

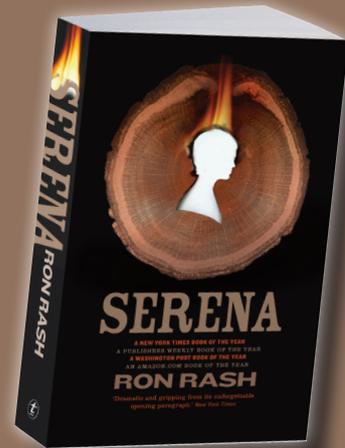
Serena

Ron Rash

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise for *Serena*

'Rash's evocative rendering of the blighted landscape and the tough characters who inhabit it recalls both John Steinbeck and Cormac McCarthy.' *New Yorker*

'Universal in scope, frightening in its brutality, *Serena* is an unflinching vision of blighted souls.' David Wroblewski, author of *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*

'With bone-chilling aplomb, linguistic grace and the piercing fatalism of an Appalachian ballad, Mr Rash lets the Pembertons' new union generate ripple after ripple of astonishment.' *New York Times*

A *New York Times* Book of the Year
 A *Publishers Weekly* Book of the Year
 A *Washington Post* Book of the Year
 An amazon.com Book of the Year

About Ron Rash

Ron Rash is the author of eleven books, including three previous novels, and has won numerous awards in the US. *Serena* is his first work to be published in Australia. Ron Rash lives in the Appalachian mountains.

A reader's introduction to *Serena*

A brilliantly gripping tale from beginning to end. It is 1929 and timber man George Pemberton returns to the North Carolina mountains after a three month stay in Boston concluding his father's estate. On the train with him he brings his new wife Serena. To the surprise of his business partners this finishing school graduate is coming to live at the camp, a harsh male world that women rarely visit let alone come to make a life. From the first moment it is clear she is a woman like no other. This strikingly beautiful woman arrives dressed in pants and boots, her face free of makeup. She looks men in the eye, shakes their hand and does not hesitate to speak up and make it clear she is no-one's fool, and she has come to be her husband's partner in every way.

We quickly learn that Pemberton is a very strong, tough man, a man people do not want to anger or cross. He is

in control of his world and expects those around him to follow without question.

They become a formidable team, hell-bent on building their timber empire at all costs and willing to fell any who threaten to block their way.

The one thing these two cannot control is their ability to start a family and when this possibility is taken away from them it sets about a course of events that will reveal to what extent each of them will go to protect what is theirs.

A wonderfully textured novel, set in an intriguing time in American natural history when timber was big business and conservation a new and unsavoury concept. This is a novel that will appeal equally to male and female audiences and will provide fodder for animated discussions between readers.

Questions for discussion

1. It could be said that in *Serena's* time sex was a woman's one true commodity. She used her beauty and her sex appeal to capture George Pemberton and then to bend him to her will after their marriage. To what extent is this still the case for women?
2. At the beginning of the book it is Pemberton who appears to be evil incarnate with his swift, no regrets killing of Rachel Harmon's father. His act pales in comparison to Serena's as the book progresses. Is her thirst for murder and revenge fuelled by his 'above the law' approach to clearing the path for his business ambitions or was she always the more evil of the two?
3. Men die easily in the harsh and dangerous conditions of this logging world, to lose a finger or a limb is considered a lucky escape. Is human life devalued by all this death and is this why killing becomes so commonplace and seemingly easy for Pemberton, Serena and Galloway?
4. Details of Serena's past are touched on at several points in the story. A flu epidemic that felled her parents and three siblings left her the sole survivor.

She reveals that she had the family house and all it contained burned before she left Colorado never to return.

Was she simply an orphan, grieving and finding a way to make a new life for herself in the face of terrible tragedy? Or, in light of all that Serena becomes as the novel progresses, is there something more to the story of her childhood and the demise of her family?

5. At the beginning of the novel Serena is plagued by vicious nightmares. She never explains them to Pemberton but it is the only time we see her vulnerable or in any way weak; childlike and whimpering back into sleep. Once the eagle arrives and she spends the sleepless nights in the barn training it, she never suffers from the nightmares again—"as though the nightmares had come those two sleepless nights and, with no dream to enter, gone elsewhere".
Is it as simple as that? What does the eagle signify? Is it simply an ingenious way of protecting the workers from deadly rattlesnakes or does Serena need the eagle in her life for other reasons?
6. Serena makes it clear to Rachel from the very beginning that she will not share her husband and will not allow any call on him as a father to her child. Was Rachel wrong to further provoke Serena's ire by coming back to work at the camp? Could she have better protected her son and those around her by behaving differently?
7. If Serena had been able to produce Pemberton's heir would all have been saved from her wrath? There is no discussion, shared grief or comfort between the couple after returning from the hospital. To what extent are her actions connected to this loss and would she have behaved differently if discussion of such tragedies had been commonplace?
8. In so many ways Pemberton and Serena seem to be two parts of a whole, each stronger and weaker only in each other's presence and capable of terrible acts. Mrs Lowell, the hostess of the party at which they met, says to Pemberton, "Just remember you were warned, just as I've warned her".
What do you think the woman meant by this? Did she foresee that theirs would be a dangerous match?
9. So many films begin as great novels and this would seem a perfect book to bring to the big screen. How well do you think a film could capture the moral ambiguities of a character like Serena? It has been compared to books like *Cold Mountain* and *Snow Falling on Cedars*, how well do you think these books transitioned into films and what would be the possible pitfalls of making this book a successful movie?
10. The book's coda reveals that Serena went on to a life of much success as a timber baroness in Brazil. We know that she came to her marriage with Pemberton with a knowledge of and a great interest in the logging potential of Brazil.
Was he simply a vehicle to fulfilling her own ruthless ambitions? Did she ever intend to keep him with her for the journey?