

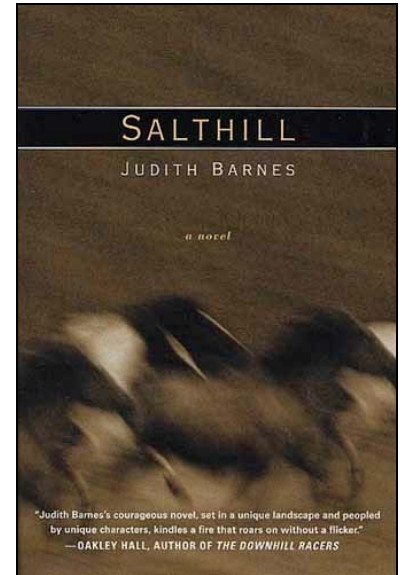
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Salthill* by Judith Barnes

St. Martin's Press

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0-312-29018-7 (hardcover)



### Introduction to *Salthill*

*He came because he was starving and he stayed because he could ride.*

*One evening in 1946, a stranger arrives at Salthill, a horse ranch in the Skillihawk Valley in British Columbia. Grey St. Oegger welcomes the young African-American, who gives his name as simply Harris, in for a meal. But after dinner, when he sees Harris's affinity for horses, he extends that welcome indefinitely, offering Harris a job and a place to live.*

Over the next five years, Harris seems to settle in at Salthill, becoming a partner and nearly a son to Grey, who breeds and trains horses while raising his two daughters and his son. Harris even buys a horse of his own, a magnificent but temperamental creature they call the Red. But even Grey sees a rage in Harris, simmering like the Red's own wild streak below Harris's quiet exterior. But the more he becomes part of the family, the more an explosion seems inevitable—especially once Elsa, Grey's youngest daughter, returns from school a headstrong and beautiful young woman and turns her eye on Harris.

Judith Barnes has written a lush and compelling historical novel about family and relationships, love and rage, loyalty and betrayal, all set against the beautiful backdrop of the ranching life.

### Praise for *Salthill*

“Judith Barnes has talent—as evidenced by her sharp, informative descriptions of horses, ranch life, and the natural wonders of the Canadian landscape.”

--*Publishers Weekly*

“Judith Barnes’s courageous novel, set in a unique landscape and people by unique characters, kindles a fire that roars on without a flicker.”

--Oakley Hall, author of *The Downhill Racers*

“*Salthill* is a huge book, and a compelling one. It reads like a classic. Barnes has created a vivid world and unforgettable characters whose astonishing collisions command awe and deep affection.”

--Sands Hall, author of *Catching Heaven*

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. What kind of a novel is *Salthill*? Is it primarily about race, or family? It is a story of romance?
2. The author uses structural devices (flashbacks, dreams, jumps in time) as tools to create suspense in telling her story. Is this effective, or would more straightforward narration have worked better?
3. Is the reader meant to compare Harris to the Red? Does this comparison illuminate Harris’s character?
4. The writing about horses provides some of the most emotional passages in the novel. Describe the role that horses play in the story, in the lives of the characters, as symbols and as plot devices.
5. The author claims the myth of King Arthur as a major influence on writing *Salthill*. The way that the allegiance Harris feels for Gray conflicts with his love for Elsa conjures up Lancelot’s dilemma, and the themes of loyalty, revenge, passion. Discuss the similarities and differences between *Salthill* and this classic story.
6. Is Grey’s reaction to Elsa and Harris’s affair related to Harris’s race, his behavior, or to his feelings of betrayal? Did he feel that Harris belonged to him? Is Grey’s reaction understandable, or simply wrong?
7. Discuss the role of race in the story. Use anecdotes from Harris’s past and present lives, from Sno-Bird and Dai and Piwonka, from the beginning of the story to the end. Is the role of race in Harris and Elsa’s lives different at the end of the book?
8. Is the ending believable? Or did you expect that Harris and Elsa would end up apart? Is it a happy ending?

## About the Author

**Judith Barnes** has traveled extensively throughout the world and lived Canada for two years. She was born, raised, and still lives in Los Angeles, California. This is her first novel.