



The Purchase by Linda Spalding

About the author:

Linda Spalding, Kansas-born Canadian fiction and nonfiction writer, often explores world cultures and the clash between contemporary life and traditional beliefs. Her most recent book, *The Purchase*, won the 2012 Governor General’s Literary Prize for Fiction. Spalding is also well known for *Who Named the Knife* (2007), the true story of the murder trial of Maryann Acker, a teenager sentenced to life in prison for a murder committed while on honeymoon in Hawaii. Spalding, who served on the jury, tracks down Maryann 20 years later in order to reexamine the murder and the question of Maryann’s innocence. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* called it, a “delicate yet powerful work.” The reviewer for the *Miami Herald* said, “Spalding is amazing in her ability to seamlessly present a legal paper trail and other research alongside her emotional and honest assessment of herself.” The book was made into a TV movie – *Of Murder and Memory* – written by Semi Chellis.

Spalding’s earlier books include the novels *Mere* (2001) co-authored with her daughter Esta Spalding; *The Paper Wife* (1996); *Daughters of Captain Cook* (1989); and the nonfiction book *The Follow* (1998), about renowned orangutan expert Birute Galdikas, one of the three female acolytes of anthropologist Louis Leakey known as “Leakey’s Angels” (along with Jane Goodall and Diane Fossey). The reviewer for the *Christian Science Monitor* called the Galdikas book, “An intimate and deeply thoughtful chronicle of a woman’s awakening to the many challenges facing orangutans and the earth as a whole.” It was short-listed for the Trillium Book Award and the Pearson Writers’ Trust Non-Fiction Prize.

Linda lives in Toronto with her husband, Michael Ondaatje, her dog Jasper and her cat Jack.

Source: Author’s website (<http://www.lindaspalding.com>)



About this book:

In 1798, Daniel Dickinson, a young Quaker father and widower, leaves his home in Pennsylvania to establish a new life. He sets out with two horses, a wagonful of belongings, his five children, a 15-year-old orphan wife, and a few land warrants for his future homestead. When Daniel suddenly trades a horse for a young slave, Onesimus, it sets in motion a struggle in his conscience that will taint his life forever, and sets in motion a chain of events that lead to two murders and the family's strange relationship with a runaway slave named Bett.

Stripped down and as hard-edged as the realities of pioneer life, Spalding's writing is nothing short of stunning, as it instantly envelops the reader in the world and time of the novel, and follows the lives of unforgettable characters. Inspired by stories of the author's own ancestors, *The Purchase* is a resonant, powerful and timeless novel.

Source: Author's website (<http://www.lindaspalding.com>)

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does Daniel's religious background shape the way he thinks about the world around him? How does the way he sees himself differ from the way other characters see him?
2. Would Daniel have been a different father (and man) had his first wife lived? How? Why can't he be a loving, devoted husband to Ruth?
3. Why does Daniel go against his beliefs and purchase a slave? What are his reasons, much later, for going to the auctioneer's house instead of the doctor's when one of his children is dying?
4. Discuss the importance of the lack of mothers for the women in this novel. From the stories the characters remember and tell, what kind of mother was Daniel's first wife? Discuss Luveen's importance as a surrogate mother for Mary. What kind of mother is

April 2016



Bett? What sort of “mother” is Mary to Bett’s son and to her own siblings? Do you think she will be a strong surrogate mother to Bett’s grandchild?

5. What is the importance of trees in the novel? What do trees represent to Onesimus and Bry?

6. The book is dedicated “In memory of my brother Skip, son of Jacob, who was son of Boyd, who was son of Martin, who was son of John, who was son of Daniel Dickinson.” Discuss this dedication and its significance on your reading experience, if any. Does knowing the book was inspired by the author’s ancestors make any difference to your reading experience?

7. Discuss the title. Why such a stark and simple title for such a large and complicated story?

8. In what ways is this book similar to *Cold Mountain* in its attention to the details and descriptions of daily life on the American frontier/wilderness?

9. Compare and contrast Mary and Ruth at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Describe their relationship. Why don’t they like each other? Do they ever learn to get along? Do they share any traits? Do you think they would have been friends if Ruth wasn’t married to Mary’s father? What does it say about Ruth that she gives her newly purchased dress to Mary? Which of the two women is a more sympathetic character?

10. Why does it say about Daniel that he marries Ruth? Since his Quaker community disowns him because Ruth is Methodist, why didn’t he marry a Quaker woman instead, and employ Ruth as a maid?

11. Why does Daniel decide to travel with his five children and Ruth to Virginia?

12. What is the importance of the stories from Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the Old Testament for



Mary and the children? How does Mary connect these stories with Onesimus's own history and predicament, and with her own life?

13. How do religion and spirituality play into the novel? Discuss the importance and role of both Quaker and Methodist Christianity on Daniel, Mary and Ruth, and the spirituality of Bett. How different are the versions of faith each character has?

14. Do you believe Ruth's claim to have been spoken to by an angel? Does she believe it? Who put the idea into her head?

15. How do Daniel's Quaker traditions and ethics crumble as he spends more and more time away from his former community and on the frontier? Which traditions stay with him? With Mary?

16. What is the importance of remembering childhood stories and traditions for Mary (both of her mother and her nanny, Luveen), Onesimus, and Bett. How useful are these stories out on the frontier?

17. The novel starts and ends with Daniel. Why do you think, when there are so many strong female characters, that the author chose to do this? Do you believe this is ultimately Daniel's story? Why or why not?

18. Describe Mary's relationship with Bett and with Onesimus. Who is she trying to save when she hits Jester Fox? How does she become closer to them than to anyone in her own family or, as time goes on, her husband? Why does she refuse to free Bett?

19. Compare and contrast Daniel with the other white men of the novel, especially Misters Jones and Fox.

20. Over the course of the novel, Daniel's relationship with God changes. How and why? Do you think he finds peace with himself and his God by the end?



21. Does Daniel grow to love Ruth over the course of the novel? Why does he blame her for Joseph's death? How does Ruth finally assert herself at the end of the novel? Do you think her relationship with her husband will grow stronger?

22. What is the importance of Bett being a healer and knowing homeopathic remedies that the white doctor doesn't know or believe in? Why won't she share her secrets with Mary?

23. Discuss the various physical homes in this novel: the Pennsylvania house, Onesimus's hut, Daniel's cabin, Wiley's house, the Foxes house. Why does Benjamin build his house/mansion right in front of his father's smaller house? Is there a significance to this?

24. Why does Jemima run off with and bind herself to Rafe Fox, despite being aware of the history and animosities between the two families? Are her motives simple or complex? What are the choices and opportunities for a spirited, pretty girl like her out on the frontier? Why is she so devoted to Bry?

25. Discuss Bry. How is he a product of both the white and black worlds of rural Virginia in the early 1800s. What do you think will become of him? Will he ever not be an outsider?

26. Caryl Phillips has lauded this novel, calling it "a poised and moving novel about the indignities of slavery and the moral stain at the inception of the American republic." What ultimately is this novel saying about this part of American history and its effects on future generations?

Source: Penguin Random house(<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com>)

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