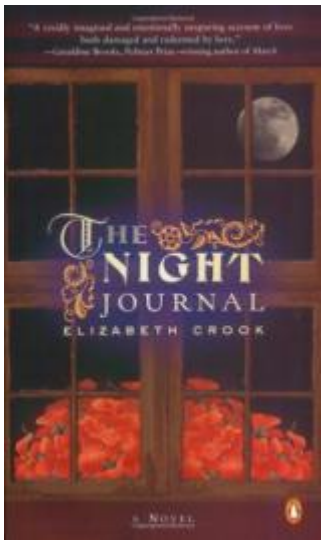
bookreporter

The Night Journal

by Elizabeth Crook



About the Book

Elizabeth Crook's novel is a lavish and transporting tale of a young woman discovering the truth about her family's mythic past.

Meg Mabry has spent her life with her back turned to her legendary family legacy. In the 1890s her great-grandmother Hannah Bass composed starkly revealing diaries of her life on the southwestern frontier, first as a Harvey Girl at the glamorous Montezuma Resort in New Mexico and later as the wife of brilliant, and often absent, railway engineer Elliott Bass. A generation later, Hannah's daughter, Claudia Bass, a renowned historian known to all as Bassie, staked her academic career and reputation on these vibrant accounts, editing and publishing them to great acclaim, and establishing the Bass family as a pillar in the history of the American southwest.

Meg-Bassie's granddaughter-finds the family lore oppressive. Determined to pursue a life away from the business of history-keeping, she has refused, to the annoyance of her grandmother, to read even a single page of the journals. When an excavation on the old Bass family property beckons a now elderly and viper-tongued Bassie back to the fabled land of her childhood, Meg grudgingly consents to accompany her. But when an unexpected discovery casts doubt on the history recorded in Hannah's pages and Bassie's memories, Meg finally succumbs to the allure of her great-grandmother's story and ventures deeper into Hannah's life to unlock the mystery at the journal's core.

Seductive and richly told, THE NIGHT JOURNAL is an enthralling tale in which Indian ruins, majestic desert hotels, and the hardship and grandeur of frontier life fit seamlessly with a modern-day story of coming to terms with loss, family secrets, and shattering truths that lie shrouded in memory.

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Discussion Guide

1. How important is it in our contemporary lives to feel a connection to the past or to have an understanding of our ancestors? Are the stories about your ancestors important to your own self-image?

2. Are we, as a generation, pale in comparison to our ancestors, as Meg seems to believe? In other words, do we lack their strength? Are there ways in which we are stronger?

3. Most of the major characters in the book have suffered difficult or traumatic childhood experiences. Is it

inevitable that difficult childhoods lead to dysfunctional relationships later in life, or can these experiences be overcome? What are the different ways in which each character attempts to cope? Do you think Elliott's attempt to leave the past behind by focusing only on the future, and refusing to talk about his memories, can be effective?

4. Bassie essentially raised both Nina and Meg. Why did her overbearing personality affect them so differently? Are some children more genetically inclined to survive bad parenting?

5. Many of the central characters -- Bassie, Elliott, Jim, and even Meg -- are in some respects orphans. What does it mean to be an orphan? How does being orphaned affect a person's connection to the world around them?

6. Which of the historical male characters are you more drawn to -- Elliott Bass or Vicente Morales? Which one do you respect more?

7. Is your respect for Hannah diminished by the ultimate revelation of her affair with Vicente? Do you think you, as a reader, are more forgiving of, and less judgmental about, extramarital affairs between historical characters than you are of those between contemporary characters?

8. Do you believe Meg and Jim are soul mates, kept apart through circumstance, or are they merely swept up in the drama of Hannah and Elliott's story?

9. Are you relieved that Meg ultimately resists having an affair with Jim, or would you feel more satisfied if she had allowed the relationship to go further? In general do you prefer, in literature, to be gratified or left slightly unsatisfied? Do you feel that stories, and perhaps even real-life stories, are richer if a deep love affair is left somewhat unrealized, or if it is fully satisfied?

10. Given Meg's personality, do you think she matures and changes enough in the course of the book that her future will be different from what it would have been had she not gone to New Mexico with Bassie?

11. Meg and Jim are surprised by several discoveries in the last third of the novel. Which of these discoveries took you by surprise as a reader and which did you anticipate?

12. Were you ultimately more engaged by Meg's story or by Hannah's? Which did you find yourself most eager to return to while reading, and most reluctant to leave?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Crook is the author of four novels, including THE NIGHT JOURNAL, which won a Spur Award from Western Writers of America and a WILLA Literary Award from Women Writing the West. She has written for magazines and periodicals, including *Texas Monthly* and the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. She lives in Austin with her family.

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