

READING GROUP GUIDE

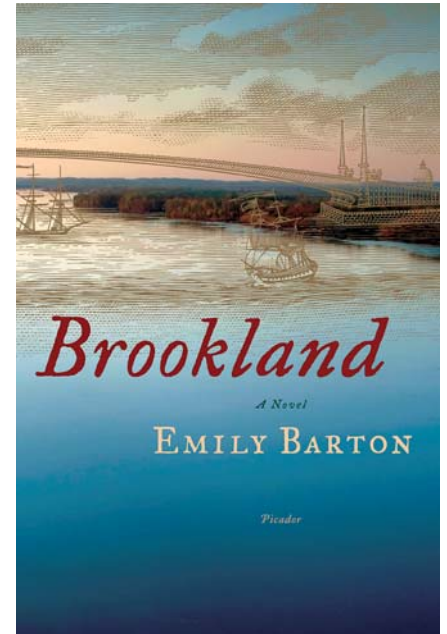
Brookland

A Novel

by Emily Barton

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Brookland* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Brookland*.

About the Book

Set during America's tenuous years after the Patriots' triumph over the British, *Brookland* weaves a dazzling thread through the rich tapestry of New York history. Prudence Winship's Brooklyn is a town unto itself, a rural village that has little in common with the urban island of Manhattan across the East River. Like many before her, Prue has gazed across these tidal straits since childhood and dreamed of a magnificent bridge to link Brooklyn and New York. Without brothers, she has been raised in the world of work, trained from an early age to run her father's bustling gin distillery and inheriting it outright while she is still a young woman.

Despite the power bequeathed to her by her father, she still yearns to create something that is truly her own—a grand invention on the scale of an impossible bridge.

Learning all she can about mathematics and engineering, Prue turns her vision into a bold plan, drawn in painstaking detail by her silent sister Pearl and applauded by her vivacious sister Tem. Although their enthusiasm helps convince Prue the plan might be viable, local surveyor

Benjamin Horsfield convinces her that a man would have more persuasive power in the world of fund-raising; though Prue herself presents the idea to her fellow Brooklynites, he becomes Prue's voice before the state legislators in Albany. Thus begins a mammoth undertaking that will repeatedly exalt and diminish Prue, binding her fate and the fate of those she loves to her daring, costly obsession.

Unfolding in evocative, beautifully crafted scenes, with a trove of intriguing historical details at every turn, *Brookland* confirms Emily Barton's reputation as one of the finest writers of her generation.

"Barton has re-created the borough's brief pastoral moment in such lavish, precise detail that I can't think of a single recent historical novel that compares. . . . A rare delight."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Marvelously engrossing . . . utterly convincing and involving . . . Emily Barton has taken an elegant way with questions of thought-provoking substance and has made a very fine and satisfying novel."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Ms. Barton's prose voice is as good and supple as anything being written in America today. . . . [*Brookland*] reaffirms the unswerving adage of the novel reader: Describe a world well enough and I am its member."

—*The New York Observer*

"Together with the book's profound treatment of the spiritual ills born of the enlightenment, this wonderful character [Prudence Winship] is Barton's main gift to us."

—*The New Yorker*

"[A] sprawling, panoramic, meticulous novel . . . Complex and engaging . . . *Brookland* is an enormously satisfying book. . . . A work of such grandeur that it evokes Tolstoy's genius for scope and story."

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

About the Author

Emily Barton was raised in New Jersey, where she attended Kent Place School. She earned her B.A. summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard College, where she concentrated in English literature, and went on to earn an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her first novel, *The Testament of Yves Gundron*, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and a *San Francisco Chronicle* Book of the Month, won the Bard Fiction Prize, and was nominated for Britain's Guardian Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared in *Story*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Conjunctions*, and she has reviewed books for *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post Book World*, *Poetry*, *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, and *Bookforum*. She has taught writing and humanities at Bard, currently teaches writing at the New School, and has been teaching yoga since 1998. She lives in Brooklyn, and is the recipient of a 2006 artist's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Visit her website at www.emilybarton.com.

Discussion Questions

1. How were you affected by the presence of Prue's letters? How does her storytelling compare to that in the rest of the novel?
2. Discuss the pivotal scene from Prue's childhood in which she batters her doll (chapter one). How would you characterize Prue's feelings toward Pearl throughout her life? Would their trust have been shattered later in life regardless of Prue's guilt about her alleged hex?
3. What role does religion play in the village of Brookland? How is Matty's atheism received, and how does it affect his daughters' attitude toward death and suffering? How is Ezra Fischer's Judaism received? What distinctions are made between Protestants and Catholics?
4. Do Prue, Tem, and Pearl share any traits derived from their upbringing? How did they cope with the deaths of their parents?
5. Anyone familiar with Brooklyn Heights will recognize location names from the families described in the novel, including the Pierreponts, the Joralemons, the Remsens, and the Livingstons. How did the history presented in *Brookland* compare to your previous impressions of Brooklyn's early European settlers? What images surprised you the most?
6. To varying degrees, the Winship daughters are faced with sexism and stereotypes. How did each of them respond to this in charting the course of her life? Would you have married Ben, knowing it meant technically relinquishing your father's company to him?
7. Chapter nine, "The Dream," describes both Prue's nightmare regarding Pearl and her dream of building the bridge. Are these two visions related? What does the bridge ultimately come to represent in Prue's life?
8. In what ways did the novel's depictions of slavery, particularly in the characters of Johanna and Abiah, differ from depictions of slavery in fiction set in the South? What did you discover about the abolition process in New York discussed in chapter eighteen?
9. Prudence, Temperance, and Recompense: Is there irony in these character names?
10. Was Pearl ever truly heard by her family or by Will Severn?
11. The novel's epigraph, which includes Yosa Buson's lines, "You are the slaves/of chrysanthemums!" captures many aspects of Prue's life. To what is she enslaved? What is the source of her liberation?
12. Discuss the effect of gin as the commodity of choice to drive the novel's storyline. How is *Brookland* enhanced by the fact that the Winships' livelihood depends on alcohol consumption?

13. What impact did the hazards of their era—timber fires, infant mortality, epidemics, gruesome on-the-job accidents—have on the Winship daughters? Did they possess a deeper appreciation for life because of such hazards?
14. Prue would not have lived long enough to see John Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge, which was completed in 1883 after more than a decade of hazardous, multi-million-dollar construction. As in the novel, many Brooklynites opposed the bridge and sought to keep a cultural distance from Manhattan. What might Prue have thought of present-day Brooklyn and its role as a borough of New York City?
15. How would Ben's presentation tactics have fared in the world of contemporary public works projects? Has the process for acquiring such funding changed very much over the past two centuries? What is the modern-day equivalent of Prue's bridge? Can you think of an outrageous invention that has been widely wished for but never successfully built?
16. What do you imagine Pearl's fate to be? What unresolved answers lurk in your family legacy, akin the way Recompense continues to hope she will find her aunt?
17. What similarities and differences exist between *Brookland* and Emily Barton's debut novel, *The Testament of Yves Gundron*? What makes her approach to storytelling unique?

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