

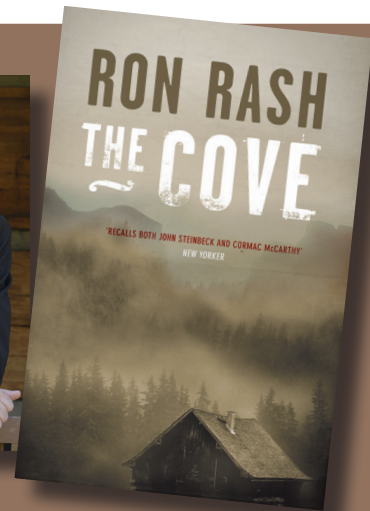
The Cove

Ron Rash

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Fiction, Trade Paperback



Praise for *The Cove*

'This novel confirms Rash's status as a master of that dark regional tradition that has distinguished American fiction since Mark Twain.' *Weekend Australian*

'Cormac McCarthy has made a good living, hardearned and richly deserved, out of his mordant, bewildered, sceptical take on American history. Ron Rash may not enjoy the same popularity (yet). but he does demonstrate, repeatedly, a comparable force of expression, a remarkable depth of feeling and most of all a deep and abiding sense of tragedy.' *Canberra Times*

'Few writers do dark American gothic as capably as Rash.' *Qantas: The Australian Way*

About Ron Rash

Ron Rash is a multi-award-winning poet, short story writer and author of the internationally acclaimed and prize-winning novels *Serena* and *One Foot in Eden*. A PEN/Faulkner finalist for *Serena*, he is also a recipient of the O. Henry Prize and winner of the 2011 Frank O'Connor Award. He teaches at Western Carolina University.

A reader's introduction to *The Cove*

In *The Cove*, Ron Rash transports us to a place filled with darkness and sadness, crippled by prejudice, superstition and the burdens of a world in the grips of World War I. Amidst all this we meet Laurel who, like the area's fabled Carolina parakeet, shines with such kindness and beauty that we are immediately enraptured and determined to know her fate. Will she overcome the oppressive history of this place many consider cursed?

It is hard to imagine that a world like this really existed as we read of women who not only cross the street to avoid her but believe that 'her father's heart gave out after rocking Laurel with her birthmark touching his chest' and that 'her mother's poisoned limb had turned the colour of Laurel's stained skin'. However, this is what she is forced to endure and yearns to escape.

The return of her brother Hank from war, after she has survived several gruelling years alone in their isolated cabin in the cove, should have been a relief and the beginning of happier times for Laurel, but it comes with complications and a confirmation that the people of Mars Hill will never move past their superstitious beliefs.

While washing at the creek near the cabin, Laurel hears beautiful music and follows it to discover its source is not a Carolina parakeet, as she first thought, but a man. Slowly he becomes part of Laurel's life and part of life in the cove, and a world of new possibility opens up and with it, a whole new world of prejudice and peril.

Like Rash's first novel, *Serena*, this is a wonderfully textured story. The writing is evocative, emotional and controlled. *The Cove* is a story that will appeal to both male and female readers and is bound to prompt discussion.

Questions for discussion

1. Ron Rash draws readers in gradually, taking time to reveal the relationships between the three main characters—Laurel, Hank and Walter. Is this an effective storytelling tool or does it prevent readers from connecting with the narrative?
2. The Carolina parakeet is almost a character in the book. Several characters comment that it would be hard to imagine something as bright and colourful as the parakeet in a place as dark as the cove. Walter comes to Laurel with a brilliant green parakeet feather in his haversack—is this a symbol? An indication that he is either too good to be true or something to be treasured?

3. As the picture of a community rife with superstitious beliefs about the cove emerges, it is contrasted by the assertion of Miss Calicut, the schoolteacher, that superstitions are just coincidence or ignorance. Why are the townsfolk unable to share this view? Who is right?
4. When Hank and Laurel visit town together we see a vast contrast in the peoples' approach to him—shaking his hand, smiling and nodding greetings—and their treatment of Laurel—crossing to the other side of the street to avoid her. Why does Hank allow this to happen? Is he being disloyal to his sister by allowing this?
5. On a trip to town some months after Hank returns from war, Laurel chooses to tell him about her encounter with Jubel Parton. Why did she wait this long? Did she expect such an intense and violent reaction from Hank? Was it a way of testing him?
6. The character Chauncey Feith raises questions about many of the books themes, in particular, duty and honour. Here is a soldier who takes immense pride in wearing full uniform. He is motivated by the desire to impress young men and inspire them to join and serve. Does this make sense in a man that has not seen a moment of combat and has no intention of putting himself anywhere near a battlefield?
7. Tillman Estep returned from war having lost an eye and with a face so scarred that women shield their children's eyes from him when he passes in the street. Despite this lasting mark of his time as an active soldier, Estep is not seen as an exemplary or heroic veteran because he dares to tell people that 'war was nothing more than a bunch of men killing each other for acres of mud'. How do you feel about his view of the war? Is it wrong of him to share this view with others?
8. Chauncey can't hide his contempt for Estep and he has even stronger feelings about another man who returned from war 'convinced his guts were torn up' after he drove his bayonet through a German. Estep is seen as disloyal, the soldier with the imagined injury a shirker and then we have Chauncey, all the trappings but never leaving home. Which of these men has a better sense of duty and honour?
9. Today there are still many who willingly join the armed forces with the knowledge that they will likely serve in active duty and possibly in wars that many of their fellow citizens claim are unjust, unnecessary or impossible to understand. What creates the difference between those who will fight our modern wars and those intent on questioning whether we should be at war at all?
10. Would Laurel have fallen in love with any man who found his way into the cove or was Walter truly the one for her? Was it him or the things he represented?
11. The Carolina parakeets were known to remain with any member of their flock that had been shot down and, in doing so, whole flocks would be killed or threatened. Is this intended as a parallel to Laurel's life? Staying for her father and for Hank would cause her own demise?
12. If Walter had not appeared in their lives do you think Hank would have left Laurel alone in the cove while he made a new home with Carolyn Weatherbee?
13. Despite knowing nothing of Walter's past, Hank and Laurel trust him. Were they simply open-minded and free of the burdens of suspicion and prejudice so common around them? Or were they naïve?
14. It is a crushing blow for Laurel when she discovers that Hanks has been planning for months that he will leave the cove when he marries Carolyn and not take Laurel with him. This would not have been the convention of the time. Did Hank also see Laurel as cursed or a source of bad luck? Or is he just trying to appease his new bride and her family?
15. Laurel leaves Professor Mayer's house with the frightening truth about Walter. She has three choices—to go straight to the sheriff, to pretend she knows nothing or to confront Walter directly. Which choice would you have made?
16. The prologue is set some years after the rest of the story. A government worker comes to the cove to view land soon to be covered by a dam. All is deserted, dilapidated and forgotten, but not by the people in town who tell him 'you can't bury that cove deep enough for me' and 'the cove was a place where only bad things happened'. Do you think the townsfolk would have felt regret for what happened in the cove, or would they have felt the tragedy was a natural end to a cursed place?