

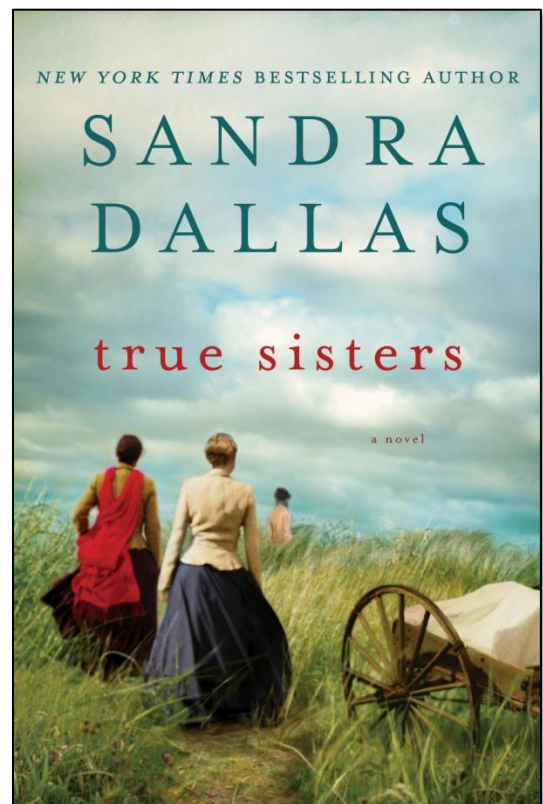
READING GROUP GUIDE

True Sisters

By Sandra Dallas

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About this Guide: The following author biography and list of questions about *True Sisters* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *True Sisters*.

About the Book: In order to encourage Mormon converts to emigrate to the Promised Land (Salt Lake City), a plan was implemented by Brigham Young himself: emigrants were outfitted with two-wheeled handcarts. The settlers were then expected to walk, pushing the handcarts, for the 1,300 mile journey from Iowa City. Several “companies,” as they were called, completed this perilous trek and successfully reached Salt Lake City. But for the Martin Company, one of the very last groups to leave from Iowa City that year, the trip proved disastrous. *True Sisters* tells the story of four women, brought together on the harrowing journey of the Martin Handcart Company, and united by the promises of prosperity and salvation in a new land. Through the ties of female friendships and the strength born from suffering, each one tests the boundaries of her faith and learns the real meaning of survival along the way.





About the Author: *New York Times* best-selling author SANDRA DALLAS, the author of ten novels as well as ten nonfiction books, was dubbed “a quintessential American voice” by Jane Smiley, in *Vogue Magazine*. A journalism graduate of the University of Denver, Sandra began her writing career as a reporter with *Business Week*. Sandra has published ten novels, including *The Bride’s House*. Sandra is the recipient of the Women Writing the West Willa Award for *New Mercies*, and two-time winner of the Western Writers of America Spur Award, for *The Chili Queen* and *Tallgrass*. *Prayers for Sale* was given the Romantic Times Reviewer’s Choice Award for Historical Fiction. The mother of two daughters, Sandra lives in Denver and Georgetown, Colorado, with her husband, Bob.

Praise for Sandra Dallas: “With a perfect blend of masterful storytelling, sympathetic and realistic characters and prose as crisp as a Colorado creek, Dallas again spins a timeless tale of love and tenacity, tenderness and redemption. And *The Bride’s House* is ultimately a story of the confines of legacy and the fulfillment that can come when those chains are broken.” —*Richmond Times Dispatch* on *The Bride’s House*

“Forgiveness and redemption are the themes of this gentle novel about hardscrabble lives.” —*Kirkus Reviews* on *Prayers for Sale*

“Dallas’s terrific characters, unerring ear for regional dialects and ability to evoke the sights and sounds of the 1940s make this a special treat.” —*Publishers Weekly* on *Tallgrass*

A note from the author: As a high school student in Salt Lake City, I was intrigued with the heroic-size bronze statue of a family pushing a handcart that stood on the temple grounds of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I knew that in the 1850s, early Mormon emigrants from Europe had piled their belongings onto these carts and set off on a 1,300-mile trek across the prairie and mountains. Later, reading LDS history, I learned that the journey had been a difficult one. But not until I read David Roberts’ critical book, *Devil’s Gate*, did I realize that the Mormon handcart expedition was the worst Overland Trail disaster in U.S. history. As I poured over the accounts of handcart survivors, I was moved by their humanity. I am not a Mormon, but nonetheless, I felt compelled to tell the converts’ stories—stories not just about victims but about people who embarked on a venture of joy and faith, people willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives, for God and their religion.



Discussion:

1. What were the driving reasons for Nannie to give up her career to convert to Mormonism? Would you have given up what she had?
2. Is it truly a renouncement of faith for Louisa's family to stay in New York over the winter? Was Thales' reaction unreasonable? What was he trying to prove?
3. Why did Robert and Maud decide to make the trek against their friends' advice?
4. The Saints excommunicate a woman for adultery without a trial, which upsets some of the sisters. Is this a fair verdict? What does this show about how women are treated in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints?
5. Why does the Old Absalom oppose making the trek in the winter when he knows it is against the wishes of the other leaders? Is this indicative of cracks within the group?
6. Is it right for the other saints to profit from Emeline's father when the cart is overturned? Should their need supersede the Mormon value of respect for the grieving?
7. What effect do you think Emeline had on Ephraim? Would he have survived the journey without her?
8. Does Thales have a revelation after he causes his nephew Jimmy's death, or was the humility he shows always a part of his character?
9. What does Anne represent for the other Mormon women? Do they ultimately accept her?
10. At what point would your faith have been shaken?
11. Polygamy is a constant source of stress for the female characters in *True Sisters*, coming to a head when they arrive in Zion. Do you agree that it was the right decision for Andrew to offer to take Nannie as a second wife? Should she have accepted?
12. Have you ever heard of the Mormon handcart tragedy?
13. Do you feel that *True Sisters* gave you a good insight into what made Mormonism compelling to the converts? Did they make the right choice to leave their lives in the United Kingdom and make the pilgrimage to Zion?



A Conversation with Sandra Dallas:

You lived in Salt Lake City for three years, your high school years. Did this make you feel out of place as a non-Mormon?

I learned what it was like to be part of a minority, and that was a humbling experience. I lived in Salt Lake County the first year, where 90 pct. of the students in my high school were LDS. I remember a history teacher used the Book of Mormon as an historical source. My last two years, I lived in the city, which is about half Mormon. I admit we tended to stick with our own. My closest friends and most of the fellows I dated were Protestants. But I had Mormon friends, and still do.

How did you do your research for this book?

There was a time when the LDS Church library, which has a treasure trove Mormon journals and narratives, gave limited access to outsiders. That has changed over the years. Material about the handcart expedition, some of it critical of the church, is not only available to non-Mormons today, but it is available online. I did much of my research by computer. In addition, three Utah historians read the manuscript, adding information and pointing out errors. In one case, I had emigrants digging a grave with a shovel but was told that the Martin Company, the company I write about, had no shovels, only one or two spades. I followed part of the handcart route—starting with the Mormon encampment near Iowa City and ending in Salt Lake City. Most moving was Devil’s Gate in Wyoming, where the Martin Company was snowbound and where so many deaths took place. This is sacred ground. I could feel it.

Your rendering of winter in the mountains was very detailed and harrowing- is this something you have personal experience with?

I’ve lived in the mountains and know about the blizzards, but I’ve never had experiences like those of the Mormon emigrants. You don’t know until you’ve experienced one of the snowstorms how deadly they are. The emigrants knew about snow, but they had no idea what storms in the Rockies were like.

The theme of long-ago women forging relationships with other women in order to overcome hardship and tragedy seems to be an enduring (and winning) theme in your stories. How do you think this theme evolved in your writing career?

That’s a hard question to answer. Book ideas come to me in a kind of flash, what James Michener called “the magical moment.” I don’t sit down and say, let’s see, I write about women, so what should I tackle next? I wait until an idea hits me, and sometimes, it’s a long wait. I love the history of western women, and I’ve written a number of nonfiction books about the West, so I’m sure that has something to do with my choice of story line.

Anne seems to be a unique female character, from her life as a shop owner through her decision not to join the faith- what inspired Anne?



I wondered what it would be like for a nonbeliever to be part of that journey. One of the things that got the emigrants through was their extraordinary faith. I asked myself how someone who did not have that faith would deal with the challenges.

Was it emotionally draining for you to write these women's stories? Was there any particular portion of the book that was most difficult to write for this reason?

The hardest part was writing about the husbands of the two old women who died. I loved those couples and felt the women's loss. And I was moved by the little boy who drowned. I wanted to resurrect him, but that wouldn't fit the story line. I don't like to be cold and found myself almost shivering when I wrote about the women, their clothes soaked, walking through the blizzards, never able to get warm.

What draws you to writing about the past in your books?

I love history. I'd have been an historian if I hadn't been a journalist. I wrote 10 books, mostly on western history, before turning to fiction. Besides, I don't want to write about cell phones and iPads and e-books.

In your online bio it states that you have written about contemporary polygamy. Did your experience researching those stories influence the polygamy threads in TRUE SISTERS?

I should mention that contemporary polygamy is a whole different state from what the early Mormons practiced. The LDS Church outlawed plural marriage in 1890, and any Mormon today who enters polygamy is excommunicated. The polygamous cults in Utah and elsewhere are offshoots of the Mormon Church. Still, polygamy under any circumstances is difficult. I'm sure some of the remarks made in my interviews with women who escaped from polygamy in recent years, went into the book, certainly my sympathy for them did.

Did you feel it was presumptuous of you to write about a religious history that is not your own?

I wondered about that when I started *True Sisters*, because the handcart story is profoundly sacred to Mormons. Then I realized that this is not just a Mormon story. It is a western story. These are the women who settled my part of America. I also thought that as a non-Mormon, I would not be pressured by myself or others to write a faith-promoting book and therefore, might be more objective.

As a reporter for Business Week Magazine, did you ever write about Mormons?



I covered the Rocky Mountain region, so I wrote a number of stories about Utah, some of them about Mormons. I also wrote about polygamy and how polygamous wives and their children are a drain on the state's welfare system. Polygamy, by the way, was outlawed by the LDS church in 1890, and any Mormon involved in polygamy today is excommunicated. The polygamous groups that exist now are offshoots of the Mormon Church.

Can we expect a modern story from you in the future? Some sci-fi maybe?

Not until I've exhausted western history, and I have a long way to go.

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reading group or call-in for discussion contact

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