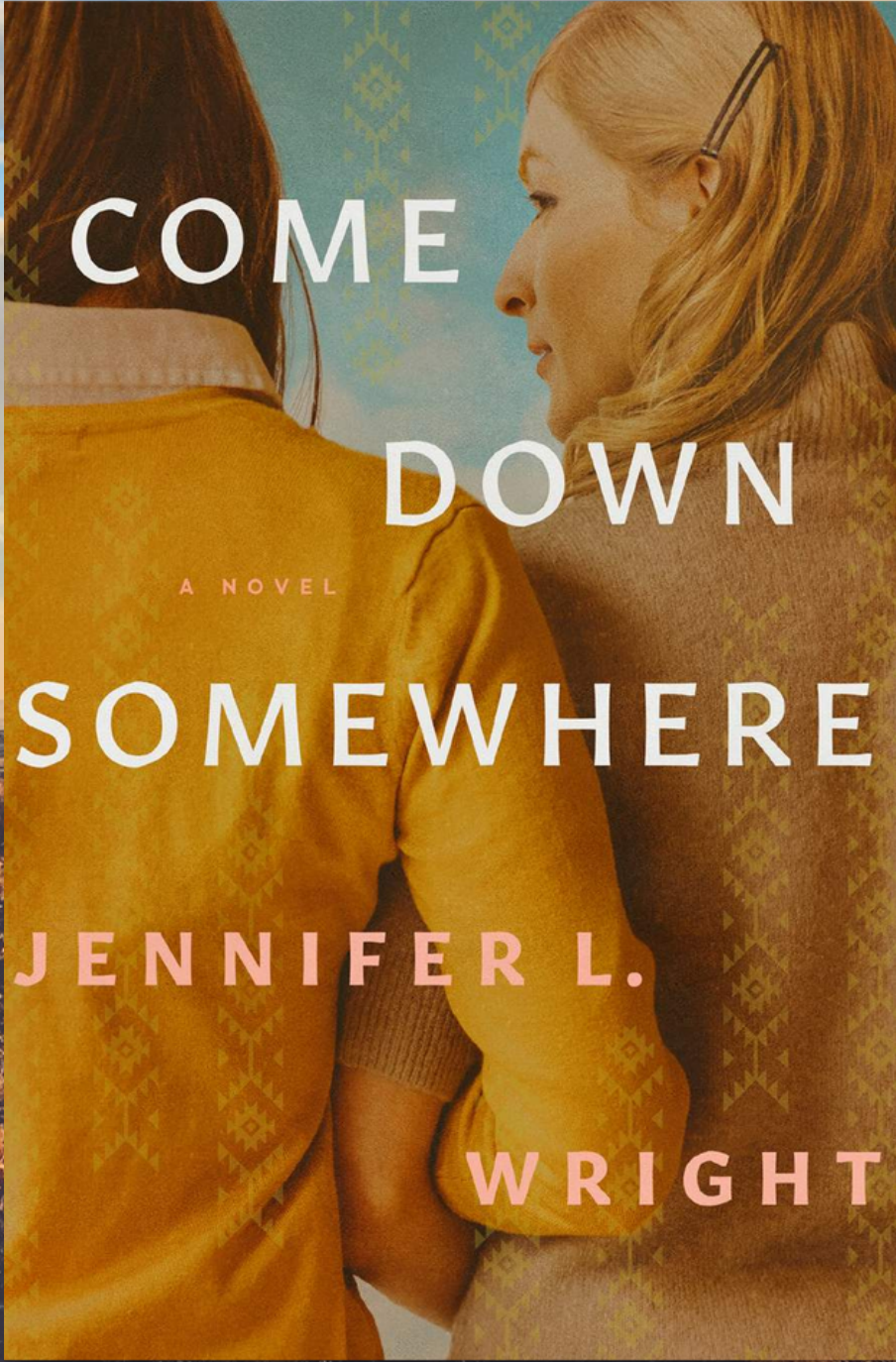


Come Down Somewhere

Book club kit





ABOUT JENNIFER L. WRIGHT

Jennifer L. Wright has been writing since middle school, eventually earning a master's degree in journalism at Indiana University. However, it took only a few short months of covering the local news for her to realize that writing fiction is much better for the soul and definitely way more fun. A born and bred Hoosier, she was plucked from the Heartland after being swept off her feet by an Air Force pilot and has spent the past decade traveling the world and, every few years, attempting to make old curtains fit in the windows of a new home.

She currently resides in New Mexico with her husband, two children, one grumpy old dachshund, and her newest obsession—a guinea pig named Peanut Butter Cup.

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P.S. Visit Jennifer L.

Wright's website to sign up for her newsletter and get updates sent directly to your inbox!

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for choosing *Come Down Somewhere* as your book club read! I hope Olive and Jo's story inspires you, challenges you, and encourages you in your own faith journeys. Most of all, though, I hope you enjoy the book and learn a little bit more about the Trinity Test and its aftermath.

I was inspired to write this book after moving to southern New Mexico in 2014, to an area less than 100 miles from where the test took place. Although I had heard of Trinity in history classes, I was surprised to learn that, in this part of the country at least, the atomic bomb test was not history. The ramifications of that day over seventy-seven years ago are still being dealt with by the local population—consequences the Manhattan Project scientists didn't fully understand or anticipate when they chose this area for the testing of their new weapon. But as I dove into research for this novel, I became very conflicted about the story I wanted to tell. There were both positive and negative outcomes for the weapon and its use, intended and unintended consequences that can be attributed to ignorance, a desire to end the war quickly, political tensions, and just plain lack of knowledge about the new science. There were no clear-cut villains. There were only the choices of the people involved, based on their objectives and what they knew at the time. The history of the atomic bomb and its aftermath is not a black-and-white issue; it is made up only in shades of gray.

And that's when I realized that was the story. Every day, we make a series of choices based on our own knowledge, experience, and goals. And sometimes people get hurt along the way—either intentionally or unintentionally. As you read *Come Down Somewhere*, I hope you'll take special note of how the larger story of Trinity intersects with the lives of Olive and Jo—and not just in a physical way. But I also hope you'll see how in every situation, no matter the outcome, God is there, always ready to bind our hearts, heal our wounds, and bring beauty from ashes.

Happy reading and God bless,

Jennifer L. Wright



A Note from the Author

BY JENNIFER L. WRIGHT

Come Down Somewhere is a work of fiction. That much must be made perfectly clear. Olive, Jo, and the others in this book were created in my mind. The Alexander ranch never existed, nor were contractors assisting with the Trinity site housed in the outlying rural community. But as in every work of historical fiction, many aspects within these pages are based in truth.



Despite being an ally to the United States in its fight against the Nazis, the American government was already growing wary of the USSR in the early 1940s. Their bridge of friendship was built on the desire to defeat a common enemy, but that allegiance went no further than the battlefield. So when the US government began work on a secret military weapon in the mountains of northern New Mexico, they kept it a secret from everyone.

Including their Soviet allies.

"But as in every work of historical fiction, many aspects within these pages are based in truth."

Jennifer L. Wright on her novel
Come Down Somewhere



CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE



Because not only did the US recognize the inherent danger Communism posed to a free republic, it also understood the brutality and ambition of Stalin's regime. It was obvious that Russia was a possible future enemy and one from which they needed to closely guard their secrets.

What they failed to identify, however, was that—at least to the Communists—the future was already here.

Although there is no concrete evidence that any sort of Soviet espionage occurred in the area bordering Trinity, nor within any of the ranches requisitioned for the test site, Moscow operatives did infiltrate the Manhattan Project in various ways. The leaks came all the way from scientists such as Klaus Fuchs to Army men like David Greenglass. It wasn't until the Soviets tested their own atomic weapon in 1949—over a decade before US Army officials believed they would, based on the Communists' lagging science—that the US government truly became aware of the treachery from their so-called ally.

What's surprising is that a large number of these operatives were not Russian nationals; they were, in fact, American citizens with Communist sympathies. Outwardly, the Communist Party USA proclaimed itself loyal to the United States and sought to bring reform to the American system, allowing it to fly under the US government's radar and avoid any real suspicion. In reality, however, its inner workings were full of people faithful to the USSR and more than willing to do its bidding. For example, both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were American citizens who provided top secret information to the Soviet Union regarding radar, sonar, and jet propulsion engines. They were executed in 1953 for their crimes.

The United States declassified the Venona project, its Soviet counterintelligence program, in the early 1990s. Over the course of almost forty years, agents decrypted nearly three thousand messages between KGB agents and the USSR. The sheer depth of undercover Soviet permeation within the United States' borders was astounding.

If you're interested in reading further about atomic espionage during the 1940s and 1950s, I highly recommend *The Atomic Spies* by Oliver Pilat and *The Venona Secrets: Exposing Soviet Espionage and America's Traitors* by Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel. Both of these works were monumental in helping me understand the mentality and atmosphere surrounding spy work during World War II and the time immediately following.

While the occurrence of spies within the confines of the testing site is fiction, sadly the effects from the Trinity test on the people of southern New Mexico are all too real.



The Jornada del Muerto, or “Route of the Dead Man,” is a ninety-mile stretch of desert lying between Socorro, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. It’s hot, it’s dry, and it’s barren. But the very characteristics that made it so appealing to ranchers also made it attractive to scientists from Los Alamos searching for a place to test their secret bomb. Although chosen for its isolation and accessibility (most of the land was already owned by the government and in use as the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range), the land was not completely empty. Several towns lay scattered throughout the desert nearby. In fact, nearly forty thousand people lived in a fifty-mile radius around the test site. Nearly one hundred families had their ranches “leased” for testing purposes, with the understanding that their land would eventually be returned. The fallout from Trinity, as well as the creation of White Sands Missile Range, however, meant this was not the case. The government simply continued to “rent” the land year after year, despite the protests from owners. Although outrage led to some ranchers eventually receiving payment, most of them, to this day, have never gotten their property back.

Bigger than the land grab, however, were the consequences of the test itself. Scientists were concerned about the effects of the initial blast, even hiring a seismologist to assure any quaking from the explosion would not cause damage to nearby homes and villages and also assessing vegetation location to rule out any possible wildfires that could result. The issue of fallout, however—what would happen hours, days, weeks, and months after the test—was barely considered. Although consulting physicians raised several red flags, their concerns were, for the most part, pushed aside. To appease these issues, the Army outlined an emergency evacuation plan for the surrounding area, though they didn’t really expect to use it. When it came down to it, the priority for scientists was the test; anything that happened afterward wasn’t their problem.

On Monday, July 16, 1945, at 5:29:45 a.m. Mountain Standard Time, the bomb ignited. The flash was so brilliant, it was seen in three states, and the resulting mushroom cloud surged thirty-eight thousand feet into the atmosphere in only seven minutes. The heat created by the ensuing fireball was so intense, it fused together sand particles and created a greenish-gray glass within a half-mile crater, a substance scientists would later call trinitite. Every living thing—plant and animal—within a mile radius of the blast was killed instantly.

The radioactive cloud split into three parts. The lower section drifted north, the center went west, and the upper—the brunt of the cloud—moved toward the northeast at around forty-five thousand to fifty-five thousand feet. Teams of scientists followed the clouds with devices to measure radiation. Very little fallout occurred for about two hours, giving the men a false sense of security. Instead, the fallout began to intensify in the days following the blast, due to the nature of the particles as well as wind patterns. Although an evacuation



plan had been developed, there was no agreement on how high radiation levels needed to be in order to enact it; because of this, a full-scale evacuation of fallout areas was never put into place.

But even as scientists began to collect high readings, they did not really understand the danger. At the time, scientists believed the fallout to be a “onetime” exposure that would eventually dissipate and pose no long-term danger to residents. The test site became a tourist destination (although time inside the blast area was limited) and trinitite was sold as souvenirs, the only caveat being not to hold it close to the body for an extended period of time. Because no effects were immediately apparent, many scientists and military personnel soon became lackadaisical in their protection efforts around the test site.

Areas of contamination stretched to a hundred-mile radius, from Las Vegas over to Roswell and all the way down to El Paso. The heaviest area of contamination, outside the restricted area, was the Chupadera Mesa, nearly thirty miles away from ground zero (and the site of Olive and Avery’s fictional ranch in the story). During that time, these areas were predominantly rural. The people lived off the land, both in terms of livestock and agriculture, and much water was collected in outdoor cisterns or ditches. When the fallout began to come down, it settled on the very things these people needed to survive. Cows began losing their hair and showing abnormal blotches on their skin. But because the cattle appeared otherwise healthy, researchers decided they were safe and they were allowed to continue to reproduce and be used for food. Rodents and birds in the area were also discovered with unusual mutations and discolorations. Plutonium was discovered in the soil as well as nearby plants, with the desert wind pushing particles even further outside the original contamination zone. Although scientists from the Atomic Energy Commission made yearly trips from 1947 to 1955, funding soon dried up and the monitoring ceased. The world’s attention moved on.

For the people of the Jornada and the Tularosa Basin, however, the effects of Trinity are still being felt. A 2019 article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* showed that, following a decline in infant mortality in the years leading up to 1945, there was a spike in infant death in the area with no known cause other than it began after the Trinity test. In 2020, the National Cancer Institute released a study on the high cancer rate in southern New Mexico, finding that many “probably” got sick due to radioactive fallout from the atomic bomb blast of 1945. A consortium of survivors and their children, known as the Downwinders, continue to fight for recognition and compensation for the land—and lives—lost to this atomic test in an “uninhabited area.”



If you're interested in learning more about the Trinity test, as well as the fallout that occurred afterward, I recommend Ferenc Morton Szasz's book *The Day the Sun Rose Twice*, as well as *Trinity: The History of an Atomic Bomb National Historic Landmark* by Jim Eckles. I also highly encourage you to visit trinitydownwinders.com to hear from their own mouths the stories of those affected by the test, as well as to understand and support their legislative efforts.

The title of this book comes from a quote attributed to Dr. Louis Hempelmann, a physician who worked on the Manhattan Project. Upon witnessing the Trinity test, he remarked, "All I could think of was, my God, all that radioactivity up there has got to come down somewhere." And come down it did—on the homes, farms, and lives of the people of southern New Mexico. I wrote this book in an attempt to honor their stories and aid in their pursuit of validation. I hear you. I see you. And now I hope others do too.

Reflect:

How has the historical information the author shared enlightened your understanding of the world Olive and Jo are growing up in? What new questions do you have about the time period?

"[An] affecting coming-of-age story . . . In *Olive and Jo*, Wright captures the tenderness of formative friendships."

Publishers Weekly on *Come Down Somewhere*

Discussion Questions

To start your group's conversation about *Come Down Somewhere*, read through these questions with your book club and share your responses together.

1. While most people know that atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II, fewer are aware that the bomb was tested on US soil or that it caused lasting consequences to people who lived in the area. How much did you know about the Trinity test? What is the fallout—both literal and emotional—for the characters in this story?
2. Olive and Jo initially seem like polar opposites in personality and in the way they view life. Where do they find common ground? What makes Olive so determined to push Jo away? Why do you think Jo continues to pursue a friendship with her anyway?
3. Jo leaves Alamogordo as a hurt and bewildered girl and returns a hardened and angry young woman, after years of believing she was betrayed and abandoned by those she loved most. What did she not know or misinterpret about the events of the day she left? How does she misinterpret God as a result? Were her hurt and bitterness justified?
4. At times both Olive and Jo take refuge in anger, calling it an anchor, a buoy, a source of strength. What lies behind the anger for each of them? Have there been times when you found anger a comfort or a “safer” emotion than what you might otherwise feel?
5. Each thread of this story—in 1944 and in 1952—contains elements of mystery. When did you begin to suspect Charlie’s motives might be different from what he claimed? What did you think was behind the strange goings-on at the Alexander ranch—the notes Olive finds, the odd letter from Avery, the confusing behavior from Evelyn? Were your conclusions correct, or were you surprised?

Continued on next page



6. Olive starts out believing that religion is absurd and belief in God is a sign of delusion or weakness. But as she watches Jo live out her faith, she sees that Jo “didn’t need everything to be perfect to find joy. She could love her God and her pigheaded, short-tempered, nonbelieving friend at the same time; she saw no contradiction between the two.” How does this begin to change what Olive thinks about God? Is there someone in your own life whose faith you find especially winsome or compelling?

7. Standing at the Trinity site, Jo realizes, “Never had [she] felt God’s absence more powerfully than she did right here, right now.” Have you ever believed God was absent from a place? Or from your life? How would you describe what that felt like? What does Jo come to believe about God’s absence?

8. As a teenager, Jo is certain of God’s path for her—His calling on her life and His plan for how she and Olive will work together—only to find herself cruelly disappointed and left doubting. Do you think she was wrong about what God wanted for her life? How do you discern or define God’s plan or purpose?

9. Though Olive wants to follow Jo into mission work, she concludes that is not God’s path for her. How does Olive find her own purpose? What do you imagine would’ve been different if she’d gone with Jo?

10. Sergeant Hawthorne and Evelyn Alexander love their daughters but are caught up in “a storm of secrets.” What actions do they take to try to protect Jo and Olive? In what ways do they fail them?

jot down some questions about the novel here that you'd like to discuss with your book group:





Get to Know Olive

Jennifer L. Wright on her character
from *Come Down Somewhere*

- 1. If Olive could travel anywhere in the world, where would she go?** *I don't believe Olive has thought much about traveling; her heart and soul belong in New Mexico! However, she might enjoy traveling to her family's native Russia, if only to see the places her grandparents talked about when she was little.*
- 2. It's a rainy day in Alamogordo and Olive is visiting the local library. What section can you find her wandering?** *Olive is drawn to classic adventure stories such as *Treasure Island*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. These were the books she shared with her father when she was little, and they bring her comfort now that she's living someplace unfamiliar.*
- 3. What does Olive love most about growing up in New Mexico?** *Olive loves the pure, unbridled freedom of life on the ranch. The wide-open skies and rolling hills of the mesa—the landscape gives the illusion of being the only person in the world, something her fiercely independent streak loves.*
- 4. If Olive could be a heroic character from a book, who would she pick and why?** *Olive feels a bit of a kinship with Jo March from *Little Women*, with her plucky, self-reliant nature often at odds with her deep loyalty and love for her family.*
- 5. Olive's favorite inspirational quote:** *"All calculations based on experience elsewhere fail in New Mexico"—Lew Wallace.*
- 6. What's one thing Olive hopes for her future?:** *Olive desires nothing more than a quiet life on the ranch, spending her days doing what she knows she is meant to do, where she is meant to do it.*
- 7. One word Olive would pick to describe herself:** *Resolute.*
- 8. Her favorite place on her family's ranch:** *The burrow!*



Get to Know Jo

Jennifer L. Wright on her character
from *Come Down Somewhere*

- 1. If Jo could move somewhere, where would she choose to go and why?** *Jo feels called to go anywhere there are people in need. She is less concerned with locales than she is about helping people. I think anywhere an opportunity to serve God opens up, she would go.*
- 2. What's one big dream Jo has for her future?** *Jo wants to start a family. She wants to meet a God-fearing man through her service to the Lord and raise her children in that same faith.*
- 3. What book does Jo love most and reread when she has the time?** *Jo reads her Bible every night, but her current favorite book is A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*
- 4. When she has time on the weekend, is there a favorite spot in Alamogordo Jo likes to visit for fun?** *Alameda Park, with its lush green vegetation and duck pond, makes Jo feel as if she's back in California rather than in the middle of the desert. She enjoys meandering the pathways, reading in the shade of the trees, and feeding the birds.*
- 5. One word Jo's friends would pick to describe her:** *Positive.*
- 6. If Jo could have a pet, what would she choose and why?** *Jo would love something small and easy to care for but still cuddly. A guinea pig would be the perfect companion.*
- 7. One thing that inspires Jo:** *Seeing answered prayers.*
- 8. Her favorite color:** *Pink.*

Though the green glass sea has been bulldozed under, pieces of trinitite still litter the earth at ground zero. You can handle pieces for examination. Removing pieces from the site is strictly forbidden.



A view of the Chupadera Mesa from the road. The Alexander ranch would be behind these rolling hills, near the foot of the rising peaks.

Step into the Setting

The Author at ground zero. Although safe for a short visit, ground zero is still radioactive, and visitors are only allowed in the site twice a year for a few hours.



White Sands National Park. These gypsum dunes are the biggest tourist draw in the area.



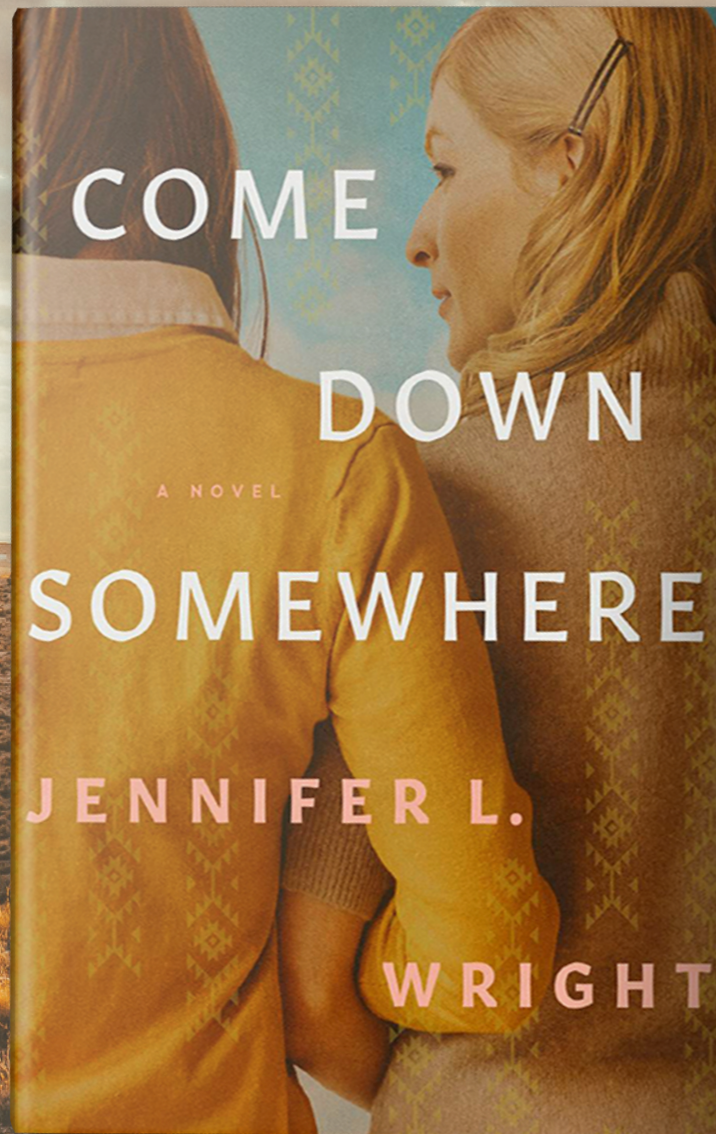
Pieces of trinitite littering the dirt at ground zero.



A lone monument marks ground zero at the spot of the Trinity Test.

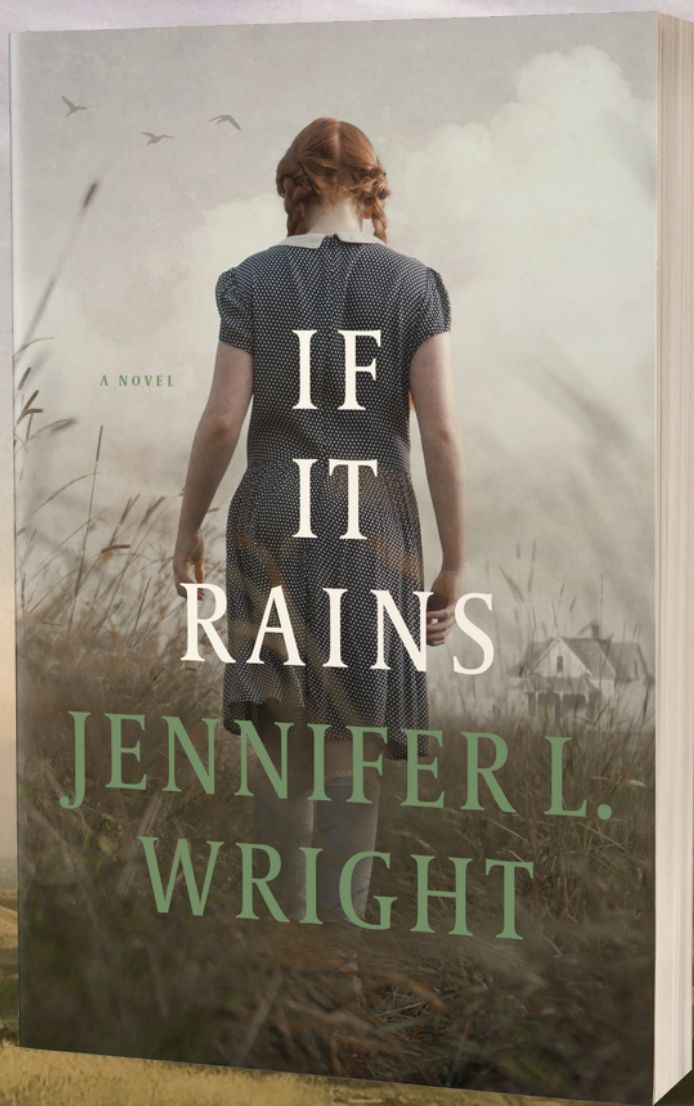
Photos courtesy of Jennifer L. Wright

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for your book club!

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debut historical novel



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for the next
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