



PRAYERS FOR SALE

by Sandra Dallas

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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

About the Author

“I wanted to write a novel . . . combining the brutality of gold dredging with the comfort of quilting.”

Award-winning author Sandra Dallas was dubbed “a quintessential American voice” by Jane Smiley in *Vogue* magazine. Her novels, with their themes of loyalty, friendship, and human dignity, have been translated into nearly a dozen foreign languages and optioned for films.

A journalism graduate from the University of Denver, Sandra began her writing career as a reporter with *Business Week*. A staff member for twenty-five years (and the magazine’s first female bureau chief), she covered the Rocky Mountain region, writing about everything from penny stock scandals to hard-rock mining to contemporary polygamy. Many of her experiences have been incorporated into her novels. At the same time, she wrote nine nonfiction books, including *Sacred Paint*, which won the National Cowboy Hall of Fame Western Heritage Wrangler Award.

Turning to fiction in 1990, Sandra has since published eight novels including *Prayers for Sale*. She received the Western Writers of America Spur Award for *The Chili Queen* and *Tallgrass*, and the Women Writing the West Willa Award for *New Mercies*. She was also a finalist for the Colorado Book Award, the Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association Award, and a four-time finalist for the Women Writing the West Willa Award.

The mother of two daughters—Dana is an attorney in New Orleans, and Povy is a photographer in Golden, Colorado—Sandra lives in Denver with her husband, Bob. Visit her on the Web at www.sandradallas.com.



Povy Kencal Atchison



A Conversation with Sandra Dallas



What sparked the idea for *Prayers for Sale*?

I'd been intrigued with gold dredging since I lived in Breckenridge, Colorado, in the early 1960s. (Middle Swan, the book's setting, is based on Breckenridge, which was a gold mining town long before it became a ski area.) Since then I'd toyed with the idea of writing about those treacherous gold boats on the streams near Breckenridge and the people who had a love-hate relationship with them. I'd also wanted to write a collection of stories about Colorado, told by a quilter, similar to the classic *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, written by Eliza Calvert Hall a hundred years ago. But I'd never considered combining the two ideas until I read a Civil War story about a baby who died while his mother was detained by soldiers. I was so moved by the story that I began thinking about how I could incorporate it into a novel. That was when I realized I could make it the departure point of a novel combining the brutality of gold dredging with the comfort of quilting.

When you write a novel, do you begin with the plot or the characters? Or the setting?

I almost always start with the setting. The characters come next. Then the characters and I go looking for a plot.

What sort of research did you do for *Prayers for Sale*?

I'd already done some of the research when I wrote my ten nonfiction books, most of them on Colorado history. When I lived in Breckenridge, I talked to the old men who had worked on the dredges and heard their stories. But *Prayers for Sale* took additional

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“For women in isolated areas, forming a quilting bee . . . was a joyous social occasion.”

research, of course. I researched gold dredging and read 1930s accounts of life in the mountains. And I studied the books and notes of two old women, novelist Helen Rich and poet Belle Turnbull, who had taken me under their wing when I lived in the mountains. In fact, in my Brecken-ridge file, I have a letter from Helen in which she told me she was glad I was going to write about Breckenridge. She wrote, “You’ve really got the bug about doing Breckenridge. I feel quite sure about you and you have the grace to grow. . . . As you have found out the stuff out of which such books are made has to seep into a person.” She wrote the letter in 1967.

Quilting plays an important role in many of your novels, including this one. Why?

Quilting defines a woman—the type of stitches she makes, the colors she picks for her quilt tops, the pattern she chooses. And quilting, especially in an isolated town such as Middle Swan, brings women together. Sharing their secrets, they bond over the quilt frame.

Why did you choose to have such an age difference between the two heroines in this novel, Hennie and Nit?

Hennie had to be a Civil War survivor for her story to work. I wanted to incorporate characters from my other books into the story—Zepha Massie from *The Persian Pickle Club*, Tom Earley from *The Diary of Mattie Spenser*, Ned and Emma from *The Chili Queen*. The only way this worked was to set the story in 1936 when Hennie was a very old woman. Because she was so vulnerable, Nit had to be young, barely more than a girl.



What do you feel are some of the most important themes in this novel?

Friendship, human dignity, survival, forgiveness, redemption.

Would you name some other books you've enjoyed recently?

I'd like to say I've just curled up with *War and Peace*, but in fact the books I've read recently include: *Going Together* by Arnold Grossman, *This Republic of Suffering* by Drew Gilpin Faust, *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott, *The March* by E. L. Doctorow, *Spoon* by Robert Greer, and various short stories by Truman Capote.

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Behind the Novel

Quilting and the Women of *Prayers for Sale*

Sandra Dallas was on the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum's board of directors when she wrote *The Quilt That Walked to Golden* (Breckling Press), a history of women and quilts in the Mountain West. The book became a major quilt publication, winning the Benjamin Franklin Award and underscoring the importance of a western quilt museum. To learn more about the author's passion for quilting—and to subscribe to her *Piecework* newsletter—please visit www.sandradallas.com.

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A woman who takes small, even stitches is different from one whose stitches are big and sloppy, just as a quilter who uses primary colors differs from one who chooses black and white. Patterns define a woman, too. Hennie, who is eighty-six, likes the traditional old patterns—Lone Star or Bear Claw, for instance, patterns that date back to her girlhood. But Nit, seventeen, is more modern and picks popular 1930s patterns such as Dutch Tulips and Coffee Cup. She even considers making up her own design using aspen leaves. Both are frugal women, however, and they make string quilts, which are tiny strips of leftover fabric put together in a hit-or-miss pattern.

—Sandra Dallas

Quilting Bees

Historically, women were not encouraged to pursue art seriously. So they incorporated their artistry in everyday works,



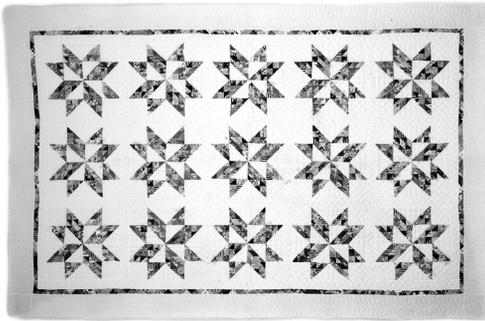
Quilting Party at Quillcote



such as quilting. For women in isolated areas, forming a quilting bee—in which a group of women stitched the quilt in sections—was a joyous social occasion, a time to catch up on news and gossip, and to share joys and sorrows.

Twinkling Stars

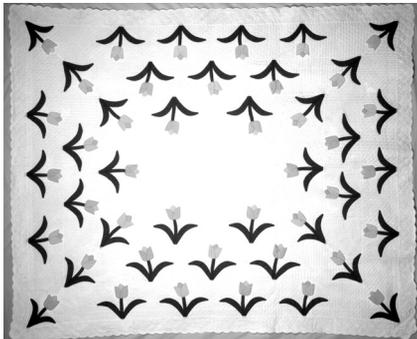
Stars are probably the most beloved of all quilt designs. Hennie would have likely made an old-fashioned Lone Star whereas Nit might have preferred the more modern Twinkling Stars pattern.



Courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum. Photo by Povy Kendal Atchison.

Dutch Tulips

In the 1930s, women appliquéd their quilts using patterns printed in newspapers and womens' magazines, or on wrappers of store-bought cotton batting. Tulips and roses, cut from pastel fabrics, were popular and would have appealed to Nit, who liked realistic designs.



Courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum. Photo by Povy Kendal Atchison.

*Behind the
Novel*



Reading Group Questions

1. Hennie Comfort's sign outside her house says PRAYERS FOR SALE and yet she doesn't sell prayers. Why does Hennie keep the sign?
2. As Hennie begins her story for Nit, she says, "Back then, I wasn't Hennie Comfort. In those days, I was called by the name of Ila Mae Stubbs." What else has changed about Hennie from her teenaged self to her eighty-six-year-old self? More importantly, what has stayed the same?
3. One of the themes of this book is surviving the "unsurvivable." What would you consider "unsurvivable?"
4. Another theme is forgiveness. Is there ever a time when forgiveness isn't possible? Can you relate to the way Hennie forgives at the end of the book—and whom she forgives? In Hennie's shoes, would you have forgiven? Would Hennie's life have been different if she had forgiven earlier?
5. What are some of the qualities you see in the women of Middle Swan that help them survive life there? What is the most important quality?
6. Maudie Sarsfield says, "Quilting keeps me from going queer," meaning "insane." Why would this be so? What is the significance of Maudie adding her initials to her quilts? And what role do quilts and quilting play in the lives of the characters?
7. What is the most tragic aspect of Maudie's life?
8. What is the most important lesson Hennie teaches Nit?



9. Is it ever too late to find true love? How do you define true love?
10. Discuss the phrase “deep enough.” What does it mean in the story? What would it mean to you in your own life?
11. Middle Swan is a cold, harsh town. What makes Hennie love it, and why has she stayed all these years? What draws people together in such an environment?