

# BOOKNOTES

READERS GUIDE

## thematic connections

**Historical Fiction:  
World War I**

**Patriotism**

**Courage & Honor**

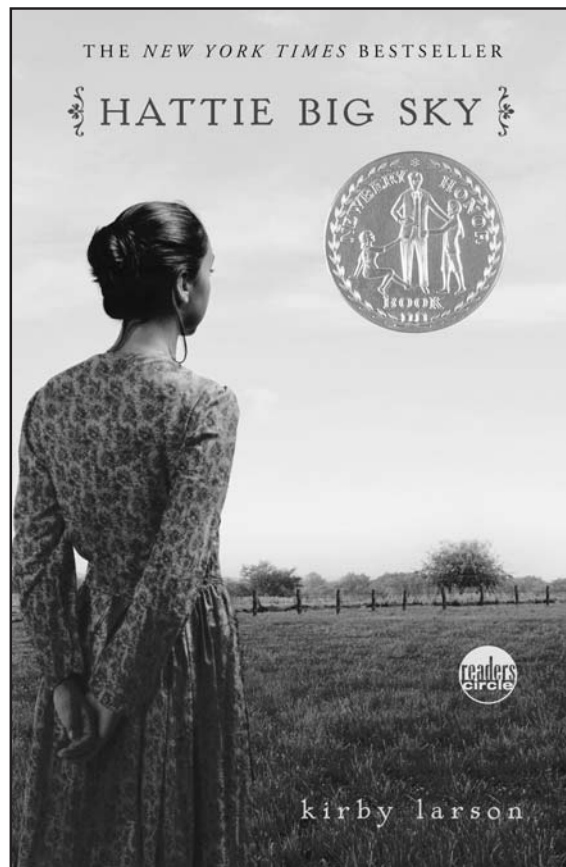
**Perseverance**

**Coming-of-Age**

**Grades 7 up**

## about the book

Hattie Brooks is only 16 years old when she inherits her uncle's homestead claim in Montana. Orphaned at a young age, she isn't sure she has what it takes to prove up on this claim, but she does know that she is tired of living here and there with distant relatives. In the winter of 1917, Hattie packs her few possessions and boards a train headed west. Her only companions are her cat, and letters from Charlie, her best friend who is fighting in France during World War I. It turns out that proving up on a claim takes more than courage, but Hattie is determined to beat the odds, and with the help of kindhearted neighbors, she gives it her all. Hattie proves her independence and courage, but an unforeseen tragedy forces her to examine her future, and decide whether Montana will be a part of it.



Delacorte Press trade PB: 978-0-440-23941-3 (0-440-23941-9)  
Delacorte Press HC: 978-0-385-73313-7 (0-385-73313-5)  
GLB: 978-0-385-90332-5 (0-385-90332-4)  
Listening Library CD: 978-0-7393-6284-6 (0-7393-6284-4)

## awards & honors

**A Newbery Honor Book**

**An ALA Notable Book**

**An ALA Best Book for  
Young Adults**

**A School Library Journal  
Best Book of the Year**

**A Booklist Editors' Choice**

**A New York Times  
Bestseller**

**A Book Links Lasting  
Connection Selection**

**A NCSS-CBC Notable  
Social Studies Trade  
Book for Young People**

**A Montana Book Award**

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## pre-reading activity

Ask readers to use resources in the library or sites on the Internet to find out about the Homestead Act approved by Congress in the late 1800s. How was the Homestead Act of 1910 different from the original act? Discuss how the rules of the act made it almost impossible for an independent 16-year-old girl to prove up on a claim.

# discussion

- Describe Hattie's relationship with Aunt Ivy and Uncle Holt. What does Uncle Holt see in Hattie that Aunt Ivy doesn't? How does Uncle Holt continue to support Hattie after she moves to Montana?
- Hattie travels to Montana on the Great Northern Railway. She reads a pamphlet on the train that describes Montana as "the land of milk and honey." Discuss Hattie's first impression of Montana. How might Hattie describe this land by the end of the novel? In the last chapter, Hattie goes to Seattle. What does she expect to find there that she doesn't have in Montana?
- Explain what Perilee Mueller means when she tells Hattie that her resemblance to Uncle Chester goes beyond looks. How does this give Hattie a sense of family? Why are the items in Uncle Chester's trunk so important to Hattie? There are many mysterious things about Uncle Chester. How does this mystery give Hattie the courage and determination to prove up on the claim?

## praise

★ "Writing in figurative language that draws on nature and domestic detail that infuse her story with the sounds, smells, and sights of the prairie, she creates a richly textured novel full of memorable characters."—*Booklist*, Starred

★ "Larson creates a masterful picture of the homesteading experience and the people who persevered."

—*School Library Journal*, Starred

# questions

- Perilee and Karl Mueller meet Hattie at the train, and welcome her to their family. How does their relationship grow as the novel progresses?
- Karl Mueller is mistreated by the citizens of Vida because he is German. How does Hattie's friendship with Karl and Perilee make her a victim of bullying? How do the bullies create an atmosphere of mistrust and fear? At what point does Hattie experience the most fear? She says, "The worst thing of all is standing by when folks are doing something wrong." (p. 164) Explain how Hattie attempts to right the wrongs.
- Hattie says, "I guessed Charlie and I were in the same boat. We'd both signed on for something we'd envisioned as heroic and glamorous." (p. 120) How is Hattie's effort to save her uncle's claim heroic? Discuss how Charlie's idea of a hero changes after he witnesses the death of his comrades.
- Describe how Hattie changes in the year that she spends on the Montana prairie. Debate whether her idea of "home" is different by the end of the novel. Hattie says, "I'd arrived alone, and I wanted to leave that way." (p. 282) Why is this so important to her? How is she a success even though tragedy prevented her from proving the claim?
- At the beginning of the novel, Hattie says, "My bounce around life had taught me that dreams were dangerous things." (p. 3) Why was Hattie so afraid of dreams? How does she learn that dreams do come true? What about Charlie? Do his dreams come true? How do their dreams collide?

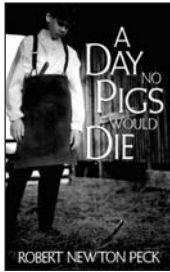
## vocabulary/use of language

The vocabulary in the novel isn't difficult, but readers should be encouraged to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words using the context of the story. Such words may include: *familial* (p. 15), *counsel* (p. 17), *orations* (p. 17), *legacy* (p. 22),

*odiferous* (p. 27), *coulee* (p. 34), *allure* (p. 57), *minuscule* (p. 66), *resolute* (p. 107), *resplendent* (p. 107), *pommel* (p. 115), *sedition* (p. 117), *conscripted* (p. 117), *oblivious* (p. 132), *indignant* (p. 173), *domicile* (p. 173), and *fortuitous* (p. 252).

## related titles

### by theme



#### **A Day No Pigs Would Die** Robert Newton Peck

Historical Fiction: 20th Century • Coming-of-Age  
Grades 7 up  
Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-679-85306-0 (0-679-85306-5)



#### **Ashes of Roses** Mary Jane Auch

Historical Fiction: 20th Century  
Immigrant Experience • Perseverance  
Grades 7 up  
Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-23851-5 (0-440-23851-X)



#### **Shackleton's Stowaway** Victoria McKernan

Historical Fiction: 20th Century • Perseverance  
Grades 7 up  
Laurel-Leaf PB: 978-0-440-41984-6 (0-440-41984-0)  
Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-82691-7 (0-375-82691-2)

## internet resources

#### **Montana History Web Site**

[www.metnet.state.mt.us/teachmthistory](http://www.metnet.state.mt.us/teachmthistory)  
A resource for teachers about Montana history  
with a link about homesteaders

#### **The Homestead Act**

[www.legendsofamerica.com/AH-Homestead.html](http://www.legendsofamerica.com/AH-Homestead.html)  
An overview of the Homestead Act approved by Congress

#### **Montana Politics**

[www.montanaheritageproject.org/index.php/teacherlore/printer/montana-and-whitefish-politics-in-1910](http://www.montanaheritageproject.org/index.php/teacherlore/printer/montana-and-whitefish-politics-in-1910)

A discussion of the enlarged Homestead Act of 1910



Photo Credit: Kysiel Porter

## about the author

**Kirby Larson** never liked history until she heard the story of her great-grandmother homesteading by herself in Montana. She became interested in knowing more about Hattie Wright and the courage it took for her to tackle the prairie alone. Larson traveled to Montana and spent countless hours reading courthouse records and newspaper morgues. The result is *Hattie Big Sky*, a 2007 Newbery Honor Book. Larson lives with her husband in Kenmore, Washington. She is the mother of two grown children.

For more information about the author, visit [www.kirbylarson.com](http://www.kirbylarson.com)

## on the web

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