



Serena

By Ron Rash
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Introduction

The year is 1929, and newlyweds George and Serena Pemberton travel from Boston to the North Carolina mountains where they plan to create a timber empire. Although George has already lived in the camp long enough to father an illegitimate child, Serena is new to the mountains but she soon shows herself to be the equal of any man, overseeing crews, hunting rattlesnakes, even saving her husband's life in the wilderness. Together this lord and lady of the woodlands ruthlessly kill or vanquish all who fall out of favor. Yet when Serena learns that she will never bear a child, she sets out to murder the son George fathered without her. Mother and child begin a struggle for their lives, and when Serena suspects George is protecting his illegitimate family, the Pembertons' intense, passionate marriage starts to unravel as the story moves toward its shocking reckoning.

Rash's masterful balance of violence and beauty yields a riveting novel that, at its core, tells of love

both honored and betrayed.

Questions for Discussion

1. Explore the novel's use of historical figures and events—Horace Kephart, George Vanderbilt, and the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. How do these characters contribute to the historical texture of the novel? What are the values attributed to these characters? What does the book have to say about the importance of land preservation versus the need for economic interests?
2. How would you describe Serena's philosophy of life? What does she value most? What importance does she place on honesty? In your opinion, did she ever truly love Pemberton? If so, what do her actions in the end say about what she values most in life?
3. The moon, prominent in both mythology and folklore, has traditionally embodied femininity, romantic love, insanity, and life cycles. Serena is associated with the moon throughout the novel, and her name evokes Selena, a goddess of the moon. How does this association deepen the characterization of Serena? Is the author's pairing of the moon with Serena in any way ironic?
4. Although Serena and Rachel have decidedly different personalities, can you see any similarities between them? How do the juxtaposed scenes at the end of Book One—Serena taming the eagle and Rachel carrying Jacob to the doctor—create parallels between these women? How do Rachel's and Serena's childhoods shape their adult personalities?
5. Although many of the novel's events are dark and violent, there are comic moments as well, as in McIntyre's prophecies of snakes falling from the sky. What are some other comic scenes? What purpose do these episodes have in the larger pattern of the novel?
6. There is a hunting episode near the novel's beginning and one at the conclusion. Compare and contrast the characters and actions in these scenes. What foreshadowing can you see in the first hunting scene? How do these connections help you understand the second hunting episode more fully?
7. From the opening scene when he arrives in Waynesville and dispatches Harmon, Pemberton is in control of nearly everyone and everything he surveys. Considering his lifelong position of authority and control through economic and physical violence, why do you think he was blind to Serena's intentions in the end? Does the conclusion change your feelings about Pemberton? Why or why not?
8. Although the novel offers a kind of realism akin to the historical documentary, there are episodes of the otherworldly and supernatural that cannot be explained rationally. What effect do these scenes and characters have on you as the reader?
9. For instance, do you believe in the "second sight" of the blind Mrs. Galloway? What do these examples suggest about the nature of the world and the actions of human beings?
10. Several reviewers have argued that there has never been a character quite like Serena in previous American fiction. Do you agree? Can you think of other female characters who wield such life and death power with such ruthlessness?
11. In the novel's coda, it is 1929, Serena is living in Sao Paulo, Brazil. The notorious Nazi Joseph Mengele was living in Sao Paulo at the same time. Is there any indication that Serena and Mengele were somewhere connected? If so, what significance do you see in their connection?
12. When Rachel gathers ginseng early in the novel, she carefully replants the seeds to ensure more plants will grow. She is also extremely knowledgeable about the plants and creatures she lives among. Contrast her attitude to nature to the Pembertons.

About the Author

Ron Rash is the author of four prize-winning novels: *One Foot in Eden*, *Saints at the River*, *The World Made Straight*, and *Serena*; three collections of poems; and three collections of stories. A recipient of the O. Henry Prize, he holds the John Parris Chair in Appalachian

