

Cold Mountain

by
Charles Frazier

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 6

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
Columbia

Trudier Harris
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill

John Shelton Reed
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill



StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage.

Additional support from
Barnes & Noble

Discussion questions

During Inman's journey, how do the characters he meets show the disintegration of a society crippled by war?

Although Ruby is an extremely practical and earthy woman, what does she teach Ada philosophically? What ideas, attitudes, or philosophies does Inman learn from his Cherokee friend, Swimmer? How do these ideas aid Inman and Ada in constructing a new life for themselves?

Additional readings

Margaret Mitchell. *Gone With the Wind*, 1936.
C. Vann Woodward, ed. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 1981.
Stark Young. *So Red the Rose*, 1934.

StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage.
Additional support from Barnes & Noble

©1999 American Library Association



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
HUMANITIES

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS



StoryLines America

A Radio/Library
Partnership Exploring Our
Regional Literature



Charles Frazier's best-selling debut novel, *Cold Mountain*, winner of the prestigious National Book Award (1997), is a historical fiction set in North Carolina near the close of the Civil War. In some regards, comparisons between this novel and *Gone With The Wind* are inevitable. Margaret Mitchell's first published novel was also an historical fiction set in the Civil War era, an instant popular success, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1936). Both novels are structured around the courtship of two lovers, though the respective couples differ greatly in character and in the outcome of their romantic designs.

Opinions will differ as to which of the two novels is a more realistic portrayal of life in the South during the Civil War. Some would say that the "Southern belle" character of Scarlett O'Hara and the "moonlight and magnolias" opulence of the plantation setting of *Gone With The Wind* perpetuate Southern stereotypes. Similarly, in *Cold Mountain*, the portrayals of Inman as the noble woodsman and Stobrod as the moonshining hillbilly may perpetuate other stereotypes. Perhaps Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler represent a fairly accurate picture of one class of Southern society of mid-nineteenth century America, whereas Inman and Ada represent lifestyles that were much more common.

Do these books glorify or denigrate the antebellum South, glamorize or disparage the lost cause of the Confederate warriors? In learning the history of the Civil War, or any war, we often focus on political and economic statistics and lose sight of the varied human costs and the particular sagas, successes, and sufferings of individuals. If anything, *Cold Mountain* will encourage readers to consider the way in which warfare not only shapes politics but also profoundly alters the course of many lives caught in the fray.

The plot of this novel is roughly based on the Civil War experience of W.P. Inman, a relative of the author. *Cold Mountain* opens in a military hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina, where injured Confederate soldier Inman lies recuperating from neck wounds received in bloody hand-to-hand combat under General Lee in the battle of Petersburg, Virginia. Inman is hurt in both body and in spirit; he is weary of war and

lies in the hospital pondering how "a man's spirit could be torn apart and cease and yet his body keep moving." Inman's task, and the author's focus in constructing the plot, is to heal his body and revive his soul.

Two things keep Inman from collapse and despair: the memory of Ada Monroe—a beautiful but somewhat unapproachable young woman he had fallen in love with before the war—and his memory of Cold Mountain, a certain peak amidst the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, near where he was raised and where Ada now resides. For Inman, Cold Mountain represents an earlier and better time than the war-ravaged present, and Ada represents the only remaining glimmer of the life he was aiming for before the war began. He knows he will be sent back to the fighting as soon as he is physically able, and he contemplates desertion, knowing that deserters are often hunted down and imprisoned, or worse. Still, Cold Mountain, "a place where all his scattered forces might gather," and Ada beckon to him as his last chance for survival. One morning he simply crawls out a hospital window and sets out on foot towards home.

Inman's and Ada's stories are told in alternating chapters; as Inman makes his way back, Ada must overcome various trials of her own. Ada had been raised as a city girl in Charleston, "educated beyond the point considered wise for females," under the watchful eye of her father, a preacher. Ada moved with her father to Cold Mountain, where he planned to begin a mission to the locals, and hoped also to heal himself of consumption. Eventually he purchased a sizeable farm, using it only as residence for him and his daughter, and leaving the fields and outbuildings unattended. Near the beginning of the war, he dies, leaving Ada alone and unprepared to fend for herself. This is where the reader finds Ada in her first chapter, overcome by grief and depression, unable to formulate a day-by-day strategy for her future.

Meanwhile, on the way home, Inman encounters an array of characters, some of whom are nightmarish and evil while others offer whatever meager sustenance and kindness they can. Inman must above all stay clear of the Home Guard,

military police who prowl the countryside, capturing and sometimes killing deserters. He must also fear Federal troops who, after four years of fighting, have spread into various and surprising locations all over the South. At one juncture, Inman is captured by the Home Guard, chained to other captives, starved, and marched many precious miles back toward the battlefields. Rather than returning the deserters to the war, the Guard forms a firing squad and murders their charges, burying them—still chained—in a shallow grave. Inman is wounded in the head and buried with his comrades, but digs himself out, frees himself of his shackles and resumes his trek homeward.

Ada's return to some prospect of survival comes in the form of the young woman, Ruby, a born survivor, who strikes a deal with Ada to resurrect the neglected farm. In spite of all of Ada's education, Ruby must instruct her in a vast array of survival skills. Together the two women make a modest success of the farm, raising food enough for themselves and bartering for other necessities. Ruby toughens Ada to the harsh realities of a war-torn existence, while Ada manages to somewhat soften and civilize Ruby along the way.

Eventually Inman and Ada are joined, though the reader should be cautioned not to assume this novel will end predictably. In his long trek, Inman has eluded violence, but malevolent forces eventually track him down. In the end, he is both triumphant and defeated, but proves in a single instinctive act of conscience that his humanity is still intact.

About the author

Charles Frazier raises horses on a 12-acre farm outside Raleigh, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife, an accounting professor, and his teenage daughter. *Cold Mountain* is his first novel.