

SOME PLACES HOLD SECRETS.
SOME HEARTS HOLD ON.

HYMNS *of* BLUE HOLLOW

A READING GROUP GUIDE



A STORY OF
LOVE, LOYALTY,
AND THE COURAGE
TO CHOOSE YOUR
OWN PATH.

About the Author

Kemma MarShall is a North Carolina author known for crafting sweeping Southern historical romances set in the rugged hills of 1940s Appalachia. Her work blends lyrical storytelling with grit, exploring themes of survival, love, secrecy, and the quiet strength of women shaped by harsh environments.



A Conversation with Kemma MarShall

*What inspired you to write **Hymns of Blue Hollow**?*
The story began in 2009, when my fascination with family history and bygone eras drew me into the plight of Esther, a young woman shaped by isolation and raised in a world where survival came before kindness. While her story is fiction, much of it is rooted in truths that have echoed through generations and the hills.

In many ways, this novel feels like a reckoning of those fragments, an attempt to gather what has been scattered or forgotten. To truly see her, as so many girls have been, overlooked and pushed to the margins of history, and to give them a distinct voice.

I wanted to explore what might have awaited her beyond the confines of that life, what existed just past the fence she had been taught not to cross. What kind of transformation could come from something as simple, and as profound, as knocking on a stranger's door.

Esther and Ian come from very different worlds. What drew you to that dynamic?

Opposites quite often do attract, and that contrast is the engine of the story. It isn't immediate or easy, and that slow-building tension mattered to me. They are both the salve that the other needs, even if they don't know it.

The setting. Why Appalachia? Why the 1940s?

Aw, the beautiful hills of eastern Tennessee have a life of their own. They are a full-on character in this story and were calling to be heard as well. There, when you are still, you can almost hear their voice and feel their magic.

As for the 1940s, the World War II home front was such a profound time of change, even there. The isolation of rural communities was quickly fading as the war effort and Hollywood homogenized culture at record speed.

What is it you want readers to take away from this story?

That for Esther, who had always felt her hands were bound, change took a lot of courage. That it wasn't a one-and-done thing for her, but small steps, even if some of those steps landed her in a pothole from time to time. She was surviving. Trying.

Major Themes to Consider

- Isolation vs. Belonging
- Fear vs. Truth
- Love as Risk, Not Escape
- Power, Control, and Survival
- The Weight of Family Secrets
- Outsiders and Prejudice



Reading Group Questions

1. How does Esther's understanding of the world begin to shift once she crosses the river to the Old Reed Estate?
2. The Blue Hollow Hills and Larkin function almost like a character in the novel. How does the setting and time period influence the decisions and limitations of the characters?
3. Ian is both an outsider and a stabilizing force. How does his presence challenge the existing dynamics of the estate and Esther's worldview?

4. Consider the idea of *usefulness* in Esther's life. How does her fear of being a burden affect her behavior and choices?

5. The novel explores different forms of strength. Which characters demonstrate strength in unexpected ways?

6. How does secrecy shape the relationships in the story? What is the cost of keeping—or revealing—the truth?

7. Esther has been taught to fear certain people and places. How does the novel challenge inherited beliefs?

8. Discuss the slow-burn nature of Esther and Ian's relationship. What makes their connection compelling—or complicated?

9. The story presents a contrast between harsh survival and moments of tenderness. How do these elements coexist, and what effect do they have on the reader?

10. Many characters operate within systems they did not choose. Do you believe they have agency? Why or why not?

11. How does the novel portray gender roles in the 1940s South? In what ways do characters conform to or resist them?

12. Trust plays a central role in the story. Which relationships are built on trust, and which are shaped by suspicion?
13. What does “home” mean to Esther by the end of the novel? Has her definition changed?
14. While this is not a religious novel, in what ways does faith, or a belief in God, influence the characters and the culture of the rural South?
15. Which moments or scenes stayed with you the most, and why?

Ideas for Book Groups

- Compare *Hymns of Blue Hollow* to other Southern historical fiction works (e.g., *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek*, *Cold Mountain*, *The Women of Promiscuous Nature*, *The Moonshine Women*, *The Four Winds*, *The Mountains We Call Home*)
- Discuss how setting shapes identity in literature
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- Explore the role of women in restrictive environments—then vs. now

- Talk about generational beliefs and how they are passed down or broken

Final Reflection

At its heart, *Hymns of Blue Hollow* asks:

What would you believe—if everything you were taught was built on fear?

And perhaps more importantly:

Would you have made the same decisions as Esther?

Continue the journey at:
HymnsOfBlueHollow.com

