Book Club Kit

A NOVEL NA FAR-OF LAND STEPHANIE LANDSEM

ABOUT STEPHANIE LANDSEM



Stephanie Landsem writes historical fiction because she loves adventure in far-off times and places. In real life, she's explored ruins, castles, and cathedrals on four continents and has met fascinating characters who sometimes find their way into her fiction. Stephanie is just as happy at home in Minnesota with her husband, four adult children, two cats, and a dog. When she's not reading, researching, or writing, she's avoiding housework and dreaming about her next adventure—whether it be in person or on the page.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

My hope for this story is that, when the last page is turned, you might say, "Wasn't that like the story in the Bible, the one about the Prodigal Son?" For that beautiful parable of compassion has been my inspiration.

Jesus was a teacher with radical ideas and unconventional ways. The Parable of the Lost Son, which he told to his disciples and the Pharisees, started out as a story they all knew well: a story of justice—of a bad son who did bad things and got his comeuppance, and a good son who followed the law and in return received his father's favor. But to the Pharisees' shock—and, no doubt, dismay—Jesus turned the story on its head. In his upside-down version, the terrible son who squandered his father's money on a life of dissipation was forgiven! And not only forgiven but welcomed home with rejoicing. What kind of father, they surely asked themselves, would reward a sinful son with the father's own cloak, the ring from his finger, and a feast? The wayward son didn't deserve forgiveness, they surely argued. He wasn't entitled to mercy. And yet he received them just the same. Because the Father Jesus showed us in the parable defies our understanding. His mercy is infinite. His forgiveness is without measure. His love is beyond all reason.

My hope is that through this reimagining of the Parable of the Lost Son, we can see ourselves in one—or all—of the characters: Max, seeking redemption and forgiveness; Oscar, obsessed with justice; Penny, unable to forgive; Ephraim, a parent faithfully waiting for the return of a wayward child. And most of all, Mina, who longs to return to her father and be forgiven.

For aren't we all wayward children hoping to return to the arms of our Father? And don't we long for him to say, "I forgive you, my child. I love you. Always. No matter what"?

With love, Stephanie Landsem



Q. What drew you to write about the Great Depression era?

A: The era of the Great Depression was one of enormous change in the United States. Women's roles were changing rapidly, and Prohibition was having dramatic effects on crime and law enforcement. Nationalism and communism were becoming powerful motivators in the political realm at a time when we were experiencing heightened racial tensions and prejudices in city and rural areas. Then the economy went into a tailspin that added strain to every family in the country. Despite all these difficulties, what we hear from many of our parents and grandparents who lived through this time are stories of resilience, heroism, and family togetherness. I've always been interested in this juxtaposition and hoped to write a story that showed the many facets of this time period in our country.

Q. Can you tell us about some lesser-known historical events that made it into *In a Far-Off Land*?

A: I loved learning about farm life in the Depressionbank foreclosures, penny auctions, and how farmers made ends meet when money was tight. Researching the sad reality of Mexican Repatriation in Los Angeles and around the country was eye-opening and brought to light a chapter in our country's history that is sometimes forgotten, and unfortunately has been repeated. Of course, the ins and outs of Hollywood were fascinating-the rise of the studio system, the power wielded by a very few, and the hopeful masses that flocked to California, hoping to be discovered.

Q. How did you go about researching the world of Hollywood in the 1930s?

A: Researching the 1930s was a delight and very different from my previous historical research in biblical times. I found fascinating firsthand accounts of everything from taxi-dancing to farm life, glamorous photos of movie stars, and of course the films of the times—from my favorite, Charlie Chaplin, to early works of Myrna Loy and Clara Bow. The original sources on 1930s Hollywood were abundant and easily accessed, which made deciding when to stop researching and write the story in my head the most difficult part of this book!

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Q. What was it like to write the father of your main character—the father watching his child make mistakes and hoping she will eventually come home?

A: As parents, we live with the hope that our children will be happy, never suffer, never fail. But they do, of course, because they are human and we are all weak and stumbling our way through life. It was a great joy to write Ephraim's story as he waited in faithful patience for the return of his wayward daughter, and then offered her mercy and forgiveness—and great joy!—just as our Father offers the same to each of us every single time we come back to Him. No matter what.

Q. What is your hope for readers of *In a Far-Off Land*?

A: My wish for all my historical fiction is that readers may come—through the magic of storytelling—to understand more about themselves. People of longago times and far-off places are not so different from us. We all have hopes and fears. We love and are loved. We have parents and children and siblings and friends. We make mistakes and ask forgiveness. Sometimes we are weak, and sometimes we are heroic, and always we learn and grow. I can't claim to use stories as effectively as Jesus did in his parables, but I hope in my small way to show the truths of this life—and the next—in the characters and happenings of my stories.

HISTORICAL NOTE

When I start a book, I spend months in research, a process I love as much as the writing. This book being set in the 1930s (as opposed to my previous biblical fiction) allowed me to study a plethora of resources: not only books and maps, but newspaper articles, magazines, photographs, films, interviews, and biographies. While I can't list all the sources that contributed to the plot and setting of *In a Far-Off Land*, there are several that may be of interest to readers who wish to delve further into the general history of the times and the specific themes of this story.

As I was inspired to write this story in the course of a trip to Monterey, California, it's only appropriate that I read the novels of John Steinbeck to acquaint myself with the period and place in which he lived and worked, and especially with his commitment to the issues of labor exploitation and immigration. As I did, the characters of Oscar and his family—and the prejudices they experienced—came to life, as did the desperation of the Great Depression. I'd recommend any of Steinbeck's books to get more insight into these issues and for the beauty of his prose.

Somewhere between five hundred thousand and two million Mexican people were forcibly repatriated to Mexico between 1929 and 1936—and an estimated 60 percent of those were American citizens. These forced deportations were most often carried out by city and county governments, but with the tacit approval of federal lawmakers. To learn more about Mexican migration, culture, and repatriation, please see *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression*, by Douglas Monroy.

Almost anything you wish to know about Los Angeles in the Great Depression can be found by perusing *Los Angeles in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City of Angels.* This book was written as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. The WPA was a government-funded project that provided jobs and income to writers during the Great Depression when such jobs were hard to come by. It resulted in a series of detailed guides of many cities and states of our nation, all of which are invaluable now to historians and writers of historical fiction. To look at the Great Depression from a new perspective, I suggest *The Forgotten Man* by Amity Shlaes.

The period of the Great Depression is often overlooked in our history, coming as it did between two great wars. It deserves our attention perhaps now more than ever, for it was a time of great uncertainty and fear, much like recent years. Difficult times such as these can be—and often are—met with charity and love, a coming together of communities and neighbors. Unfortunately, hard times can also cause desperate people to lash out in fear and prejudice. May we strive for the former and avoid the latter as our country continues to meet unprecedented challenges.

I endeavor always to be historically accurate. Any small liberties I've taken for the sake of the story or mistakes made through my own ignorance will, I hope, be forgiven.

5 MOMENTS IN THE NOVEL TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR BOOK GROUP

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By Stephanie Landsem

Read the following passages from *In a Far-Off Land*. What new insights have you gained from the novel after re-reading them?

1.) Chapter 2, page 40: Mina has a chance to talk to her father about what happened with Alex. She wants to throw herself into his arms and tell him everything, but she is afraid that he will reject her. Have you ever been afraid someone will push you away because of something you've done? How does carrying that secret feel?

2.) Chapter 2, page 66: When she starts work at the Brown Derby, Mina meets her celebrity crush Charlie Chaplin and stands there "like a bug-eyed Betty." Have you ever met a celebrity or seen someone you admire and been speechless? What do you wish you'd said? **3.) Chapter 6, page 175:** At Dusty Clark's beach house, Mina gives Max "too much, or maybe just the wrong thing." Given her experience with men and all he's done for her, she thinks that she owes him something. How does that night damage their relationship instead of strengthening it?

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4.) Chapter 7, page 222: Mina manages to get Max back to the *colonia* for dinner with Oscar and his family. Why do you think she felt so strongly that he should have a chance to reunite with them? Was it a good choice to force him back home?

5.) Chapter 11, page 314: When Mina asks for her father's forgiveness, she doesn't believe him when he gives it immediately and completely. "He couldn't. Not really. It wasn't that easy." Have you ever been able to forgive completely and immediately, like her father does? Or did forgiveness take time and work like it does for Penny?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions to help your club further its conversation about *In a Far-Off Land*.

Mina had some bad things happen to her—the loss of her mother, the actions of Alex. Other things, she chose to do, like stealing her father's money and her decisions at the beach house with Max. When and how are we culpable for our actions, even when they stem from something that isn't our fault?

2 Mina asks herself about the nature of mercy and forgiveness: "The thing I learned—after everything that happened—was you don't deserve mercy. And you can't earn forgiveness. If you deserved it—if you earned it—well, I guess then they'd call it something else." Do you ever feel like forgiveness is a ledger that has to balance on both sides? How is Ephraim's forgiveness more of a gift than a reward?

3 Oscar finds himself frustrated and angry at injustice: "If there were justice in the world, people would get what they deserved, Max included. They do good, they get good things, like a place to live and food on the table. If they do bad, they get bad in return." Do you ever feel like Oscar? Does that frustration make it harder to forgive?

4 Lupita further challenges Oscar about his expectations of perfection in those around him, accusing him of having no mercy for others. In what ways do we see this in the story? How have you experienced this attitude, either from others or in your own thoughts and feelings? Why is it sometimes easy to fall into this pattern?

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Even after Mina returns home and tries to make things right with her family, her sister has a hard time forgiving her: "Her silent anger reminded me each day that I hadn't paid my debt to my father, that I didn't deserve his mercy." Have you ever been unable to forgive someone for something they did to someone you love—a child or a parent? Is it harder than forgiving someone for a wrong you've suffered yourself?

In the end, Penny wants to forgive her sister, but she still feels anger. How do we forgive when we don't *feel* forgiveness in our heart?

Many parents are much like Ephraim, waiting for their children to come home—children who have turned away from their families or their faith: "Papa didn't love me because I was a good daughter. Nothing I did or didn't do changed his love one jot—not even if I had been perfect like Penny. He loved me just because he was my father, and that would never change. Honestly, it was too much to even believe." For those who are waiting for the return of a child or other loved one, what can we do as we wait and hope?

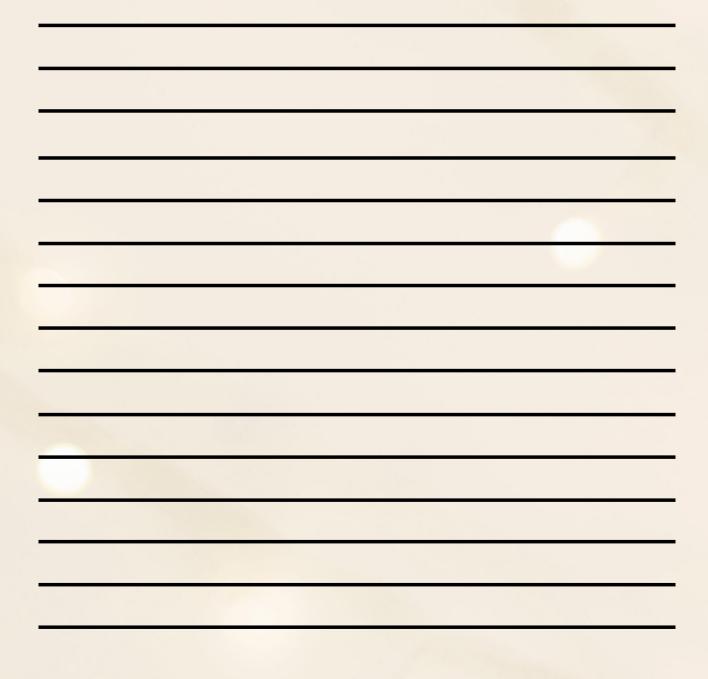
Both Max and Mina struggle with unspoken assumptions and past shame. In what ways does this affect their relationship? How do they finally move beyond it? Looking ahead, how might they continue to feel the effects of their past choices and continue to heal from them?

9 Hollywood's excesses during the 1930s were the stuff of legend fashions and furs and expensive cars, lavish houses and jewels—while a large portion of the population was suffering from the Great Depression. Why is it that so many people turned to films and the glamor of Hollywood to escape the realities of their daily lives? Do we still do that today?

Because of rampant unemployment during the Great Depression, the United States forcibly "repatriated" somewhere between five hundred thousand and two million Mexican people in the 1930s. At least half of these were American-born citizens who were intimidated into leaving the country. What do you think should have been done instead? What kind of similar practices are we using at our borders today?

MY BOOK CLUB NOTES

Use this as a space to jot down thoughts about the novel that came to mind as you were reading the story or during book club conversations



THANKS FOR CHOOSING



FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB!





Keep an eye out for a new historical fiction novel by Stephanie Landsem

Coming in 2022 from Tyndale House Publishers



