

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *A Hard Witching* Jacqueline Baker

### IN HER OWN WORDS

#### **1. When did you decide you wanted to be a writer and what other writers influenced you? Who are some of your favourite writers?**

I decided to be many things before I decided to be a writer: journalist, photographer, nature guide. But writing has always been something I thought I would do one day. I took a half-hearted stab at it in my mid-20s, sent out a few really awful stories, received them back rather smartly. Then I took another brief detour and found myself in university. There, in my late-20s, I began to write seriously, partly because I began to read seriously – stopped reading the latest hip writer-of-the-moment and began to discover the writers who would become my favourites, writers to learn from: Hawthorne, Chekhov, Austen, Laxness, Bulgakov, Munro, and most of all those remarkable Southerners, Faulkner, Welty, O'Connor. I imagine the writers you love are the same ones who influence you.

#### **2. Can you talk a bit about the difference in terms of craft between writing short stories and writing novels?**

Well, my view on the writing of novels is rather limited at the moment, having only just begun work on my first, and so I hardly feel qualified to speak on the subject. I suppose I could say that the short story requires an acute awareness of the defining moments in life, and the ability to translate one moment—which is vast, which, in a sense, means everything—into only a few pages. The writer must reach readers quickly, must bring the reader into a new world for an instant and make them believe in that world, must make them understand something of the nature of humanity, the enormity of a life. On the other hand, the novel requires a constant and sustained sense of engagement, a relentless narrative drive – you must keep readers with you always and not let them stray off, wondering about the weather or what they shall have for dinner, or if perhaps that other book might not have been a better choice after all. More characters, longer time spans, perhaps even a few changes of location—the novelist must have the ability to juggle many ideas at once, be possessed of a broader scope. And, of course, the novelist must understand psychology and must remain true to her characters always –more challenging, perhaps, in three hundred pages than in thirty.

#### **3. *A Hard Witching* appears to draw on some of your own family experiences. How do you use personal experience as a writer?**

I don't write that way, directly from personal experience, translating it to the page. Generally I try to come up with a first line, at random—it has to be just right— and then see what that line evokes for me; or a character's name –Aloetius, for instance— and then write about the kind of person who might belong to that name. Sometimes I'll start with a title—*A Hard Witching*— which means nothing to me on its own, before beginning to write, but which is interesting or mysterious enough to spark a story. "Personal experience" writing seems to announce itself so obviously and often strikes me as rather thin. There's a distinction between personal experience and the knowledge which stems from it: the latter is always useful in literature; the former, perhaps best left to anecdote. Of course, I grew

up near the Sand Hills and my mother's family is German, so there is that. And I sometimes add details from my family life, insignificant on their own – I have a great-aunt Cherry, my grandmother sold Avon, that sort of thing. It pleases my mother to find those little allusions.

**4. Your stories have a very strong sense of place. Can you talk about why you were drawn to the Sand Hills region and what imaginative role it played in the writing of these stories.**

I wasn't drawn to the Sand Hills, not at first. In fact, I was steering as far clear of Saskatchewan as possible. I kept hearing how dull it was to write about the prairies—about Canada generally, particularly rural Canada—but especially and most of all the prairies. Margaret Laurence and Sinclair Ross were roundly scorned by my peers. So when I began writing, I wrote about the southern US where I'd lived for a few years. A writing instructor at the University of Victoria suggested, bless him, that I write a piece set in Saskatchewan. I was further encouraged to do so while in graduate studies in Edmonton. As the stories in *A Hard Witching* unfolded, this central image of the Sand Hills just rose up for me, as if it had been waiting. It was a gift, really. And, of course, the Sand Hills are so familiar to me. I'm not sure I can say I love the place, or love everything about it, but it's in my blood, for better or for worse.

**5. You are the beginning of your writing career. What are some of the goals you would like to accomplish as a writer?**

I've never been good at making or keeping goals. At its simplest, I suppose my goal is to write the kind of fiction I like to read. I'd like my family to enjoy what I write. Just now, there is the novel. Then, with any luck, another. I am a terribly slow writer, pondering and agonizing over every word, every comma. So I won't look any farther ahead than that. Of course, I hope to put together another collection of short stories. I do enjoy them.

**JACQUELINE BAKER was raised in Saskatchewan, studied creative writing at the University of Victoria, and is a recent M.A. graduate of the University of Alberta. Her work has appeared in such magazines as Grain, Prism, Prairie Fire, The Antigonish Review and The Malahat Review. She lives with her family in Edmonton, Alberta, where she is at work on her first novel.**

**PRAISE FOR A HARD WITCHING**

*"A Hard Witching is a book to reread, twice as good the second time. Jacqueline Baker, with an honest and skillful debut, surpasses the crowd by miles." —The Globe and Mail*

*"What Alistair MacLeod has done for the Maritimes, Jacqueline Baker has done for the Sand Hills region of southwestern Saskatchewan. It is insightful and accurate in its depiction of beauty and menace of the landscape and of the brutality and tenderness of its inhabitants."*  
—Diane Schoemperlen

*"Her prose is concise and evocative, and the authenticity of her voice and understanding of the complexity of human emotions calls to mind the work of Alice Munro." —Toronto Star*