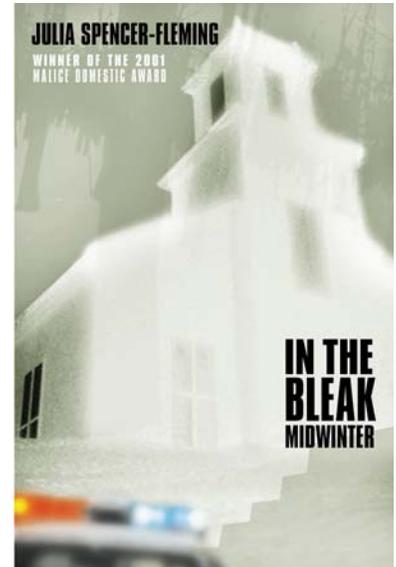


READING GROUP GUIDE

In the Bleak MidWinter by Julia Spencer-Fleming



St. Martin's Press

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Introduction to *In the Bleak MidWinter*

It's a cold, snowy December in the upstate New York town of Millers Kill, and newly ordained Clare Fergusson is on thin ice as the first female priest of its small Episcopal church. The ancient regime running the parish covertly demands that she prove herself as a leader. However, her blunt manner, honed by years as an army pilot, is meeting with a chilly reception from some members of her congregation and Chief of Police Russ Van Alostyne, in particular, doesn't know what to make of her, or how to address "a lady priest" for that matter.

The last thing she needs is trouble, but that is exactly what she finds. When a newborn baby is abandoned on the church stairs and a young mother is brutally murdered, Clare has to pick her way through the secrets and silence that shadow that town like the ever-present Adirondack mountains. As the days dwindle down and the attraction between the avowed priest and the married police chief grows, Clare will need all her faith, tenacity, and courage to stand fast against a killer's icy heart.

In the Bleak Midwinter is one of the most outstanding Malice Domestic winners the contest has seen. The compelling atmosphere—the kind of very cold and snowy winter that is typical of upstate New York—will make you reach for another sweater. The characters are fully and believably drawn and you will feel like they are your old friends and find yourself rooting for them every step of the way.

Reading Group Guide Questions

Questions provided by the reading group of St. Martin of Tours Episcopal Church in Kalamazoo, MI, courtesy of David Senecal

1. What do you think of Clare Fergusson as a person?
2. What do you think of Clare as a priest?
3. How does St. Alban's strike you as a parish? A place you'd want to be? A good match for Clare and its members?
4. What are your reactions to the relationship between Clare and Russ?
5. What do you think of the setting of the story [In *The Bleak Midwinter*] and how it is described and used in the book? Have any of you travelled in the Adirondacks and be willing to share your impressions of the area?
6. Do you have a favorite character - or one you love to hate - in the story [other than Clare and Russ]?
7. What are your thoughts about the use of prayer in the book?
8. Do you think the book is successful as a mystery?
9. Is there a good balance between the plot, social and religious issues, and personal relationships in the book?
10. I quoted the question and your response to it in one of your interviews: "What is it about the Episcopal Church that seems to lend itself so readily to mystery authors?" and gave the group a list of writers who have used Episcopal and Anglican clergy as protagonists in their books. I later expanded the list (including your books, of course!) and printed it up as a passout to our group.
11. If *MIDWINTER* were made into a movie, what actors could you see playing Clare and Russ?

Questions provided by the mystery reading group of the South County Regional Library in Charlotte, NC, courtesy of Lawrence Turner

- 1) Is Clare Fergusson a realistic character (in regards to being a member of the clergy after year earlier being trained as an army pilot)?
- 2) Does the author give a strong sense of place/setting/community/use of dialogue in the book?
- 3) Did the author do a good job telling this story—is it involving, suspenseful, plausible?
- 4) Did the book leave you wanting to learn more about any character? Who?

- 5) Could this story have been the same if the absent Mrs. Russ Van Alystne was present?
- 6) Why does Clare continue to assist Russ in two criminal investigations—why is she so curious and assertive?
- 7) Why does Russ permit Clare to accompany him?
- 8) Clare and Russ work well together when following up on an abandoned baby case but run into some friction when pursuing a murderer—is this conflict to be expected?
- 9) Are there any instances in the book when foreshadowing is used?
- 10) Why is Clare’s wardrobe important throughout the story (i.e., boots, clerical collar)?
- 11) What does Clare’s car say about her or represent to her?
- 12) Could this story take place in another time period (say, even 25 years ago) and still be the same basic story? Would this story be as effective in another region of the country?
- 13) Is the book a cozy mystery? (for the unsure, cozy mysteries can be defined and then treatment of certain scenes and situations can be reviewed)

About the Author

Julia Spencer-Fleming was born in Plattsburgh Air Force Base and spent most of her childhood on the move as an Army brat. She studied acting and history at Ithaca College, and received her J.D. at the University of Maine School of Law. She lives in a 180-year-old farmhouse outside of Portland, Maine, with her husband, three children, and beloved big dog.