

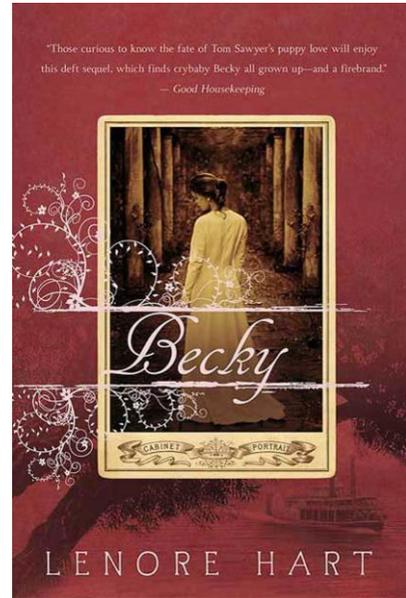
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## Becky

By Lenore Hart

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Becky* 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 *Becky*.

### About the Book

Becky Thatcher wants to set the record straight. She was never the weeping ninny Mark Twain made her out to be in his famous novel. She knew Samuel Clemens before he was “Mark Twain,” when he was a wide-eyed dreamer who never could get his facts straight. Yes, she was Tom’s childhood sweetheart, but the true story of their love, and the dark secret that tore it apart, never made it into Twain’s novel.

Now married to Tom’s cousin Sid Hopkins, Becky has children of her own to protect while the men of Missouri are off fighting their “un-Civil” War. But when tragedy strikes at home, Becky embarks on a phenomenal quest to find her husband and save her family---a life journey that takes her from the Mississippi River’s steamboats to Ozark rebel camps, from Nevada’s silver mines to the gilded streets of San Francisco.

Time and again, stubborn but levelheaded Becky must reconcile her independent spirit and thirst for adventure with the era’s narrow notions of marriage and motherhood. As she seeks to find a compromise between fulfillment and security, she also grapples with ghosts of her past. Can she forgive herself, or be forgiven, for the lies she’s told to the men she’s loved? Will she ever forget the maddening, sweet-talking, irresponsible Tom Sawyer, the boy who stole her heart as a little girl? And when she is old, and Huck and Tom and Twain only memories, whose shadow will still lie beside her?



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## About the Author

Lenore Hart is the author of *Ordinary Springs*, *Waterwoman*, and other novels. Her work has been featured on Voice of America, in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, and on the PBS series “Writer to Writer.” She teaches creative writing at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania and Old Dominion University in Virginia. She lives on the Eastern Shore of Virginia with her husband, novelist David Poyer, and their daughter.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Lenore Hart decided to give Becky Thatcher -- who’s not a central character in Twain’s Hannibal mythos -- a life of her own?
2. Why did she decide to tell Becky’s story from the first person point of view? Do you think events would seem significantly different if told in third person? How about if we saw things from the point of view of Tom, too? Or Huck? Injun Joe? Sid?
3. Twain based his characters on real people in his hometown. Some of them (like the man he based Injun Joe on), he changed significantly. One major theme of BECKY seems to be the relationship between author and character. How might you react if your life had been “immortalized” in this way?
4. The novel presents a steamy encounter between Becky and Tom the very night before her wedding to Sid. Does this strike you as credible, given the supposed mores of the 1850s? Considering Tom’s character, and Becky’s? Why or why not?
5. Are Hart’s scenes of, and explanations of, the ferocity and aimlessness of the violent partisan war in Missouri like other famous depictions of the Civil War in film and fiction? How does this author’s attitude toward the War differ from that of Margaret Mitchell? Michael and Jeff Shaara? Charles Frazier’s? Civil War films you’ve seen?
6. Some purists object to the use of an earlier authors’ characters for material in a later work, calling it a “misappropriation” or “violation” of the earlier piece. Yet authors from Shakespeare to Geraldine Brooks have “borrowed” and enlarged on other author’s characters. Do you support the objection to this, or not? What other works use earlier stories or characters as starting points?
7. In the opening scene, Becky refers to having “chased after wild rascals, and run from tame one.” What does she mean by this? What was the attraction of the principal “wild rascal” in the novel? How did Becky deal with her attraction to him, and how would her life have been different, had she not?



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8. Hart uses varying flavors of period language throughout the book, from bushwhacker and river rat jargon, to military speech, to miner's argot, to that of high San Francisco society. What particular phrases did you find unfamiliar? Did this enhance or lessen your pleasure in reading those passages?
9. Huck's attitude toward Becky seems ambivalent, as if he is deeply torn between seeing her as a chum and as a rival for Tom's affections. How do you see Huck's position in what seems to be a triangle of some sort?
10. Becky refers often to the state of her clothing, the meaning of her choice of clothing, and how clothes at times hinder or help her accomplish what needs to be done. There are passages where she's in widow's weeds, or wears trousers, and even a wartime battle scene where she dons a sort of military uniform. How does the experience of clothing in Becky's life mirror or differ from that in the life of a modern woman?
11. Becky admits that she herself was not a paragon of Victorian virtue – “never the weeping little ninny Sam Clemens made me out to be.” In what ways did she violate the feminine ideal of her epoch? What acts or omissions of hers would probably be judged more leniently by society today? Which would be judged more harshly? Does this reflect well on today's society as compared to that of the 1800's, or badly?
12. Tom eventually either disappears or dies as a result of a massacre of Cheyenne Indians just before the Battle of the Little Bighorn. What is significant about his fate? Given his life experience and character, what do you think drives Tom to this fatal action? What is significant about the way the news reaches Becky?
13. Hart doesn't portray Sam Clemens/Mark Twain himself in a worshipful or even wholly positive light or in BECKY. At times he comes across as clueless, feckless, not very brave, prone to wander, and even needing rescue. As the novel opens, Becky accuses him of “making up” much of what happened in Hannibal, saying he should be “ashamed.” Where do you think Hart found this Twain? Are her criticisms supported by what you've read of Twain's life, his humorous works, and his writings about himself?

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