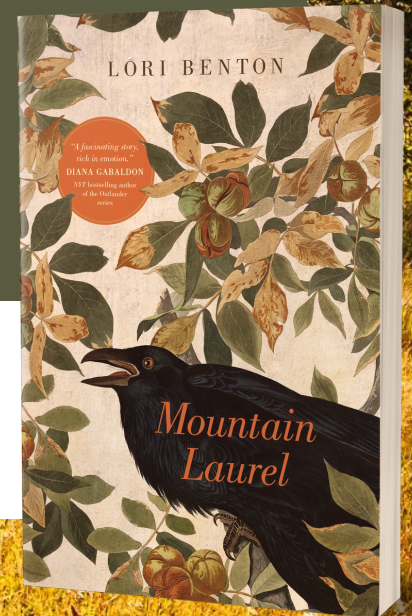


# *MOUNTAIN LAUREL*

Book Club Kit

"A fascinating story, rich in emotion and a sense of the time and cultures in which it takes place."

Diana Gabaldon, *New York Times* bestselling author



# PRAISE FOR *MOUNTAIN LAUREL*



**"Exquisitely penned, with all the beauty of a highland song..."**

Cathy Gohlke, Christy Award-winning  
author of *The Medallion*

**"Lori Benton's epic family saga *Mountain Laurel* thoroughly immersed me in plantation life in the 1790s and in the moral dilemmas created by the evil of slavery."**

Lynn Austin, Christy Award-winning  
author of *If I Were You*

**"An intricately woven tale of love and heartache, wrapped up in a sweeping family saga."**

Joanne Bischof, Christy Award-winning  
author of *Sons of Blackbird Mountain*



# A Note from Lori Benton



Once upon a time, somewhere in the American colonies, someone chose to aid an escaped slave along the road to freedom. Perhaps he hid the fugitive in his barn. She might have offered food or told of a friend, miles to the north, willing to shelter the runaway for the night. Maybe he just turned a blind eye when the laws of the day dictated otherwise. Whoever was the first to aid a runaway slave, by the mid-1800s an organized network of such people extended from the southern United States into Canada. My research into the grassroots beginning of what would become the Underground Railroad uncovered many compelling characters who played a part in ending slavery, one man, woman, or child at a time. Levi and Vestal Coffin, North Carolina Quakers, established the earliest known system for conveying fugitives north to the free states. Josiah Henson, once a slave in Maryland, became a conductor for other fleeing slaves. Giles Pettibone, justice of the peace and state assemblyman, helped hide a family of slaves for weeks. Isaac Hopper, a tailor's apprentice in Philadelphia, assisted the first of many fugitives to freedom with directions to a sympathetic Quaker's house. They and many others merit further study. Toward that end I recommend Fergus M. Bordewich's *Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement*.

Narratives such as that of ex-slave Olaudah Equiano, which inspired the character of Thomas Ross to put feet to his convictions, began appearing in print in the mid-eighteenth century and continued to be published throughout the antebellum period, educating white Americans and persuading them of slavery's cruelties and horrors and its immorality as a system. "*Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry. But narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men,*" wrote a northern reviewer of a slave narrative in 1849. Hearts as well as laws must change in the face of such an entrenched evil as slavery. Individual slave narratives like Equiano's played their part in affecting that change.



## Continued: A Note from Lori Benton

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The main setting of this story, a range of mountains considered the oldest in North America, ancient, worn, isolated in the central Piedmont—called the Carraways on my mid-1700s map of North Carolina—today encompass the Uwharrie (yoo-WAH-ree) National Forest, the Birkhead Mountains Wilderness, and other recreational areas. During my childhood a family acquaintance lived on the edge of this landscape, near the town of Asheboro, North Carolina. After I set eyes on the collection of arrowheads and knapped stone chips his tractor turned up each spring in the long furrows of his garden, he let me do some digging of my own. I spent an enjoyable few hours in the pursuit, never knowing I was unearthing—in the very soil the plows of Mountain Laurel might have turned—the seeds of a novel I’d one day write.

While I didn’t find any gold nuggets, Ally’s discovery of the shiny yellow rock he gave to Seona, and which Lucinda Cameron subsequently identified, is not a far-fetched story element. The first documented gold discovery in the United States occurred in 1799 in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, five years after and fifty miles southwest of *Mountain Laurel’s* setting. A boy, Conrad Reed, spied a shiny yellow rock like Ally’s in a stream on his family’s farm—only Conrad’s rock weighed seventeen pounds. The family used it as a doorstep until, in 1802, a Fayetteville jeweler recognized it for gold. It was worth over \$3,500. Gold was eventually discovered in the Carraways/Uwharries as well. Along with the remnants of old homesteads, mining sites mark these ridges and hollows today. In the pages of this novel I’ve imagined how it might have been if gold were discovered there in the 1790s and its existence carefully guarded. Who can say such a thing never happened? History is full of secrets.

A brief note concerning anachronisms—something out of its proper or chronological order. For the sake of verisimilitude, I avoid anachronisms in my stories. My editors help me greatly with this because despite due diligence, they still slip in, usually in the form of language, words that had their verifiable origins later than the story’s setting. However, there is an anachronism in *Mountain Laurel* that I included intentionally. One of the songs sung by Mountain Laurel’s enslaved people, at the clearing on the ridge, had a date of origin later than the last decade of the eighteenth century. Its first line, “Jesus Christ is made to me all I need,” said exactly what I wanted to convey in that moment of Ian Cameron’s spiritual journey. This is a work of historical fiction; the choice between Ian’s journey and precise historical accuracy was an easy one to make.



## Continued: A Note from Lori Benton

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Speaking of historical accuracy, it's often impossible to trace a novel's development back to the initial spark that ignited it, but in the case of *Mountain Laurel* that moment remains vivid in my memory. In the late 1990s I read a novel by Diana Gabaldon, set in 1760s North Carolina. In the novel a minor character—an enslaved young man on a plantation who appeared in just a few scenes—left an indelible impression on me. Having grown up living with a family of Scottish immigrants, hearing that manner of speech, he spoke with a Scottish accent too, though his ancestors were African. Having not yet begun my own writing sojourn into the eighteenth century, I asked Diana whether this character was purely her own creation or she'd found evidence of someone like him in her research. (It proved the latter, and I read the source for myself.) Along with a few other factors, that unusual historical tidbit sparked my interest in the eighteenth century and my storyteller's imagination and eventually led to my writing *Mountain Laurel*. But before I had crafted more than the faintest outlines of a story, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma and stopped writing altogether. After a six-month battle with cancer and a much longer one with chemo fog, I finally felt ready to write again (not able exactly, just ready). The story that was calling to me was the one sparked into being after reading Diana's book.

To write *Mountain Laurel*, still no more than a group of characters and a vague idea of their conflict and connection, I had to first learn a great deal about a time period I knew very little about. (I couldn't have told you then what years the Revolutionary War spanned, much less what people wore, ate, drank, read, built, drove, or sang during the eighteenth century.) Between giving myself a crash course in this fascinating time period through reading many dozens of books and retraining my chemo-damaged brain to write again, it took four years to finish a first draft of what I'd working-titled *Kindred* (now the title of this two-book series). It took a couple more years to edit it into something marketable. My agent signed me on the strength of the novel, but there proved to be no market for it a decade ago. We went on to sell six other eighteenth-century novels starting with *Burning Sky* in 2013 . . . until last year, when we decided to give the *Kindred* books, *Mountain Laurel* and its forthcoming sequel, *Shiloh*, one more chance to find a publishing home. Which, of course, they did.

## Continued: A Note from Lori Benton

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Looking back on this novel's long journey to the book you hold in your hands, I see how the timing for its publication is fitting in a way I could never have planned. While it isn't a sequel to my 2019 release, *The King's Mercy*, readers of that book will recognize *Mountain Laurel's* main setting, as well as some of its characters. If you read that book, then you've had a glimpse into Hugh Cameron's, Malcolm's, and Naomi's life some forty-five years prior to meeting them in these pages. And then there's *Burning Sky*; over the years I've had requests from readers for more of certain characters' stories. But no character has received more such requests than Joseph Tames-His-Horse, introduced in *Burning Sky*. Well, dear readers, if you've been wishing to see more of Joseph's story, then you won't want to miss *Shiloh*. While it primarily continues Ian and Seona's story, it could be considered a sequel to *Burning Sky* as well. If you haven't yet read *Burning Sky*, now would be the perfect time to do so.

I suspect my next most frequent request will be for a flowchart to show where and how all my novels are connected in this sprawling eighteenth-century world I've been weaving, book by book. That's not a bad idea. But when it comes to threads that weave through all my novels, the most important to me are the threads of God's unfailing mercy when we stumble, His grace for every challenge and trial, and a love so boundless He paid the ultimate price—dying in our place—to set us free from sin and bring us into fellowship with Him. For this life and for His Kingdom that is coming soon. My prayer for you is that you've drawn closer to Him as you read this first part of Ian and Seona's story.

I hope we'll all meet again in the pages of *Shiloh*.

Lori Benton







*Mountain Laurel*

*"Loved? He had. Did. Would always.  
But had Seona loved him?"*



# *Mountain Laurel* Discussion Questions



**At its core, *Mountain Laurel* is a story of choice and consequence . . .**

- 1 Ian tells his neighbor John Reynold that he hopes to settle to a life that will atone (for past mistakes and failures, particularly in his father's eyes). In what ways does he try to do that? At what point in the story do his choices begin to lead him down a different path? Do you think he ever could atone? Does he even need to? Why or why not?
- 2 Seona's and Ian's artistic outlets are an early point of connection. Ian even unwittingly plays a part in Seona's childhood choice to pick up a slate and draw a picture. Is it a kind or a thoughtless impulse when he provides Seona a new outlet for her creativity? How does this choice complicate Seona's life? Does it enrich it as well? How so?
- 3 Hugh Cameron's choice to suppress the truth of Seona's parentage and "leave things as they be" (in Naomi's words) is typical of eighteenth-century slaveholders in such circumstances. How does this choice shape him as a man? What effect does it have on Lucinda, Rosalyn, and Judith? In what ways might his choices contribute to his physical and mental decline? Does Hugh make any good choices in this story?
- 4 Judith often finds herself caught in the middle: between her mother and Seona, between Ian and Seona, between Ian and her mother and sister. Does she navigate those relationships well? How does she respond to situations of injustice, to others and to herself? Did you sympathize with her choices? Did she surprise you in any way?
- 5 Rosalyn's choices are different from her sister's. While not admirable, are they understandable? What insight into her character is Ian eventually granted? What sort of life do you imagine she will have as the mistress of Chesterfield Plantation?



6 Several characters in this story reach conclusions or draw assumptions that prove false: Hugh Cameron's belief about Aidan's death; Ian's conviction about Seona's parentage and Thomas and Seona's disappearance; Robert Cameron's belief about the circumstances that ended Ian's apprenticeship. What was the fallout of each of these false convictions?

7 Perhaps the most difficult choices in this story are Ian's. First, the choice to remain at Mountain Laurel as his uncle's heir or leave and go back north. Second, the choice between Seona and Judith. What makes these decisions so difficult? Do you believe he makes the right choice each time? Why or why not?

### **A story of bondage and freedom . . .**

8 Thomas Ross risks not only his friendship with Ian but his very life in order to aid slaves to freedom. Is he ever needlessly reckless? How do his choices clash with Ian's? Did you agree with his assessment of the man Ian becomes at Mountain Laurel? At what point might Thomas's perception of Ian have changed for the better?

9 Malcolm's words "Every man makes himself a slave to someone or something" leave a strong impression on Ian. Are they true? How does this idea play out for different characters?

10 An imbalance of power and agency exists between Ian and Seona as an eighteenth-century man and woman, even more so as free and enslaved. Does Ian misuse his greater power and agency, even without meaning to? In what ways? Who helps him understand that Seona's perception of their relationship and his own might very well be different?

11 Hugh Cameron wasn't the only character who maintained a determined silence in the face of repeated inquiries about Seona's parentage. Who else refused to speak of it or discouraged Seona from questioning? What was each character's reason for maintaining silence? What effect did this silence have on Lucinda, Judith, and Rosalyn?

12 Instead of allowing Seona and Lily to exist as a shadow family (not an uncommon practice in the antebellum South), what might have happened if Hugh Cameron had acknowledged the truth of their kinship sooner? Given North Carolina's slave laws—including the Federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1793—what might have happened if he had allowed them to run away? Why do you think he never attempted to free them before Ian's arrival?

13 Ian Cameron asks the doubt-filled question, *What can one man hope to do?* Against the evils of slavery, he meant, but the question can apply to any overwhelming circumstance. What choices does Ian make that wind up having a far-reaching outcome in the lives of others? What was the root motivation for each choice? Did his motivation change over the story's course? Would you have made the same choices in his place?

### **A story of family and faith . . .**

14 As the story begins, Ian views himself as a prodigal, a misfit, and an outcast—from family and from God. Did you see him in that light? In Ian's search for belonging and redemption, Malcolm, John Reynold, and Lily are examples of steadfast faith in God. What specific truths does each character speak into his life? What truth does Seona speak?

15 As an enslaved person, Seona's choices are limited, but she has the freedom to choose what she thinks and believes. How is her faith in God's sovereignty challenged? Who models trust in God for her? Who sows seeds of doubt? What is Seona's most difficult choice to make? In what ways does her faith grow because of it?

16 Mountain Laurel's past is still alive in many ways. What reminders do we witness of Hugh's long-dead son, Aidan? How did that death affect various characters? What other characters, either dead or gone, have bearing on Mountain Laurel's present?

17 *Mountain Laurel* and its upcoming sequel are joined under the series title *Kindred*—a word that can refer to family relationships or to similarity in character and nature. How do you see the themes of kinship and of kindred spirits woven through this story? What do you imagine is ahead for Ian? For Seona? For Mountain Laurel itself?





# Q&A with Lori Benton

**Q What kind of research did you do to inform this book?**

**A** Because *Mountain Laurel* was the first eighteenth-century-set book I'd ever written, I came to it largely ignorant of the time period. I had a considerable amount of research to do to make the world of these characters come alive with any hope of verisimilitude. I initially researched and wrote this novel from 2004 to 2009, after which I wrote and published six other eighteenth-century-set novels, the research for each building on the knowledge I acquired writing *Mountain Laurel*. That early research consisted of reading hundreds of books on topics ranging from eighteenth-century practical life (what they wore, ate, lived in, did for work and play) the history of colonial America and that of North Carolina, to more specialized topics like plantation economy, North Carolina's slave laws, the beginnings of the Underground Railroad, Eli Whitney's cotton gin, eighteenth-century thoroughbred breeding, the Scottish Jacobite Rising, how to construct a dovetail joint, treat malaria, and fire a black powder rifle. I talked to an acquaintance who had been stalked by a mountain lion. I watched every YouTube video and documentary on the eighteenth century I could get my hands on, spent thousands of hours online, and took a memorable road trip through western North Carolina with the express purpose of reacquainting myself with a landscape last seen as a teenager. In other words, I immersed myself in the eighteenth century for five years, a process that continues.

**Q In your research, did you come across any true stories like Ian and Seona's story?**

**A** Stories like Ian and Seona's were common in the antebellum slave South. Some were more tangled and complicated than what I've depicted in this story and most did not end with the changed heart of a man who chose to take responsibility for his "shadow family" living among the community he, his father, uncle, or neighbor enslaved. Some did take responsibility for their children in the slave quarter, with varying degrees of compassion. Others were indifferent. Out of sight, out of mind.



That a heart could be so hardened to one's own children is one of the many morally corrupting facets of chattel slavery we observe looking back on that tragic era. That's why I chose to write about it, that the light of redemption and grace I wanted to shine through it would be the brighter.

Readers interested in learning how fraught with fear, hope, and emotional complications the life of an enslaved woman who caught the eye of her white master could be should read Harriet Jacobs's narrative: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

### **Q What can we expect from a future book in the Kindred series?**

**A** *Shiloh* is the title of *Mountain Laurel's* sequel, but it also happens to be a sequel to another novel of mine, *Burning Sky*.

While I've received requests from readers to write more of their favorite character's story, no character has been the subject of more such requests than the Mohawk warrior Joseph Tames-His-Horse, introduced in *Burning Sky*. At last I've found the way to grant that request. While *Shiloh* is primarily the second half of Ian and Seona's story, Joseph plays a significant role in it. If you haven't met Joseph Tames-His-Horse, for the sake of his obviously compelling story having the greatest impact, I recommend reading *Burning Sky* before *Shiloh* releases in 2021. Readers will also encounter other characters from *Burning Sky*, twelve years beyond the point that novel ended.

Such tangled webs are bound to be woven when an author lets her characters wander from book to book, as I have freely done.

### **Q What is your hope for readers of this novel?**

**A** Here's a wonderful thing I've discovered over the years about celebrating the grace and redemptive power of Jesus Christ in the form of story. While I've had my conversation with the Lord about these characters and the themes I've explored with them, heard from Him and changed and grown in the writing, after the book is published, it becomes the reader's turn. It still amazes me how God can speak to each reader's heart something unique. Whatever that turns out to be, my hope is that readers are drawn closer to the Lord through Seona and Ian's story, and that they turn that last page of *Mountain Laurel* more in love with our gracious Jesus than when they began.



# About the Author



Lori Benton was raised in Maryland, with generations-deep roots in southern Virginia and the Appalachian frontier. Her historical novels transport readers to the eighteenth century, where she expertly brings to life the colonial and early federal periods of American history. Her books have received the Christy Award and the Inspy Award and have been honored as finalists for the ECPA Book of the Year. Lori is most at home surrounded by mountains, currently those of the Pacific Northwest, where, when she isn't writing, she's likely to be found in wild places behind a camera.

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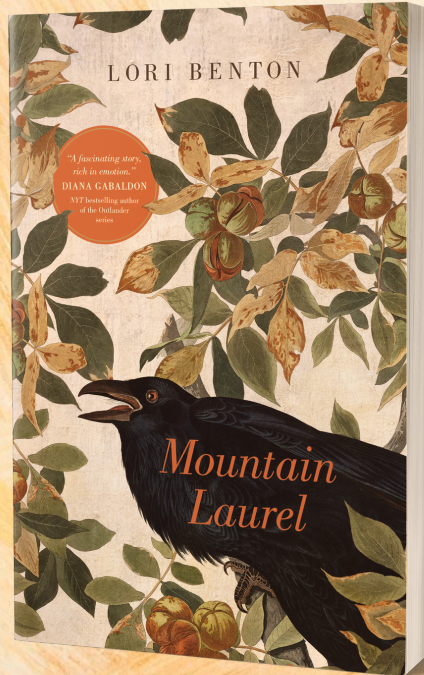
Visit [Lori's website](#) to stay up-to-date on news from the author  
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Thanks for choosing



as your book club pick.

Keep an eye out for the next book in the Kindred series by Lori Benton coming in 2021 from Tyndale House Publishers.