

Reading Group Guide

Deep Down Things

Tamara Linse

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Deep Down Things, Tamara Linse's debut novel, is the emotionally riveting story of three siblings torn apart by a charismatic bullrider-turned-writer and the love that triumphs despite tragedy.

From the death of her parents at sixteen, Maggie Jordan yearns for lost family, while sister CJ drowns in alcohol and brother Tibs withdraws. When Maggie and an idealistic young writer named Jackdaw fall in love, she is certain that she's found what she's looking for. As she helps him write a novel, she gets pregnant, and they marry. But after Maggie gives birth to a darling boy, Jes, she struggles to cope with Jes's severe birth defect, while Jackdaw struggles to overcome writer's block brought on by memories of his abusive father.

Ambitious, but never seeming so, *Deep Down Things* may remind you of Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* and Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*.

Like the characters in *Deep Down Things*, the author Tamara Linse and her husband Steve have lost babies. They had five miscarriages before their twins were born through the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier. Tamara is also the author of the short story collection *How to Be a Man* and earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and on her blog *Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl* at tamaralinse.blogspot.com.

Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

Oh, what I wouldn't have given to be able to give Maggie a happy ending, to have Jes grow into a happy and healthy young man whose only scars are those left by his troubled father. It wasn't to be, however. The logic of the story inexorably pulled me to where it ended.

That's not entirely true. The first ending actually had Jackdaw successfully shooting Jes and then killing himself. So maybe I did pull back a little—at the behest of an editor friend. The conversation went something like this. “The ending is too unremittingly dark.” “But Jes has to die. Otherwise no one will buy it.” “Yes, but does his father have to kill him? AND THEN commit suicide?” Point taken. That same friend said she bawled in public in NYC at least four times while reading it. Now THAT is a compliment. I think.

The inspiration for this story is a friend and coworker who is one of those ideal mothers. If I could have chosen to have any mother in the world, she would have been at the top of my list. She had two boys, and then her third boy was born with severe spina bifida. Watching what she went through was heart-wrenching. When I decided to write this book, a few years after the darling boy had died at age six, we sat and talked through what had happened. She said that most people act as if it never happened and so it was good to talk about it. I hope so, and I hope I've in some small way been able to honor what she went through.

Another inspiration for this story is my history of infertility. My mother had seven kids including me, and one of my sisters had seven, and so I never considered that I would have problems having children. Then, my husband and I had five miscarriages, the first at six months. Medical rigmarole ensued. I'm so glad for it, though, because we were able to have our happy ending. A wonderful amazing woman—whom I'd trust almost more than I'd trust myself—acted as gestational carrier for us, and our twins were born. Our son was also born with a severe cleft lip and palate, and so more medical procedures. As much as we've been through, though, I can't express how thankful I am to medical science and the wonderful doctors who made it all possible.

The first scene of *Deep Down Things* that I wrote, I was actually staying in a residential hotel in Denver undergoing IVF procedure for the twins. All those shots. That was August 2005. The first scene I wrote was where Maggie walks into the room and Jes just lights up. He makes her feel wonderful, despite everything, just by the way he beams at her. I finished a first draft by June 2009. I remember because I completed it for a Tin House writers conference mentorship with the legendary Little, Brown editor Judy Clain. The manuscript was an unqualified mess—four points of view with two timelines going concurrently. Bless Judy's heart for first of all agreeing to do the mentorship and second of all giving me such great advice. Help your reader

out. Chronological, chronological! More reflection to let the reader know what to take away from a scene. Her talking with me was simply the best encouragement I could have had.

So I went back and majorly rewrote it. Because of how I'd written it—two timelines—the beginning and the end were basically written and I had to write through the middle. An odd experience, to say the least, but a good one. It shaped up nicely, although I distinctly remember having writer's block and thinking, this is the most horrible thing I've ever read. I do that when I write—I go through periods of loving the work and then hating it. Especially when I'm not writing, I think about all the flaws.

Having four points of view presented its own challenges. If you have a point of view, you must have a character arc. Something has to happen to that person. They have to change. And therefore all the stories have to be coherent in their own right, yet they have to meld together into this unified whole. "Ambitious," someone called it, and at the time I don't think they meant it as a compliment. My initial inspiration for form was the movie *Love Actually*. I was fascinated with how that movie was able to have all those different story lines yet work. I still love that movie. It strayed pretty far from that, though, didn't it? Another big inspiration was William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, one of my favorite books. All those points of view tied together in a country setting. Believe it or not, I didn't actually read Kent Haruf's *Plainsong* till late in the writing process. Without knowing it, I had mirrored a lot of that wonderful book, and so when I did finally read it I was a bit thunderstruck.

I deliberately try to have all kinds of people in my books. I regret that I don't have more diversity in this one, but I am glad I was able to have CJ work through her sexuality. Race and ethnicity and gender and sexuality are not binaries—they exist much more on a spectrum—and I find myself continually fascinated with the complexities of these subjects.

Finally, I often have an extended metaphor or theme that I'm thinking of when I write a story or a novel. In the case of *Deep Down Things*, it's the story of Jesus. Many readers would not pick up on it, I think, but Jes's story riffs on it with details large and small. I'm a spiritual person—though I'm not a religious one—and the ideas underlying the story of Jesus are complicated and compelling and timeless. Self-sacrifice, family relationships, being a good person—these all are just as relevant today as they ever were. And I find by using something like this as a framework, an extended metaphor, I can explore these subjects more deeply. I don't think of this as a religious book or a Christian book, but I am very invested in the ideas that Christianity presents to us. I am happy, however, if this book helps someone affirm his or her faith or think more deeply about the issues presented. We all need help sometimes in being good people.

My finally confession is that the ending still makes me bawl like a baby. I don't think writers are supposed to admit that.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the title *Deep Down Things* reflect what the novel is about? Would you have chosen a different title? The title comes from a poem by Gerard Manly Hopkins entitled “God’s Grandeur” (printed above before the text)—how does the novel relate to the poem?
2. The original title of *Deep Down Things* was *Loveland*, reflecting the importance and resonance of place and landscape. Would you have preferred the title *Loveland*, or would it have had the wrong connotations? In general, how does landscape shape the characters in the novel?
3. The characters have odd names. Does this lend itself to their characterizations or detract? How do these names reflect their characters?
4. Very little backstory is given about the characters. We know a few major life events, and there are a few flashbacks. Do you think the story would have benefited from more history and more flashback? You don’t hear much about Bo, in particular. What backstory would you imagine for her?
5. What do you imagine is Jackdaw’s pig story that Tibs tries to get him to tell early in the book?
6. Tibs’s story parallels Jackdaw’s in relation to writing. CJ’s story parallels Maggie’s in relation to having children. Compare and contrast these stories and their outcomes.
7. There are a number of sex scenes throughout the book. Are the scenes convincing? Are they necessary? Would it be a different book without them? There is also some bad language. Would the novel be as convincing without it?
8. Which of the four points of view was your favorite? Your least favorite? Whom did you like the best? Was the most likable character the same as your favorite character?
9. Jackdaw does what he thinks he has to do. What in his past brought him to this decision? Should euthanasia ever be an option?
10. How is the medical community portrayed in the novel? Do you think the novel accurately shows what it’s like to deal with an illness or with the death of a loved one?
11. Does having both members of a gay couple named Jason play with stereotype, or reinforce it? Are there other stereotypes in the book? Do some points of view call for more stereotyping than others? Which characters would be more apt to stereotype?

12. The three siblings are close because they were first abandoned by their parents and then their parents were killed in a plane crash. In what ways are they “functional” and in what ways are they “dysfunctional”?
13. How would you describe the town of Loveland, as depicted in *Deep Down Things*?
14. The story of Jesus is an extended metaphor that inspired the author. In what ways does *Deep Down Things* riff on the story of Jesus?
15. Does the climax scene at Easter—where Maggie realizes Jes is dying, CJ confronts Bo, Tibs confronts CJ and Bo, and Jackdaw shoots Maggie—seem contrived? Did the author convincingly lay the groundwork for the scene earlier in the book?
16. Both Maggie and Jackdaw have “gone crazy” at the end of the book. In what ways are they crazy? How might the author have portrayed this differently? Do you think their mental illnesses are justified?
17. How would you have ended it?

About the Author



Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she’s been thankful for ever since. In high school, she was rodeo queen, placed in a poetry contest, and waitressed.

She put herself through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor’s and master’s in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called Literature and the Land, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. They went through five miscarriages before the twins were born with the help of a wonderful woman who acted as a gestational carrier.

Tamara writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara’s website, www.tamaralinse.com/, and her blog, Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl, at tamara-linse.blogspot.com. You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on [Facebook](#) and [Google+](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#), and if you see her in person, please say hi. She really means it.

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