

BOOK CLUB KIT

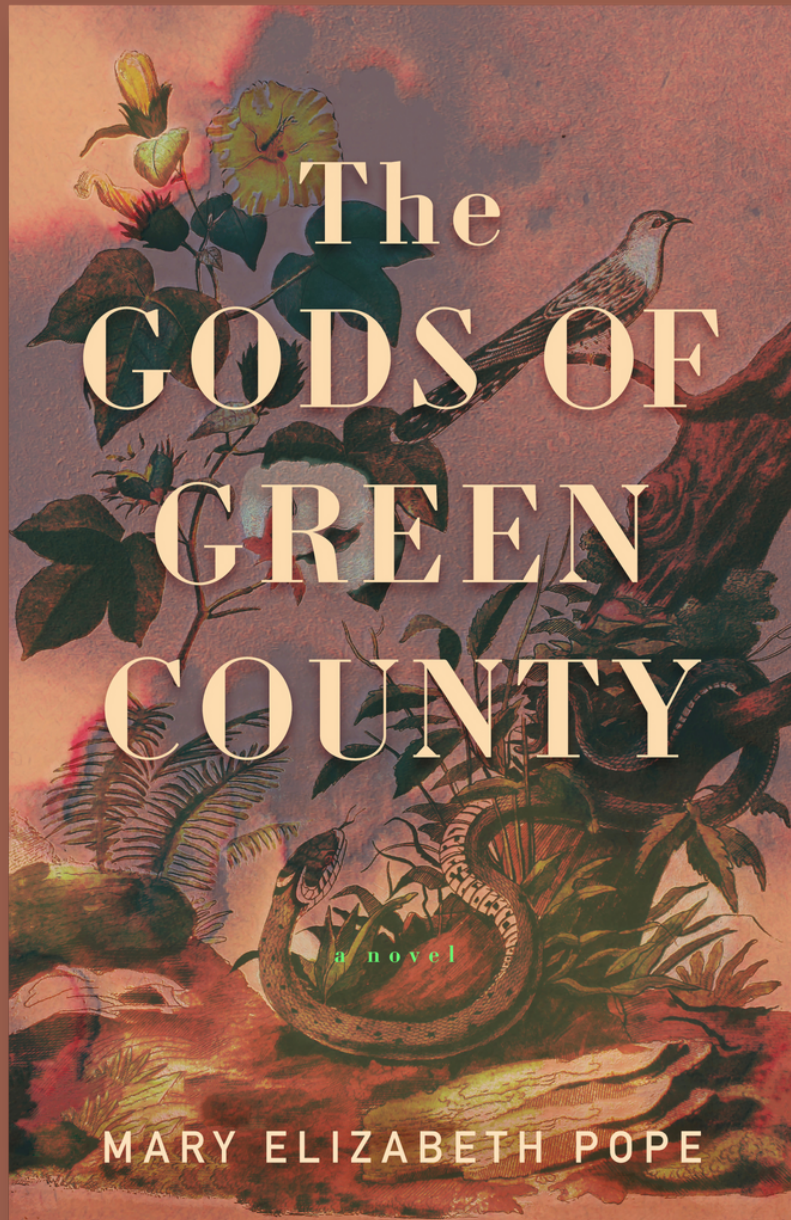
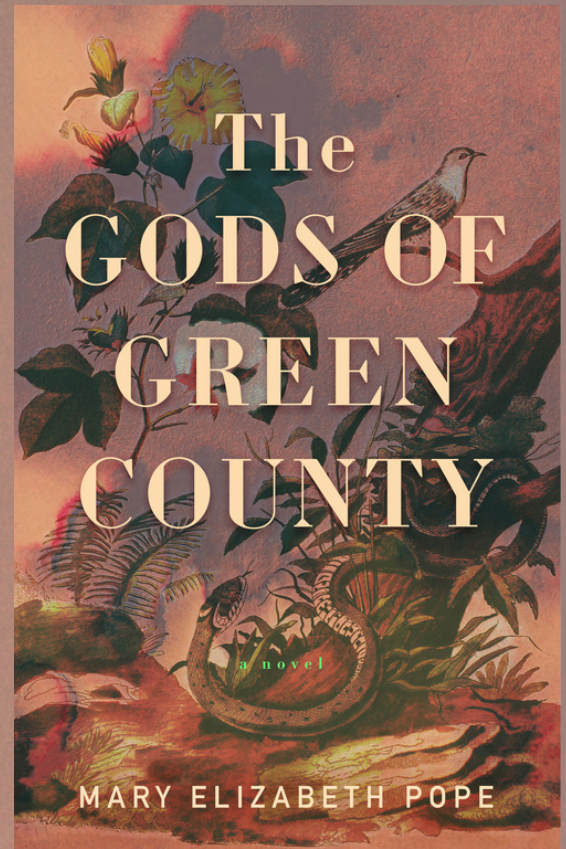


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INTRODUCTION

A grieving young woman who is either clairvoyant or seeing things. A newly minted judge with a dark secret and a guilty conscience. A formidable sheriff who will do anything, even bribe, extort, and murder, to get his way. Busybody mothers, husbands run ragged at the cotton gin, a snake-handling preacher. The people of Paradise, Arkansas, vying to survive the Depression, face another daunting threat: the plots of powerful men.



Mary Elizabeth Pope grew up in Michigan with roots deep in the Missouri Bootheel and Northeast Arkansas. She is Professor of English at Emmanuel College in Boston. She is the author of *Divining Venus: Stories*, and her work has been featured in the literary magazines *Arkansas Review*, *Florida Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Ascent*, *Passages North*, and *Fugue*, among others. She holds a Ph.D. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Iowa. She lives outside Boston with her husband.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

To what degree are Brother Jeremiah and his congregation responsible for Coralee's fate? Do they bear any responsibility for the lengths she is driven to, or is Coralee alone responsible for her actions?

Leroy determines that Coralee has a right to worship in any manner she chooses, even if it's dangerous, so long as that danger is only to herself. Given that she is the mother of a young boy, is Leroy correct in his belief?

If Coralee suffers from hallucinations, how can we know the difference between what she experiences and what actually happens to her?

To what degree are Coralee, Mabel, Libby, and Lorna shaped or limited by gender expectations of the time?

What part does poverty play in Big Earl's life? To what degree do his precarious economic circumstances determine the decisions he makes?

Coralee does not seem confused about who Buddy is when she meets him at Earl's funeral. By the end of the novel, does Leroy believe Coralee really can see ghosts? Does the reader?

At the end of the book, Leroy says he had more in common with Sheriff Slocum than he ever realized. Given Leroy's behavior over the course of the book, is he ultimately a good person?

AUTHOR Q&A

What was the inspiration for the book? Was there a particular moment when the story or a line or a character came to you?

My father's hometown and upbringing are the inspiration for this book. Every time I went South to visit my father's family and hometown growing up, it seemed more like something I'd seen on television or in the movies rather than anything I'd experienced in real life growing up in Michigan. I did write a series of poems about the subject of this novel that were published in *Arkansas Review* in 2011, which was the first time I'd come close to writing about this subject. The validation of having them published gave me confidence that there was interest in the story I wanted to tell, and I think that really helped propel me forward when I started work on the novel.

In your acknowledgments, you say this book was inspired by the lives of your paternal grandparents. Where does inspiration stop and fiction begin?

My paternal grandparents are the models for Big Earl and Coralee, and my grandmother's brother is the basis for Buddy (he was killed by a local sheriff in the exact same manner as described in the book, right down to the bullet holes in his body—I have an old newspaper article about his death that was very helpful in writing that scene). The basics about Earl and Coralee's lives are the same, and the trajectories of their lives are similar up to a point. Leroy is a fictional character, however, so it is after he becomes considerably involved with them that the events of their lives diverge into fiction.

What character did you most enjoy creating? And which character gave you the most trouble, and why?

The character I most enjoyed creating was Leroy, because he is almost entirely a product of my imagination. There was a lawyer who represented the sheriff who killed my great-uncle, and there was later a judge involved in my grandmother's sanity hearing, but they were not the same person, and I know nothing about either of them except the judge's verdict on my grandmother's sanity and my grandfather's confrontation with the judge over his ruling, which my father witnessed. I turned the lawyer and the judge in these cases into the same person for the sake of the narrative, and that's how Leroy was born.

The character that was hardest to create was Coralee, because although she is modeled on my own grandmother, I wasn't sure how to reveal the moments when she's hallucinating and when she's not. In the end I decided to do what my family had to do when my grandmother told us something had happened and we didn't know if it was true. We had to figure it out for ourselves. That's what I decided to let the reader do as well.

Tell us a bit about the highs and lows of your book's road to publication.

The lowest periods of writing this novel were during the academic year, when teaching doesn't allow for much writing. If you're any good as a teacher, you give a lot of yourself to your students. I am not someone who has endless energy, so I've never been great at balancing teaching and writing at the same time, though I've always done what I can when blocks of time open up in my schedule.

(Continued on next page)

My husband likes to say that had it been 100 years ago, he'd have rescued my manuscript from the fire, and he isn't wrong. I began to doubt myself so much that I started over-editing and almost destroyed the novel. Fortunately, my husband knows how to restore a computer file to an earlier date, and that's what he did for me.

The two highest points were getting an email from my agent saying she'd read my full manuscript and loved it and getting a phone call from her about a year later (and 9 months into a pandemic we never saw coming) telling me that Blair had made an offer. Everyone at Blair has been so wonderful to work with, and I feel really lucky to have a press that just "got" the book the way I hoped people would when I was writing it.

What is your favorite piece of writing advice?

My favorite piece of writing advice comes from Ann Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Advice on Writing and Life* and deals with writer's block. For years I'd sit down and try to force my way through writer's block and in the process not only waste a lot of time, but also destroy a lot of good work I'd already done. Lamott's suggestion is that writers don't get blocked, they get empty. So if you're blocked, stop forcing your way through it because you're not going to get anywhere until you go out into the world again and fill yourself back up. Do things you enjoy, see friends, take a walk in a beautiful place. Sometimes it takes a lot longer to fill myself up than I wish it did, but when I really let the work go and get back into my life, inevitably the idea I've been waiting for sneaks up on me and almost flattens me with its force, and I run to my office if I'm home, or to find paper if I'm not, to get it down before it's gone.

How did you find the title of your novel?

Finding the title for my novel took years. I spent so much time looking for a phrase from the Bible or terminology from cotton ginning that might work on multiple levels. I'd call out possible titles to my husband wherever he was in the house when I thought of them, and he'd say, "Hmm. Maybe." And I'd know, like me, he wasn't really sure any of them worked. Then one day I wrote the scene where Big Earl looks up at Leroy in the sanity hearing and thinks he looks like a god in his robes. The next morning I was drinking my coffee on the porch, getting ready to write, and the title "The Gods of Green County" popped into my head. And I just knew this was the title. It covered all the powerful men in the story, as well as Coralee's religious evolution (and when I called it out to my husband, he said, "That's perfect!").

Who is your favorite author and why?

This is a hard question for me to answer because I have so many favorite authors, and they cycle in and out at different times in my life. But I tend to prefer authors whose characters speak in first-person and have strong, distinct voices. I'm thinking of the voices of Louise Erdrich's Lulu Nanapush and Nector Kashpaw in *Love Medicine*, Jo in Jill McCorkle's *The Cheerleader*, Toni Cade Bambara's narrator Sylvia in "The Lesson" from *Gorilla, My Love*, Mildred in Alice Childress's *Like One of the Family*, and James Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*. The capacity all these characters have of laying bare all the ways we try to convince ourselves everything is okay, even when it's not, is something that slays me.

What are a couple of books you return to again and again?

Oddly, three books I return to all deal with issues of poverty and survival. One is Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, in which a daughter of a formerly rich family descends into more and more straightened circumstances. The other two are children's books—Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Long Winter* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Sara Crewe* (later extended into the novel *A Little Princess*). I never really thought until recently about how focused they all are on basic survival in one way or another, but even as a child I was drawn to the subject, so it's not surprising that this issue is central to *The Gods of Green County*.

COCKTAIL RECIPE

LEWIS & LEROY'S SWEET TEA COCKTAIL

Looks like tea, tastes like trouble, with an unexpected source of sweetness.

Ingredients:

Unsweetened Iced Tea
Bourbon
Limoncello
Lemon Wedge as garnish
Ice

PLAYLIST

Find Mary Elizabeth Pope's explanations for these songs at http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2021/10/mary_elizabeth.html.

Hymn #35, Joe Pug
Pick a Bale o' Cotton,
Johnny Cash
Cheek to Cheek, Fred Astaire
I'll Be Seeing You, Billie
Holiday
Cry Me a River, Jeff Beck
Address Unknown, The Ink
Spots

Stuck in the Middle with You,
Stealers Wheel
Fulsom Prison Blues, Johnny
Cash
A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall,
Bob Dylan
I'll Fly Away, Jillian Welch &
Allison Krauss