



School girls on the prairie, source unknown.

The Shinnery by Kate Anger

A reader's guide

Q & A with Kate Anger

Q: Is *The Shinnery* a true story?

A: It is based on true life events, namely my great-great aunt's exploitation by "Will Keyes," and my great-great grandfather's killing of him. Even though the subsequent trial was covered in every newspaper within a 100-mile radius, the family worked hard to put the story to rest. They succeeded so well that my grandmother, who was "Jessa's" niece, and born just nine years after the trial, never heard about any of it—and she lived to be 93.

Q: How did you learn about the family secret?

A: On a genealogical trip to Abilene, TX with my aunt and mother. An older, distant cousin, who grew up in Stonewall County, shared the newspaper articles he'd found researching our family history. This was over twenty years ago—*twenty years the story's rattled around in my head.*

Q: What parts are made up?

A: So much. I know so little of the actual events. The court transcripts burned in a fire, so all I had were newspapers articles and copies of a few family letters. The question that drove me to write the novel was how: *How did a young woman, living on her family homestead, fall prey to a scoundrel? How did my GG grandfather come to see shooting the man as his only recourse?* The novel is my attempt to answer these questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the novel there are excerpts from Texas newspapers covering the actual trial and events as they unfolded. How do these add to the drama of the story? And how do the newspapers cover the story differently than the novelist?
2. The Prologue of *The Shinnery* is set a year after the beginning of the novel but not quite at the end of the story. Looking back at it, why do you think the author starts with Jessa at this point in the story?
3. Jessa is an instinctual person—she understands animals and the land. How are her instincts thwarted when she moves to town and meets Will Keyes for the first time?
4. The Texas landscape provides a beautiful backdrop to *The Shinnery*. What were some of your favorite passages? As you remember the landscape where you grew up, can you name the common birds, trees, plants, mountains, or streams? What do you remember most?
5. *The Shinnery* is named for the strip of shin oak on Jessa's family property. On page 176, the narrator describes why some ranchers destroyed the shin oak and why Papa kept theirs. How does this serve as a metaphor for Jessa's own experiences?
6. Native American culture is woven throughout the novel because Jessa's heritage is part Cherokee and because, as homesteaders, the Campbells occupy land where the nomadic Comanches, Kiowas, and Tonkawas once roamed freely. How does Jessa's story relate to that of Native Americans in the same time period?
7. What is Jessa's relationship to God and religion? How does God guide her steps when she moves to Rayner? On p. 177, she regrets that she has "reduced Him...[to] a God she could fit in her apron pocket." What does Jessa mean by this? Thinking about stories and experiences that you know, how does a person's relationship to religion change when they experience trauma and tragedy?



Discussion questions by
Thatcher Carter &
Sandra Soares

Discussion Questions cont.

8. Jessa starts off as an innocent, focused more on Will Keyes' safety than her own. What factors block Jessa from her sense of self-worth when she gets caught up in Will's dangerous snare? Later, what are the moments that develop her strength and sense of self-worth by the end of the novel?
9. The relationships between the women are complicated and varied. Sisters, mothers, friends, and frenemies all play a part. Did any of the female relationships touch a chord with you? Have you ever encountered a "Mrs. Posey" in your life?
10. Not only does the family suffer financially in the father's absence, but they are also subject to a great deal of shame. In a letter from 1961, over 60 years after the events, one of "Jessa's" sisters writes of that time: "Oh! What a shame. We were all so humiliated. We never went anywhere from home except when it was necessary..." Why do you think they felt such shame? Why did some in the community act as they did—supporting Papa on one hand, while avoiding Jessa, her mother and sisters, on the other?
11. Author Brené Brown explains that "Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it—it can't survive being shared" (*The Gifts of Imperfection*). Has there been anything in yours or your family's life that felt shameful at the time but was lessened by sharing?
12. The Martins, who employ Jessa, are disgraced by Jessa's downfall. How did they add to the confusion and isolation Jessa felt while she was staying with them? Were you surprised that they scurried back to St. Louis?
13. Women who are the victims of sexual trauma often have trouble connecting with the offspring from their attackers. How does Jessa connect with her baby Rose, and why doesn't she give the child to her sister Maggie?
14. Jessa's relationship with her father is the foundation for the emotional plot of the novel. How does their relationship change from the first scene to the last?
15. If the book were to continue, do you think the author would have Jessa and Grover marry? Why or why not? Why do you think the author didn't end the book that way?

For more on the book, please contact the author at kateangerwrites@gmail.com. The author is available for book club and speaking engagements—in person or on Zoom.