

## Themes and Discussion Questions for *She Walks These Hills*

*She Walks These Hills* is a novel structured around the theme of **Journeys**. Everyone in the novel is on a journey of some sort: Katie, trying to find her way home; Jeremy Cobb, duplicating her journey in a *diminished* form; (see chapter one, for the recurring theme of diminishing); Martha Ayers on a journey of self-fulfillment; Harm on a journey home; Hank on a journey outside his narrow everyday existence; Sabrina, as a diminished form of Katie; and even the Appalachian Mountains themselves, who have been drifting away from Great Britain for millions of years, are on a journey.

**Diminishing:** This concept is a central theme of the novel, meaning that the present places/people are lesser than their past counterparts. The present Appalachians are diminished forms of the ancient mountains, which were as tall as the Rockies.

Harm is a lesser version of his kinsman, the 19<sup>th</sup> century outlaw Dalton Sorley; Both Jeremy and Sabrina as lesser versions of Katie Wyler; he in his non-heroic journey, and she in her desperation to escape.

The wilderness of today's mountains, a national park dotted with roads and 7-11 stores, much diminished from the wild forest of the 1770's in which Katie Wyler had to travel.

The title *She Walks These Hills* is the chorus of a song called *The Long Black Veil*. This series is called The Ballad Novels, in part because all the titles come from songs. If you enlarge your concept of the identity of the "She" who walks these hills, you will find that the title refers not only to Katie Wyler, but also to Martha, Sabrina, Charlotte Pentland, and even Nora Bonesteel? Are they not all at some point walking these hills, on journeys (either physical or spiritual) of their own?

### Discussion Questions

1. Chapter One of *She Walks These Hills* illustrates the theme of diminishing, and ends with the words "It was a diminishing of sorts." *Discuss how the news of Harm Sorley's escape is conveyed to Harm himself and then how it is passed along from one group to another. How does this illustrate the concept of diminishing?*

2. Discuss the drive in the country that Charlotte Pentland took with her mother Rita. In what ways are they both discussing the same thing?

3. Jeremy Cobb begins his trek through the wilderness loaded down with a heavy burden of "things." Why does he discard them, and what happens when he does?

4. How is Sabrina the modern counterpart of Katie Wyler ?
5. There are at least seven journeys in the novel-- both symbolic and literal journeys. Name two of the journeys that do *not* involve a person traveling from one place to another.
6. What differences are there between the journey of Katie Wyler and that of Jeremy Cobb ?
7. Why was Harm Sorley able to see the ghost of Katie Wyler and talk to her ?
8. Martha says, "Cities are judged by their richest inhabitants and rural areas by their poorest." Discuss.
9. How is Harm's mental disorder "Korsakov's Syndrome" symbolic of political issues in Appalachia or of the national perception of the region?
10. Katie Wyler's story is a composite of several 18<sup>th</sup> century pioneer women kidnapped by Indians. Compare her story to the true story of one of the following: Jenny Wylie, Mary Draper Ingles, or Caty Sage.