Prayers for Sale
By Sandra Dallas
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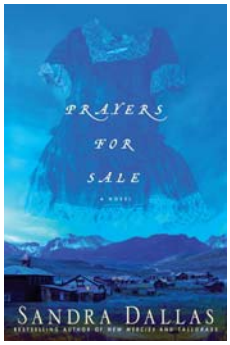


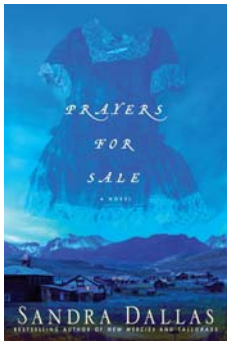
About the Book:

Hennie Comfort is eighty-six and has lived in the mountains of Middle Swan, Colorado since before it was Colorado. Nit Spindle is just seventeen and newly married. She and her husband have just moved to the high country in search of work. It's 1936 and the depression has ravaged the country and Nit and her husband have suffered greatly. Hennie notices the young woman loitering near the old sign outside of her house that promises "Prayers For Sale". Hennie doesn't sell prayers, never has, but there's something about the young woman that she's drawn to. The harsh conditions of life that each have endured create an instant bond and an unlikely friendship is formed, one in which the deepest of hardships are shared and the darkest of secrets are confessed.

Sandra Dallas has created an unforgettable tale of a friendship between two women, one with surprising twists and turns, and one that is ultimately a revelation of the finest parts of the human spirit.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Hennie Comfort's sign outside her house says "Prayers for Sale" and yet she doesn't sell prayers. Why does Hennie keep the sign?
2. As Hennie begins her story for Nit, she says, "Back then, I wasn't Hennie Comfort. In those days, I was called by the name of Ila Mae Stubbs." What else has changed about Hennie from her teenaged self to her eighty-six-year-old self? More importantly, what has stayed the same?
3. One of the themes of this book is surviving the "unsurvivable." What would you consider "unsurvivable?"
4. Another theme is forgiveness. Is there ever a time when forgiveness isn't possible? Can you relate to the way Hennie forgives at the end of the book—and who she forgives? In Hennie's shoes, would you have forgiven? Would Hennie's life have been different if she had forgiven earlier?
5. What are some of the qualities you see in the women of Middle Swan that help them survive life there? What is the most important quality?
6. Maudie Sarsfield says, "Quilting keeps me from going queer," meaning "insane." Why would this be so? What is the significance of Maudie adding her initials to her quilts? And what role do quilts and quilting play in the lives of the characters.
7. What is the most tragic aspect of Maudie's life?
8. What is the most important lesson Hennie teaches Nit Spindle?
9. Is it ever too late to find true love? How do you define true love?
10. Discuss the phrase "deep enough." What does it means in the story? What would it mean to you in your own life?
11. Middle Swan is a cold, harsh town. What makes Hennie love it, and why has she stayed all these years? What draws people together in such an environment?



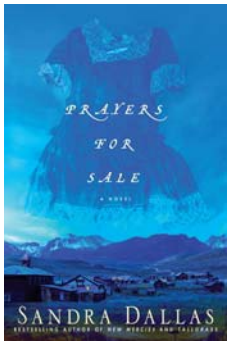
Author Q&A

1. What sparked the idea in you for PRAYERS FOR SALE?
I'd been intrigued with gold dredging since I lived in Breckenridge, Colorado, in the early 1960s. (Middle Swan, the book's setting, is based on Breckenridge, which was a gold mining town long before it because a ski area.) Since then I'd toyed with the idea of writing about those treacherous gold boats on the streams near Breckenridge and the people who had a love-hate relationship with them. I'd also wanted to write a collection of stories about Colorado, told by a quilter, similar to the classic AUNT JANE OF KENTUCKY, written by Eliza Calvert Hall a hundred years ago. But I'd never considered combining the two ideas until I read a Civil War story about a baby who died while his mother was detained by soldiers. I was so moved by the story that I began thinking about how I could incorporate it into a novel. That was when I realized I could make it the departure point of a novel combining the brutality of gold dredging with the comfort of quilting.

2. When you write a novel, do you begin with the plot or the characters? Or the setting?
I almost always start with the setting. The characters come next. Then the characters and I go looking for a plot.

3. What sort of research did you do for PRAYERS FOR SALE?
I'd already done some of the research when I wrote my 10 nonfiction books, most of them on Colorado history. When I lived in Breckenridge, I talked to the old men who had worked on the dredges and heard their stories. But PRAYERS FOR SALE took additional research, of course. I researched gold dredging and read 1930s accounts of life in the mountains. And I studied the books and notes of two old women, novelist Helen Rich and poet Belle Turnbull, who had taken me under their wing when I lived in the mountains. In fact, in my Breckenridge file, I have a letter from Helen in which she told me she was glad I was going to write about Breckenridge. She wrote, "You've really got the bug about doing Breckenridge. I feel quite sure about you and you have the grace to grow...As you have found out the stuff out of which such books are made has to steep into a person." She wrote the letter in 1967.

4. Quilting plays an important role in many of your novels, including this one. Why?
Quilting defines a woman--the type of stitches she takes, the colors she picks for her quilttops, the pattern she chooses. And quilting, especially in an isolated town such as Middle Swan, brings women together. Sharing their secrets, they bond over the quilt frame.



5. Why did you choose to have such an age difference between the two heroines in this novel--Hennie and Nit?
Hennie had to be a Civil War survivor for her story to work. I wanted to incorporate characters from my other books into the story--Zepha Massie from THE PERSIAN PICKLE CLUB, Tom Earley from THE DIARY OF MATTIE SPENSER, Ned and Emma from THE CHILI QUEEN. The only way this worked was to set the story in 1936 when Hennie was a very old woman. Because she was so vulnerable, Nit had to be young, barely more than a girl.

6. What do you feel are some of the most important themes in this novel?
Friendship, human dignity, survival, forgiveness, redemption.

7. Would you name some other books you've enjoyed recently?
I'd like to say I've just curled up with WAR AND PEACE, but in fact the books I've read recently include: GOING TOGETHER by Arnold Grossman, THIS REPUBLIC OF SUFFERING by Drew Gilpin Faust, TRAVELING MERCIES by Anne Lamott, THE MARCH by E.L. Doctorow, THE MEMORY KEEPER'S DAUGHTER by Kim Edwards, and various short stories by Truman Capote.

About the Author:
Sandra Dallas is the author of seven novels, including *Tallgrass* and *New Mercies*. She is a former Denver bureau chief for *Business Week* magazine and lives in Denver, Colorado. Visit Sandra online at http://us.macmillan.com/author/sandradallas and Sandra's website at http://www.sandradallas.com/.

*****If interested in having Sandra speak to your reading group, please send an email to Sandra@SandraDallas.com*****