

Book Group Discussion Guide for *Stars Go Blue*

In *Stars Go Blue*, novelist Laura Pritchett brings her hallmark understated style and honest gaze to bear on a situation that is increasingly prevalent: the desolation of Alzheimer's disease, the caretaking it involves, and the struggle for communication and love. The voices of this brief, harrowing novel alternate between Ben—whose Alzheimer's is nearing the turning point from escalating forgetfulness to debilitating dementia—and Renny, his wife, whose patience is at times is less than perfect. Now their daughter's killer is getting out of jail and Ben wants justice—the kind of justice the West has long been famous for—before his mind leaves him.

Stars Go Blue is a triumphant novel of the American family and the landscape of the West. With an unflinching look into the world of Alzheimer's, both from the point of view of the afflicted and the caregiver, the novel offers a story of remarkable bravery and enduring devotion, proving that the end of life does not mean the end of love.

Below readers will find a Q&A with the author, sample discussion questions, and a critical review of Pritchett's work.

Q & A with the author:

One of your book's main concerns is Alzheimer's. Why?

Laura Pritchett: There came a day, about ten years ago, when I stood with my father in front of an elevator in Denver—we were helping one of my brothers move—and my father had no idea what an elevator was for. I was confused at his confusion: perhaps he'd been out of the city for so long, being a Colorado rancher and all? But no, he had also been a college professor, a geneticist, a world-traveler famous for his research. Soon after, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

Since then, it's been a strange path for the whole gaggle of my family, particularly for my mother, who became his primary caregiver. As for me, these last ten years have been marked by my walks with him across the family ranch, and, as a writer, to better understand him, the disease, the man he was becoming, our relationship.

The irony struck me on many occasions: as he increasingly lost words, I increasingly gained them. I started to write more about more about him. For many years, this writing was (unsurprisingly) from my point of view, my take on the whole thing. But then I started to write from his point of view.

Writing was, first and foremost, my way of loving him more during this time of saying goodbye.

You have two primary points of view in the work, Ben and Renny. Which was more difficult to convey on the page?

Pritchett: One would think (or at least, I thought) writing from the point of view of Renny, the caregiver, would be easier. After all, she has clarity of thought, so can voice her story. But no, it was not easier. How to represent someone so worn down, so exhausted, so conflicted that they're unlikable? The three female characters in the book (Renny, Carolyn, and Jess) each embody a different face of caregiving. Each have their limitations: Renny does more of the day-to-day real stuff, but is not as kind; Jess is kind but limits her involvement; and Carolyn is caught somewhere in the middle.

This book presented its various difficulties, as all books do – in this case, it was the challenge of writing about Ben's confusion without confusing the reader, and how to write about Renny's exhaustive caregiving without making readers dislike her. In the end, though, I believe I did them both justice.

The characters often rely on non-verbal cues to establish relationship because of Ben's inability to always communicate clearly. It's subtle, but does so much here.

Pritchett: Of the novels I've written, body language was by far the most important here, since words were often lacking. Or at least, I thought about body language much more. There were some technical writerly things I did to help convey what I needed conveyed: Renny and Ben are generally facing each other, in direct conflict, when they speak. Carolyn and Ben are always walking side-by-side, which is indicative of the relationship they have. Jess and Ben are not really seen together, purposefully, in that her role is as a silent helper, one who hangs in the shadows. These are conscious decisions I made as a writer to illustrate, indirectly, the ways in which the relationships had developed.

Some of the writing in your two earlier books—Hell's Bottom, Colorado and Sky Bridge—deals with stories farther from your personal experiences. What inspired them?

Much of the raw emotional material is based in my life. But in fictionalizing it, I can work with the plot. I can mess with the tone, the voice, the pace. I can imagine and I can create. There's just more freedom. I synthesize my own hands-on experience and real-emotional-state with stories I make up in my brain or hear elsewhere. As an example: I was a new mother when I wrote *Sky Bridge*. I had a crying infant and was exhausted and in love. I used that emotional state (and all the details that go along with it, such as scratchy eyeballs from lack of sleep) with a made-up story about a single mom

at a minimum-wage job with a boyfriend she didn't love. That part is all made up. But the real Libby is not made up. Libby's basic emotional core is me. We are one in the same.

***Stars Go Blue* reintroduces some characters we first met in *Hell's Bottom*. What brought you back to Ben and Renny's family, in particular? And do you think you might work with side characters in this way again—expanding this little universe throughout future stories?**

All I can say is the same thing many other authors will tell you: certain characters become more-or-less real to you and you wonder what happened to them. Ben and Renny? I love them. I wanted to know what had become of them. So when I conceived the idea to write about a person with Alzheimer's, I knew it would be Ben. I knew the whole (imaginary) family so well (from my first book and many of my stories) that I could leap right into the family dynamic and personalities.

My next novel takes up the characters in *Sky Bridge*. So, yes, I'm drawn to expanding little universes that I wrote into being.

I remember reading Carol Shields's work—she's a Canadian writer most famous for her Pulitzer prize-winning book *The Stone Diaries* (Penguin Books, 1993). Her books are loosely connected—one character from one book shows up in another and so on. Many writers do this, of course, but the way Shields did it really expanded each book that came before. As in, each book WAS like a bit of an expanding universe, and the universes ran into each other and informed one another. I fell in love with that, and I'm certain that influence has been guiding me.

Do you mind telling us more about your father and the disease?

My father was a geneticist, professor, and rancher, who traveled the world – from Argentina to Australia – teaching and sharing his research. He was very bright and very active and to say he still is that would be an ungraceful lie and an avoidance of the horrible facts of this disease. He is still beautiful and kind; but he is also diminished. For several years, he was aware of this fact, and bore it with grace and strength. It's now been 13 years into the disease, and when I walk with him down his Colorado ranch – where he still lives with my mother, his primary caretaker – he denies he has a disease at all. He has moved into the stage where one no longer knows, and he is, as many have said before, very much like a child.

The bulk of this novel was written during the year in which my father moved from Stage I to Stage II of Alzheimer's – when awareness of the disease is prevalent. In certain ways, the writing of this book was an attempt to capture his calm spirit and beautiful observations as they changed, became differently articulated, and somehow were still present even after he was no longer able to give voice to a great many things. It was also

a challenge: how to give voice to someone who is losing theirs. My ultimate wish, then, was to write a novel in which I captured the mind of someone with dementia – which I suppose was a way of knowing him better and therefore loving him more. Perhaps, too, it was a preparation for my own path – for the eventual testing that I’ll do for the gene that positively indicates Alzheimer’s.

The similarities to this book end there, though, more or less. One of my brothers is a vet, who recently pulled out pink juice to put down my dog, which is where the idea for this novel first came. I do not wish – and never have – for my father to commit suicide. Rather, what I want for my father is what clinicians refer to as “Contented Dementia” – or at least as calm and peaceful a journey as possible. His disease, however, has of course revealed many of the themes that this book raises: death, suffering, questions about suicide, and the many raw and exposed facets of losing one’s self. My attempt here has been to look head-on at these issues, rather than skirting them and staying on the periphery.

In the last years, I have walked hundreds of miles with my father, trying to understand his dementia. Like all of us, and especially because he was an introvert, he trusted his internal world more than the external world, and thus this process was an annihilation of the self, of which he was very much aware. We talked about it to the extent we could.

What books influenced you?

When I was writing this book, I had in mind some other lyrical short novels, such as *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka, *Atticus* by Ron Hanson, *The Tie that Binds* by Kent Haruf – all short novels that burst with energy. To my mind, this was the sort of novel that called for that kind of approach, violent though it was. It was also important to write it from the perspective of someone with Alzheimer’s, rather than only from that of an observer.

How important is place to a story and why?

For me, place is enormously important in all my writing, both fiction and nonfiction. I’m sure that’s because place is important to me as a human being. I find my solace, my center, and my ideas while outside, engaging in the natural world. I hike or walk every day. Since my center is so tied up to place, it’s difficult (or probably impossible) for me to write about characters who are oblivious to place.

As a writer, I think I’ve found ways in which place can contribute to plot and characterization – which is essential. You can’t just go on and on about place. Readers

want to hear a *story*, and they want to see *people* moving through that story. But place can help you do that.

When did you know you wanted to become a writer?

I knew when I was about seven. I wrote in my first diary: "I want to become a riter someday."

What is the best advice you can give to new writers?

Read and write, daily (or nearly daily). Read in the genre that you hope to write in (fiction, nonfiction, historical fiction, or whatever). Then write and write and write. Find some good people to read and critique your work. Find a job that allows you to write and still eat. Sell your TV.

Why do you write?

As one of my characters says in my novel, *Sky Bridge*, "Art is what gets us beyond what is real. It makes reality more real. It also shortens the distance we gotta travel to see how connected we are. That's what art *should* do." I think that's what writing – and reading – is all about for me. It helps me to be human, to work on being a full and complete human. Writing, for me, also helps me understand things --- I write what I'm curious about, what I need to process or ponder.

What are your feelings about the state, and movement, of literature in the West?

In much of our past literary history, the West has been portrayed one way: white men were the focus, they were quiet and stoic, they had a bunch of broken dreams, and they had minorities and women to help them out. But literature has rapidly changed; we've evolved. We've quit being so romantic and nostalgic. And new voices have become part of our literary dialogue—voices by minorities, women, and complex men. I am often afraid, however, that we've backed ourselves up into another corral.

This is a gross oversimplification, but I believe we writers try to write about compelling stuff, in part, so that readers will buy our books. So we do write about the air and space

and mountains and ranches in the West because that is, in part, what makes the West interesting. It's true that when I look out my window to the mountains, my heart does a little shimmy.

We also write about them because that's probably what New York publishers want—they like certain patterns to hold. Well, to be really honest, I think we Western writers want the patterns to hold. They give us a sense of who we are. Or who we want to be. We don't want to be ordinary, with ordinary sadness playing out in ordinary landscapes. So we acquiesce (our characters do) and don the chaps and go fishing—because we feel as if we should.

Besides the ranchers that live all around me in my little rural hometown, there are also painters and musicians, army personnel and homemakers. There are folks suffering from anxiety, schizophrenia, and bi-polar disorders. There are meth addicts, illegal immigrants, the very poor and the very rich. There are plenty of people in the West who aren't outdoorsy, don't fish, don't camp, hike, or fix fence. There are subdivisions, neighborhoods, apartment buildings, and mansions. What about a single and lonely Chicana mother on the streets of Denver, or the single and lonely transplant from L.A. who is gay and living in a new subdivision?

What do you have in mind, going forward?

To keep pushing the boundaries of the literature set in the West. I want the full spectrum and an honest gaze directed at politics, poverty, wealth, sex, sexual orientation, class issues, overpopulation, climate change. A good book's job is to expose real lives, the blood and heart inside us all.

I try very hard not to be romantic and nostalgic in my writing. With both place and emotions, I don't want the Hallmark-y sappy stuff. I want the real, raw truth. Always, as a writer, I am seeking to put words to the inchoate, as truthfully as I can.

My next book is due out in June 2015. Like my other books, it's set in rural Colorado, and it follows the story of a woman who is absolutely worn down to the bones and is full of raw rage at herself and at the universe. As a *levantona* who has been running drugs and illegal immigrants once they're beyond the US-Mexico border, she's knowingly (and even defiantly) entered into a harsh and dangerous world. But now her world has become darker than she can bear: The largest wildfire in Colorado history is blazing. Immigrants are dead. She's haunted by the memory of a Mexican woman she couldn't save and a lost Mexican girl she did. Traffickers – of both immigrants and drugs – are now hunting her down. But most of all, she's at the mercy of her own traumatized soul, and the weight of it is cracking her apart.

Like all my work, I'd like to think it takes on the toughest subjects we face as humans. In *Stars Go Blue*, it was Alzheimer's, care giving, and end-of-life decisions. This new book broaches timely topics essential in the West—immigration, rural poverty, wildfires, hard-earned transformation and redemption.

Sample discussion questions:

1. Discuss the role of water (as metaphor, as a reality in the West, as a guiding image)
2. Discuss the role of music and sound. Why might music be important in a book about Alzheimer's?
3. Discuss the role of color.
4. Discuss the role of ranching. How important is Ben's ranching background to the action that he takes later in the book? How are Ben and Renny's relationships and histories to the land different?
5. Jess steps in as the final narrator. Why? To what effect?
6. Discuss the role of Shakespeare (King Lear in particular) in terms of subject matter, language invention and use, the role of the chorus, etc.
7. This book brings up many issues surrounding end-of-life decisions. Do you agree with Ben's decision? Or Renny's decision to keep quiet about it?
8. The memorial service and burial takes place in the same field where the book begins. Discuss the changes to the field, the family, the community.

Some links for additional reading:

More Magazine: <http://www.more.com/family-relationship-books>

Tin House: <http://www.tinhouse.com/blog/35431/the-last-memory.html>

Fiction Writers Review: <http://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/grafting-experiences-like-hides-a-conversation-with-laura-pritchett/>

Colorado Public Radio : <https://www.cpr.org/news/story/how-beat-writer-s-block>

Missoula : <http://missoulanews.bigskypress.com/missoula/everyday-tragedies/Content?oid=2052818>

Writer's Digest: <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/there-are-no-rules/a-writer-never-averts-her-eyes-on-killing-my-father>

Utah book chat: <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/blogtribtalk/58211864-71/lit-utah-sltrib-blue.html.csp>

A summary of the critical reception of Laura Pritchett's work:

After writing and publishing short fiction during her twenties, Pritchett assembled a collection of interwoven short stories about a ranching family, published as *Hell's Bottom, Colorado*. Released in 2001 by Milkweed Editions, Pritchett's collection won that publisher's fiction prize and the PEN USA Award for Fiction. From the ten stories of *Hell's Bottom, Colorado*, readers come to know and understand three generations of a cattle ranching family--parents Renny and Bill, daughters Carolyn and Rachel, and four teenaged grandchildren--as their lives are slowly transformed by love and their world diminished by violence and loss. In a setting that Booklist contributor Carol Haggas described as being "as heavenly as it is harsh, as protective as it is predatory," Pritchett's complex characters are brought to life in "spare yet richly evocative stories."

Praising Pritchett's skill at portraying "a world where decency and humanity are challenged repeatedly," a Kirkus Reviews critic called *Hell's Bottom, Colorado* "an impressive small-scale study of family dynamics." In a Denver Post review, Sybil Downing noted that "the characterization of the doggedly brave children contrasted with Ray's innate cruelty is right up there with Charles Dickens." School Library Journal reviewer Molly Connally felt that "teens will find this a moving portrait of the American West and what it takes to eke out a living from land that is as harsh as it is beautiful."

Pritchett's next novel, *Sky Bridge*, is also set in Colorado. Twenty-two-year old Libby convinces her younger sister, Tess, not to have an abortion, promising that she will help care for the child. Libby thinks that after Tess has the baby, she will come to love it, but instead, Tess leaves town to find a better life, leaving Libby completely responsible for Amber. Their mother, a tough ranch hand, provides little support, and Libby is unsure about whether she wants to marry her boyfriend, Derek. She loses her job as a stocker in a small-town grocery store and deals with other hardships, including Amber's father, who is visited by a flash of responsibility and wants custody of Amber, and the fact that Tess is involved with smuggling drugs and people across the border. Kim Dare wrote in School Library Journal that *Sky Bridge* "offers a gritty but redeeming picture of a family that never quite lets go of hope, and characters who are not soon forgotten." A Kirkus Reviews contributor said that the novel "displays Pritchett's gift for dialogue and compelling characters." A Booklist reviewer wrote, "Pritchett's powerful yet poetic voice speaks with clarity, wisdom, and passion about country, family, and one young woman's majestic spirit."

Pritchett's third novel *Stars Go Blue* was equally well received. In a starred review from Booklist, Carol Haggas writes, "Readers will remember Renny and Ben Cross from Pritchett's stellar first collection of linked stories, *Hell's Bottom, Colorado* (2001). Life in the meantime has not been kind to the salt-of-the-earth, hard-working couple. Their daughter, Rachel, was murdered before their very eyes a few years back by her meth-head husband, Ray. Now Ben has rapidly progressing dementia, and Renny is left to tend to the ranch and her husband single-handedly. When the Crosses learn that Ray has been released from prison in nearby Greeley, Ben leaves in the midst of a snowstorm to confront the man who ruined his family, armed with enough weapons to ensure his

misery will end. When Renny discovers Ben is gone, she takes off in what is now a full-blown blizzard, uncertain that she will find Ben in time. There is more than just the bleak and unforgiving setting of the Rocky Mountain foothills to recommend Pritchett to fans of Kent Haruf's similarly placed novels. Strength of character and simplicity of language comparably complement a rich underpinning of savagery and sadness as Pritchett sensitively navigates the end of a life and sublimely realizes its enduring legacy."

Library Journal also gave the book a starred review, noting, "Award-winning author Pritchett introduced Renny and Ben Cross in *Hell's Bottom, Colorado*, a novel that's unsparing in its stark detail of ranch life in eastern Colorado. In this emotionally charged new book, Renny and Ben are still devoted but have been driven apart by the murder of their daughter Rachel, from which neither has recovered. Rachel's abusive husband, Ray, spent time in prison for the crime, but now he's out and headed back to his hometown nearby. Facing a dangerous man like Ray is only one of Renny's worries. She has to figure out how best to dispose of their failing ranch while watching Ben struggle with Alzheimer's. In his muddled state, Ben has secretly devised a bizarre plan to assure justice for Rachel and a secure future for their surviving daughter and grandchildren, but Renny suspects his scheme when she finds the notes he's written to himself on little pieces of paper. Determined to rescue him, Renny foolishly heads out into a frightening blizzard. In the final chapter, granddaughter Jess speaks from the heart about Ben's dignity, his respect for the land, and his solid devotion to his family. **VERDICT** Pritchett delivers a brilliant novel, filled with heartache and humor, that will strike a chord with many readers. A heart-wrenching exploration of a family in crisis."

Biography:

Laura Pritchett is an award-winning, acclaimed author/editor of seven books, including her newest novel *Stars Go Blue*, which received starred reviews from Kirkus and Library Journal, the latter calling it "a brilliant novel, filled with heartache and humor." She has two other novels forthcoming from Counterpoint Press. She's the winner of the PEN USA Award for Fiction, the Colorado Book Award, the Milkweed National Fiction Prize, and others, and has published over 100 essays and short stories in magazines (including *O Magazine*, *High Country News*, *5280*, *The Sun*, *Orion*, and others). She holds a PhD from Purdue University and teaches around the country. She is also known for her environmental stewardship, particularly in regard to land preservation and river health. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart on several occasions. More at www.laurapritchett.com

Critical reception:

“In this haunting tale...the weather plays a supporting character, and its unpredictability, constantly switching from placid to punishing, mirrors the tenderness and the tumult in the couple’s marriage. **Pritchett’s prose is so beautifully crafted that she manages to make sadness beautiful and tragedy compelling.**”
—*Real Simple*

“There is **more than just the bleak and unforgiving setting of the Rocky Mountain foothills to recommend Pritchett to fans of Kent Haruf’s similarly placed novels.** Strength of character and simplicity of language comparably complement a rich underpinning of savagery and sadness as Pritchett sensitively navigates the end of a life and sublimely realizes its enduring legacy.”
—*Booklist*, Starred Review

“Pritchett delivers **a brilliant novel, filled with heartache and humor,** that will strike a chord with many readers. A heart-wrenching exploration of a family in crisis.”
—*Library Journal*, Starred Review

“**Pritchett has a remarkable talent for laying down the harshness of ranch — and human — life without letting the narrative itself descend into bitterness,** and the novel ends not on the kind of saccharine note one might expect, but survival and acceptance. Her clean prose draws the reader into painfully real evocations of all who suffer, even as **she lets the beauty of the world blossom.**”
—*Boulder Daily Camera*

“Laura Pritchett’s is a **fine new voice,** fully her own, with wise sensibilities. The deep territory mapped here in the triangular boundary between regret and endurance and hope is **well illuminated and finely wrought.**”
—Rick Bass, author of *The Stars, the Sky, the Wilderness*

“*Stars Go Blue* manages to be **both warm-hearted and violent at once—** a complex deeply-imagined family tale which finds unexpected gifts at its conclusion. Laura Pritchett is a writer who knows country life on the Rocky Mountain front range thoroughly and **she conveys this physical world expertly, beautifully out of her long experience.** Within this specific place her clear depiction of character and suspenseful delivery of story compel us to the last exact word.”
—Kent Haruf, author of *Plainsong* and *Eventide*

“In prose as bright as mountain air we meet a retired rancher whose memory is failing and his estranged, hard-bitten wife, as each attempts to prepare for the release from prison of the stranger who murdered their daughter. Their narratives are as gripping as they are intelligent, as wise as they are funny, as unsentimental as they are tender. What results is proof positive that **Pritchett is one of Colorado’s best-kept literary secrets, a superb writer.**”
—Laura Hendrie, author of *Stygo*

