



## **THE OUTCASTS** **By Kathleen Kent**

### **Reading Group Guide**

#### **A conversation with Kathleen Kent**

**You have a few titles under your belt now, including your newest, *The Outcasts*. Have you always wanted to be a writer? Will you tell us a bit about your background and what led you to write your first novel?**

Writing is something that I've always done for my own pleasure and I went to the University of Texas thinking I would pursue the Writing Life. But more practical concerns led me to live and work in New York for twenty years, building a career in finance. In the back of my mind, though, a little voice kept whispering how fine it would be to develop some stories that had always fascinated me, and so I took

the leap of faith and moved with my family to Texas to begin writing what was my first novel, *The Heretic's Daughter*. This first novel was about my grandmother, back nine generations, Martha Carrier, who was hanged as a witch in Salem in 1692. I had grown up with stories of Martha and the Carrier family and I wanted to pay homage to her courage and illuminate the day-to-day lives of her family, her husband and children who survived the witch trials.

**What inspired you to write your newest book, *The Outcasts*?**

My mother was from New England and the Carrier family legends inspired me to write my first two novels, *The Heretic's Daughter* and *The Traitor's Wife*. But I lived most of my childhood in Texas with my dad's family and spent many hours poring over books of the Old West. My dad, a life-long Texan, was a vivid storyteller himself and used to say—out of earshot of my mom—that all the witches came from her side of the family, but that all the horse thieves came from his side. Some of my favorite authors early on were Louis L'Amour and J. Frank Dobie, and later I was inspired by Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry. With *The Outcasts* I was able to revisit the larger-than-life myths, the heroes and heroines of Texas, with all their faults and weaknesses, as well their bravery and fortitude. What made the settlement men and women of Texas so fascinating to me was the complexity of their characters—the infinite variety and nuances of good and bad—and their pitched battles against the extremes of terrain and weather, as well as against their fellow Texans.

**While Nate Cannon is certainly the “white hat” character in *The Outcasts*, I couldn't help but fall in love with the strong-yet-vulnerable Lucinda Carter. She's such a survivor, and in spite of her sometimes questionable motives, I found I wanted to see good things happen to her. Did you have a**

**personal favorite character that you enjoyed writing the most?**

I did have a special admiration for Lucinda. She is a survivor and was dealt an unfortunate hand with her physical afflictions and her difficult upbringing. She is not an easy person to like, but she is not without deep compassion (witness her nursing civil war veterans, and her love for May), but as with so many women of that time, her choices for survival without the protection and resources from a man were few. What surprised me during my research for the book were how many women pursued prostitution briefly and opportunistically to feed themselves and their families. This practice was something Grandma would most likely not have talked about, but most families knew women who had no other choice to keep from starving, especially during those first few years following the Civil War, and who became, if only briefly, "Upstairs Girls."

The character I had the most fun writing, though, was Dr. Tom, a veteran Texas Ranger. A renaissance man, he trained as doctor, was a naturalist and loved to read, most particularly Charles Dickens. I think my inspiration for him was the actor Richard Farnsworth, who I fell in love with watching *The Grey Fox*. He was the ultimate gentleman cowboy: rock steady, loyal, independent, and not averse to any fight that he saw as morally justified.

***The Outcasts* is set in the 1800s and the Gulf Coast settings are almost characters unto themselves.**

**What kind of research did you do for the novel? What are a few things you find most fascinating about that time period?**

I spent a lot of time doing traditional research about Texas during the mid-1800s, but I also travelled to the Gulf Coast, Middle Bayou in particular (now the Armand Bayou Nature Preserve) to get a feel of the terrain, the climate, and the critters that inhabit it: wild boar, alligators, poisonous snakes, and banana spiders the size of dinner plates. The thing that most surprised me was how the terrain has changed

over the last 150 years. Now, the bayou country south of Houston is almost impenetrable with dense underbrush and “trash” trees, but during the years preceding the Civil War the land was mostly vast tracts of prairie that wild buffalo inhabited until the cattle men chased them off to raise their herds of Longhorn and Angus.

**What is your writing process like?**

I am normally a plotter, and a slow plotter at that. My normal pace of writing is to write three sentences and erase two, but all the while knowing what ending I am working towards. But I began *The Outcasts* without a strong idea of the ending and began to panic when I was half way finished with no clear sign of one. I needed something that would tie the characters and the story together in a cohesive way, and I went to bed one night really fretting over what that might be. I dreamt that night of Dr. Tom, and he told me that I had had the answer right in front of me the whole time, and then he gave me the ending. I woke up with a strong sense of wonder regarding the messenger, but it worked in a very satisfying way. It's the first time that that's happened, and may never happen again. But I'm in debt to Dr. Tom for tying it all together for me.

**What, or who, have been some of the biggest influences on your life and/or writing?**

As mentioned earlier, I had a special love of writers of the Old West. But there are other authors who left a deep impression on me; Charles Dickens perhaps most of all, because of the depth of his character development and his fearlessness in writing for an emotional reading experience over a purely intellectual one. Sometimes I think contemporary authors tend to shy away from emotionally engaging readers in this way as it may appear overly sentimental or maudlin. But nothing is more

disappointing than reading an entire novel and not connecting with any of the characters in a deep and substantive way.

**What are you reading now?**

I just finished reading *The Maid's Version* by Daniel Woodrell, which is a beautifully written novel based on a true life event—a tragic fire in a dance hall in the 1920s—and the repercussions on the families for generations afterwards. And I've just begun reading *The Thicket* by Joe Lansdale, a tale of blood and redemption in East Texas, which is where I spent so much time as a child.

**When you're not busy at work on your next project, how do you enjoy spending your free time?**

I love taking long walks with my boxer, Mattie Belle, (it's when I develop a lot of my story ideas) and introducing my 16 year-old son to classic movies like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He would kill me if he knew I said this, but there's nothing more satisfying than having a good cry with your teenage son.

**What's next for you, this year and beyond?**

I've begun two projects simultaneously, which I've never done before, and at some point I'm going to have to make the decision of which manuscript gets finished first. The first is another historical novel set in a Pennsylvania coal community in 1910, with a mining accident and missing children. The second is a real departure for me: a contemporary crime novel based on a short story, "Coincidences Can Kill You," that will be published this November in *Dallas Noir*, which is an anthology of crime stories by a collection of wonderful Dallas authors.

This interview was conducted by Kristin Centorcelli of My Bookish Ways, [mybookishways.com](http://mybookishways.com).

## Questions and topics for discussion

- 1) Most of *The Outcasts* revolves around the separate journeys that Lucinda and Nate take before their paths cross. Discuss the motivations that initially drive the two protagonists towards their goals?
- 2) Lucinda's moral spectrum has many shades of grey. Dr. Tom sums her up with a question: "What makes you think a woman with any decency left would cleave to an evil man like McGill?" Is his assessment of Lucinda fair? Did you find yourself sympathizing with Lucinda or judging her? To what extent should we forgive her capacity for cold self-interest and even brutality?
- 3) *The Outcasts* takes place in Texas in the 1870s, not long after the Civil War. In what ways does the specter of the war haunt the story? How has it shaped the characters and their world?
- 4) Nate's first encounter with Dr. Tom and Deerling is marked by distrust and disapproval of their questionable methods, but his relationship with both men evolves as they work together. What does Nate learn from these more seasoned rangers, and from being on the job? How would you describe the portrayal of male friendship in this novel?
- 5) To what extent does Lucinda fit the mold of the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century female protagonist, and in what ways does she break it?
- 6) Of all the people in Middle Bayou, Tobias is the first to see through Lucinda's assumed identity. Why doesn't he expose her?

- 7) Why do you think this novel is called *The Outcasts*? Which characters does this phrase describe, and why? What would it take for the outcasts to be “included,” and what would they lose in the process?
- 8) How does this book compare with other Westerns that you have read (or seen)? What themes does this novel share with them, and which does it reject or reimagine?
- 9) Are any of the characters in *The Outcasts* “good people,” in your estimation? What qualifies as goodness in the universe of this novel? Which character (if any) do you consider the story’s moral center, and why?
- 10) Where do you see Lucinda and Nate ten years from where the book ends? Do you think that Lucinda has found redemption, and has Nate realized his dream raising horses in Oklahoma?