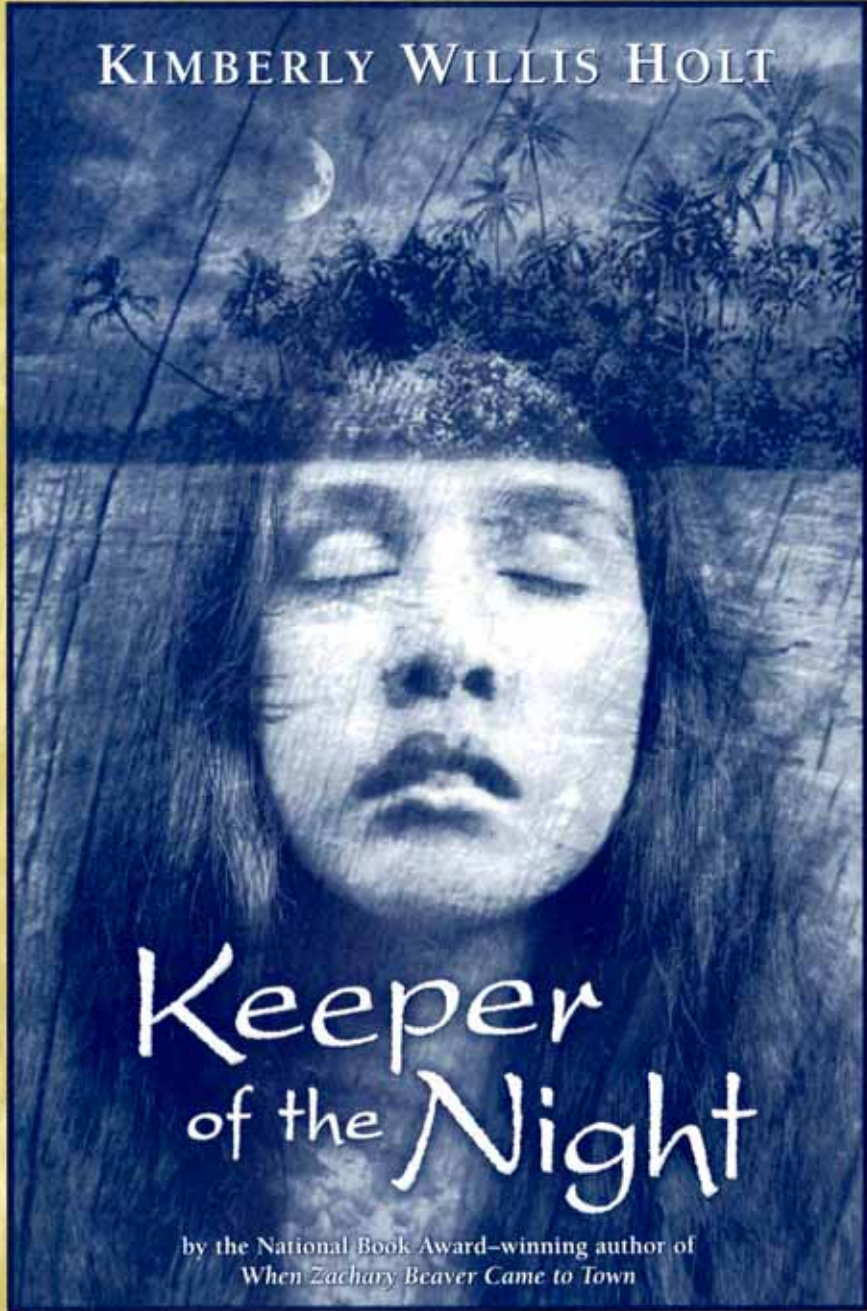


KIMBERLY WILLIS HOLT

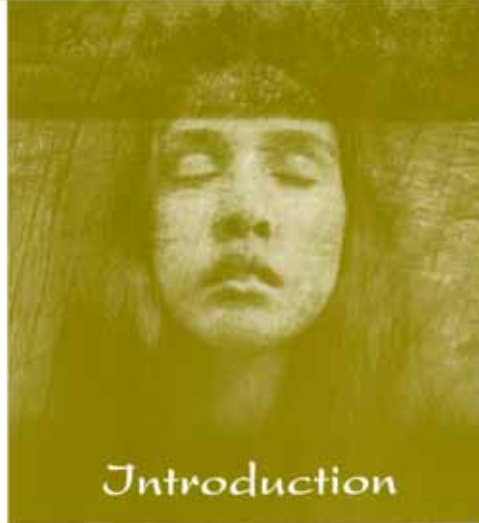


Keeper  
of the Night

by the National Book Award-winning author of  
*When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*

READING GROUP GUIDE

HENRY HOLT BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS



## Introduction

**T**hirteen-year-old Isabel enters her mother's room one morning before going to school. She finds her mother kneeling as if praying, but dead by her own hand. With their home filled with memories of his late wife, Isabel's father takes the family (Isabel, and her younger siblings, Frank and Olivia) to live with his sister in a neighboring town. Isabel despises feeling like a stranger in this new home. Her sister wets the bed every night, and her brother withdraws from family and friends. But, six months later when they return to their home in Malesso, Guam, Isabel struggles to understand her place within her family's new configuration as well as her changing perceptions of relatives and friends who live in her immediate community. Isabel's story, related through her observations about the people around her, her retellings of cultural stories, her lists of things to do, and her poetry, reveals a young girl coming to grips with death while she embraces her own life.



## Questions for Discussion:

- 1** In the opening chapter Isabel writes of finding her mother and of then getting her brother and sister off to school. “That morning I eased her door shut, tied on her apron, and made breakfast for my little brother and sister. I felt proud to scramble their eggs and butter their toast. I felt proud to tie blue ribbons in Olivia’s hair and dipped the comb into a glass of water before parting Frank’s. I had no idea it was the first of many mornings I’d be doing that.” Her reactions to her siblings vacillate between duty and pride. How do these reactions manifest themselves during the course of the novel? Do they stay constant? Does one overpower the other? Why or why not?
- 2** Isabel searches for a sense of place after her mother’s death. First that place is Malesso as she rejects their temporary exile at her aunt’s house in Tamuning. Isabel writes: “We’re stupid staying in Tamuning while our lives take place in Malesso.” But she also searches for that sense of place by trying to establish a seating configuration both at home and with her classmates. More figuratively, she considers her place within her childhood group of friends, her friendship with Roman, and with relationships with her aunts and the people of Malesso. Discuss how that sense of place changes throughout the novel.
- 3** Why doesn’t Isabel enter the contest for fiesta queen?
- 4** Both Olivia and Frank show signs of distress after their mother’s death. Isabel records those signs, but only once does she seek help, and that is with the logistical problem of washing Olivia’s wet sheets. What in her character and situation explains why she keeps these observations to herself?

- 5 Frank carves “I hate you” on his wall and “I hate” on his body. Whom or what does he hate so much?
- 6 Isabel, Frank, and Olivia are individuals, yet each contains characteristics of both parents. What traits of their mother do you see in each character? What of Tata?
- 7 Isabel writes two compositions based on a true, personal experience. One is a poem about Frank and she receives an “F” on that poem. She does the assignment over, writing about an imagined trip to Disneyland, and receives an A+. Why is each treated differently? What do you think each composition means to Isabel?
- 8 Isabel talks to Ed about her mother’s suicide and tells him, “I still can’t figure out why she killed . . . herself.” Ed replies, “You probably never will. That’s the sad part. Most survivors don’t even know why. But you can learn something from what your mother did.” What does Isabel learn from her mother’s suicide?
- 9 Who is the keeper of the night and what is s/he keeping?
- 10 Look at the jacket of the book. It suggests certain elements about *Keeper of the Night*. Before you started reading, and you had only looked at the jacket, what did you think the book was going to be about? As you were reading were you surprised, disappointed, or pretty much finding what you suspected would be there? Talk about your response with other members of your group. Now look at the jacket again. How do you think the jacket conveys your interpretation of the book?



## Interview

**BC:** Up until this point in your career, all of your novels have been set in the south, in Texas and Louisiana. This novel is set in Guam. Why the change?

**KWH:** When I was in the fifth and sixth grades, I lived in Guam while my father was stationed there with the Navy. Several years ago I returned at the invitation of the Guam International Reading Association. I went back to my old school and that visit brought me to that special time when Guam had been my home. While there, I decided to set a book in Guam, thinking this book would be a collection of short stories and that Isabel's story would be one among many. I thought I would have a Navy brat in the collection, not as an autobiographical piece but as a story with a lot of my experiences. But it didn't work out that way. When I got into Isabel's story, I realized I needed more room to tell it than a short story would allow.

**BC:** I'm surprised that you didn't write the book from the point of view of Mary Kelly, rather than Isabel.

**KWH:** I feel more connected with Isabel and really that's the voice that presented itself to me. When I hear her voice, it's almost like she's telling me a secret. Isabel's secret was "My mother died praying on her knees." That's what led me to her story. I didn't choose Isabel, she chose me. And, to be honest with you, Mary Kelly is so unlike me. When I was living in Guam I knew girls not much older than I who had military boyfriends. And I went to school with the natives and other military children. So some of that came into play, but I was not like Mary Kelly.

**BC:** Was the book hard to write because it touches such bleak parts of Isabel's life?

**KWH:** No. I really had fun with that style. But, the scene where the



brother is discovered with his cut wrist was the hardest scene for me to create. I thought: “How do I tackle that? I don’t want to be melodramatic, but I don’t know what I need to do here.” I didn’t want that scene to be too long. I think when action goes faster that sometimes it can have more impact. So I clipped the scene, like a photographer taking a series of pictures with a camera clicking really fast.

**BC:** Throughout the book you bring together many images of water, sometimes as a healing force and sometimes as a destructive one. Do you think that your use of the power of water somehow connects to your father’s years in the Navy?

**KWH:** Even though my dad was in the Navy for twenty-one years he was a dry dock sailor—he never set foot on a boat that moved. I love the water, but there’s also beauty on the prairie where I live [in the Texas Panhandle]. Still, when I have Zachary see cotton fields [in *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*], he thinks they “look like an ocean.” But, he says that because when I drive by the fields they look to me like waves.

**BC:** Another thread I see throughout your books is the acknowledgement of a kind of caste system in schools and communities.

**KWH:** I think that is the strongest in *Dancing in Cadillac Light* more than any other book. But, in *Keeper of the Night*, Isabel knows her father is a good fisherman and can afford to send her to a private school, where Roman, whose father is a drunk, has to go to another school. My mom and dad had humble beginnings. One time I was talking to them and my mom said: “We were poor, too. We just didn’t dwell on it.” And my dad said, “Oh, you always thought you were better than us because you lived on a black topped road.” I was intrigued that my dad did grow up in the back of the woods and even though my mother’s family was poor, there was a class distinction. When I was fourteen I lived near my grandparents for a little while because my dad was stationed in Washington, D.C. There were kids who thought they were better than we because they lived in a town with a hardware



store and kids who thought they were better because their town had a bank branch. I'm very aware of those kinds of class distinctions because it had so much to do with my parents' upbringing.

**BC:** All of your characters are trying to figure out where they fit into their families and their communities. For Isabel, sometimes that act is as seemingly simple as trying to determine how the family should sit around the table or where she should sit in the lunchroom. Does that image have any roots in your life?

**KWH:** I remember when my grandfather died about ten years ago. Of all my grandparents, he was the storyteller. He was a big talker and I even remember people backing out of the room sometimes because he would talk your ears off. He went places, like the barbershop to hear what was going on, but when he was home he lived in a recliner. He would rule his house from that recliner. "Zora," he would say to my grandmother, "I need some more coffee." Nanny would get his coffee cup and go get him more coffee. And when he wanted to change the channels on the TV set he would say, "Zora, come and change the channel." When one of my uncles bought him a TV with a remote control, he said: "Now Mama, that remote control is for you." But when my grandfather died and we all went over to my grandmother's house, no one would sit in that chair. She finally did. I wondered if she was sitting in that chair because she was proving that she could now or if she was sitting in that chair to say "this is just a chair." But, of course, it wasn't. I remember that powerful moment when somebody finally sat in his chair and it was my Grandmother.

**BC:** Isabel also must find her sense of place within her community. Your other books have settings that are close to where you live. How did you establish that identification with community in a place so far away?

**KWH:** It's important to me that I get the place down, and even though I lived in Guam as a child and had been back when I was invited by the Guam International Reading Association, I thought



I needed another trip to know that culture better. I wanted to soak up the atmosphere and look for those details that are so important in making fiction real and authentic. So, I scheduled another trip.

**BC:** What kind of research did you do there?

**KWH:** I knew I needed to talk to a fisherman. The librarian told me about a fisherman named Godfrey who “lived by the store.” There are few street addresses in Guam, but I found the store and asked the young girl there if I could see Godfrey. She went to get him, but told me he was taking a nap. There was a cabana next to the store and I asked her if I could sit in the cabana for a while and talk with the kids there. They were playing *kong-gi*, like Frank played. It’s a game similar to jacks. One boy was playing the guitar.

**BC:** How did you learn about *golai bagun sune*? Was that a dish you ate as a child in Guam?

**KWH:** Godfrey’s wife told me about *golai bagun sune*, which she called the spinach dish. I was surprised at this name because I thought spinach was a cool weather plant. But, she said, “It grows all over the island.” She told me how she made *golai bagun sune*, how difficult it was, and how long it took. Then she went into the back of the house and brought out this mushy green stuff in a dish. I asked her, “What is this plant that has large elephant ears?” “That’s the spinach,” she said. This didn’t look anything like spinach to me. It was about three and a half feet tall and is also called Taro leaves. She did say that I could make the dish with the spinach I was used to, and that’s why I included it in the recipe. I was amused when one of the proofreaders wrote a note telling me that if I boiled spinach for an hour [as per the directions in the book] that I would have mush. But, that’s exactly what it’s supposed to look like.

**BC:** Did you go to a cockfight?

**KWH:** No. I was told not to go by myself. One woman said,



“Don’t you dare go there. My dad went and had his car keyed.” I stayed with a friend, an old classmate, for a week during part of my research trip. Her brother was going to take me, but his wife, a Palau woman who had just discovered she was pregnant, was superstitious about him being around all the blood, so we didn’t go. But cockfighting is very much a part of the culture. When I interviewed classes of schoolchildren, I asked them, “What do you do when you go home?” A lot of them said they “boxed the chickens.” They wore boxing gloves to get their chickens in the fighting mode.

**BC:** What other kinds of research did you conduct?

**KWH:** Because I was approaching suicide, a subject I knew nothing about, I talked to the director of the suicide center here. That was how I really learned what a survivor has to do to go on with life. I wanted the character of Ed to come from an honest place. I also called the crisis center in Guam and talked briefly with a volunteer. I told him what I had done with the character of the father and he supported that. He said that often when a mother dies or commits suicide a grandmother or aunt moves in and takes over and the father just gets on with his life.

**BC:** Does this kind of validation happen often when you’re writing?

**KWH:** When I am writing I often get these little confirmations that tell me I’m supposed to be writing a certain story. When I started with Isabel’s story, I don’t know why, but I thought, “She’s going to forget what her mother looks like.” It came to me that she was going to have to look at photographs to remember her mother. One day I was talking with the woman who shampoos my hair. We weren’t talking about my book, but she mentioned that her father had committed suicide when she was a teenager. And then she said, “I got obsessed with photo albums because I couldn’t remember what my dad looked like.” Little coincidences like that happen and to me it means that I can get into a person’s skin from an honest place.

## Further Reading

You can find these books in the library as well as in a local or online bookstore.

***Cut*** by Patricia McCormick. Hardcover publisher: Front Street. Paperback publisher: Scholastic. Like Frank, Callie cuts herself. And, even though, like Frank, Callie doesn't want to talk about her condition, she does share her thoughts with readers.

***Father Figure*** by Richard Peck. Hardcover publisher: Viking. Paperback publisher: Penguin Putnam. After his mother's suicide, Jim tries to protect his younger brother. When their father re-enters their lives, Jim is reluctant to relinquish this familiar role and become a son again.

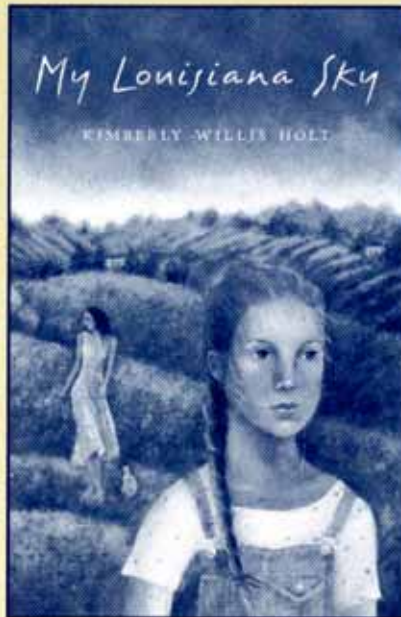
***Miracle s Boys*** by Jacqueline Woodson. Hardcover publisher: Penguin Putnam. Paperback publisher: Penguin Putnam. Lafayette, the youngest of three boys, tells how the brothers must learn to survive on their own after their mother's death. Ty'ree, the oldest, postpones his college dreams and Charlie, his other brother, moves in and out of trouble.

***Prairie Songs*** by Pam Conrad. Hardcover publisher: HarperCollins. Paperback publisher: HarperCollins. Louise is a survivor who, along with her pioneer family, endures a hard life in Kansas. And while she may not be as glamorous as the doctor's wife Emmeline, Louise comes to learn that her stamina and fortitude are more fit for the desolate prairie than is Emmeline's fragile demeanor.

***Stop Pretending*** by Sonya Sones. Hardcover publisher: HarperCollins. Paperback publisher: HarperCollins. "One day/she was my big/sister, so normal and/well-behaved, the next she was a/stranger" begins this poetic novel in which a young girl reveals her fears about her sister, her family, and herself when her older sister has a breakdown.



## Also by Kimberly Willis Holt



### ***My Louisiana Sky***

Ages 9-12 • 1998  
0-8050-5251-8 • \$16.95

★ "An unusually auspicious debut."  
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

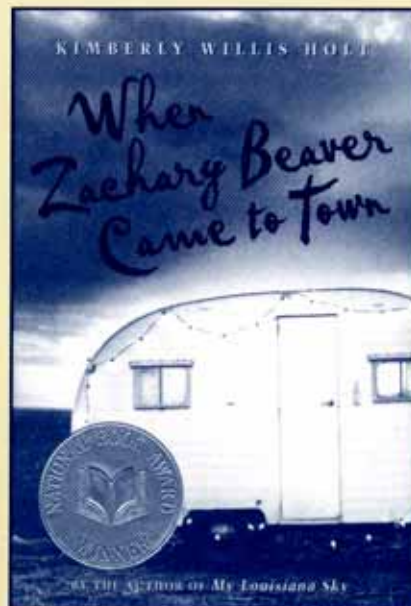
An ALA Notable Book  
One of ALA's Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults  
A Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Honor  
Book for Fiction  
A *Booklist* "Editors' Choice"  
One of *Booklist's* Top Ten First Novels of the Year  
A *Voya* Outstanding Title of the Year  
A *Book Links* "Book for Lasting Connections"  
A *Parenting Magazine's* Book of the Year  
Winner of the Bank Street College Josette  
Frank Award  
Winner of the 1998 Louisiana Literary Award

### ***When Zachary Beaver Came to Town***

Ages 10-15 • 1999  
0-8050-6116-9 • \$16.95

★ "A lovely—at times even giddy—date with  
real life." —*The Horn Book*, starred review

Winner of the 1999 National Book Award  
An ALA Notable Book  
An ALA "Best Book for Young Adults"  
A *School Library Journal* "Best Book"  
A *Booklist* "Editors' Choice"  
*Horn Book* Fanfare Honor List  
One of New York Public Library's "100 Books  
for Reading and Sharing"  
One of Chicago Public Library's "Best of  
the Best" Books  
The Texas Library Association's Bluebonnet  
Award Master List



## Biographical Sketch:



Kimberly Willis Holt's first novel, *My Louisiana Sky*, is dedicated to her parents, "who showed me the world but taught me about my roots so I'd always have a place to call home." Those roots reach back seven generations, deep in Louisiana soil. And those roots informed the first four of her books, each one set in small towns in the American South where connections among the people extend the sense of family beyond the walls of any individual home. Her third novel, *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*, received the prestigious National Book Award for

Young People's Literature. Her most recent novel, *Keeper of the Night*, acknowledges the first part of *Louisiana Sky's* dedication, by moving its setting to Guam, where Kimberly lived for two years when her father was stationed there in the Navy.

Today she still lives in Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle. She meets once a week with three friends, all of whom are writers, and they visit and discuss each person's work. Kimberly says that "writing is something I love to do" although it took her many years to make that discovery. But, as she adds, "Life is long." We always hear that life's short, but life's long, too. We can do different things. And sometimes it takes a while to find our true bliss. I feel like writing was always there, just waiting for me to find the right time to get there."

Guide Written By Betty Carter

Betty Carter is Professor Emerita in the School of Library Information Studies at Texas Woman's University where she taught classes in children's and young adult literature. She has also worked as a reading teacher and a school librarian. She is currently a reviewer for *The Horn Book Magazine*

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