

Snakewoman of Little Egypt

By Robert Hellenga

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Snakewoman of Little Egypt*, a captivating novel about the hazards of love and spirituality at the turn of the millennium.

About this book

Sunny never got to tell her own story. That's how she ended up serving a six-year jail sentence for shooting her abusive husband, Earl. If she had been able to take the stand, she would have explained that Earl, the pastor of the Church of the Burning Bush with Signs Following, was the one who forced her at gunpoint to put her arm into a crate of rattlesnakes. That's when Sunny turned on Earl in self-defense.

Now that she has served her time, Sunny is determined never to go back to Earl and the church in Little Egypt. She inherits some money and a garage apartment from her uncle Warren. On his deathbed, Warren made the anthropologist Jackson Jones, his friend and landlord, promise to look after Sunny. But Sunny swears she'll never rely on a man again, even as she and Jackson fall into a comfortable relationship. Sunny throws herself into her studies at the local university, specializing in herpetology, the study of snakes, which she handled for most of her life in Little Egypt.

Now in love with Sunny, Jackson is reminded of his last heartbreak: He has a daughter he's never met in the Ituri Forest in Africa, where he did his fieldwork years ago. Eager to get on with a new research project, Jackson goes to Little Egypt to interview Earl and his congregation. As Jackson gets dangerously close to the snakes and the spirit of the church, he finds himself on the precipice of a big decision—does his future lie in Illinois with Sunny, or should he return to Africa and finally meet the daughter he left behind?

For discussion

1. *Snakewoman of Little Egypt* takes place in 1999 and 2000, a recent past that readers should remember well. What period details from the turn of the millennium come to life in the novel? Why do you think Robert Hellenga set his novel at this time instead of the present day?
2. As soon as she steps out of prison, Sunny declares, "I used to be Willa Fern. Now I'm Sunny." (35) What does this new name mean to Sunny? How does her outlook on life change in this moment?
3. Consider how Sunny and Jackson tell their own stories. How do the chapters in Sunny's voice differ from the chapters told from Jackson's point of view?
4. Discuss what snakes mean to each character in the novel. Why do Earl, DX, and the followers of their church handle snakes? Why are Cramer and Sunny studying them?

Why is Jackson drawn to DX's two-headed snake? What personal, spiritual, and professional possibilities do snakes hold for each of these characters?

5. As Sunny decides to live in Jackson's home, she tells him, "I don't need anyone to look after me. But maybe you need someone to look after you." (63) Throughout Sunny and Jackson's relationship, who seems to look after whom? When does the balance of power shift between them and why?
6. How does Claire, Jackson's ex-girlfriend and occasional lover, change over the course of the novel? Does Claire seem like a trustworthy character when we first meet her? What about at the end of the novel, during and after Sunny's trial? How does she eventually earn Sunny's trust and sisterly love?
7. At the end of her first semester at Thomas Ford University, Sunny says, "I was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of well-being, a sense that the answers to life's big questions had fallen into my lap." (188) What important answers does Sunny learn from each of her classes—French 101, Great Books, English 207, and Biology 120? What big questions still remain unanswered for Sunny?
8. Discuss Earl's leadership as the pastor of the Church of the Burning Bush with Signs Following. What are Earl's values? What mistakes does he make when he is "backed up on the Lord," and how does he repent? Is he a villain in *Snakewoman of Little Egypt*? Why or why not?
9. "For Jackson the Church of the Burning Bush with Signs Following provided a professional opportunity too good to be passed up." (140). Why is Jackson uniquely qualified for this assignment of "salvage anthropology?" (123) What does Jackson seek in Naqada, and what does he end up finding? Does his research take him closer to the spirituality of the church or further away?
10. Twice Sunny stands trial for shooting Earl. How are the circumstances of each shooting similar, and how are they different? At her second trial, Sunny realizes, "And the funny thing was, I knew in my heart of hearts that in some ways the prosecutor was closer to the truth than Stella, and he, the prosecutor, didn't even know the half of it." (322) What version of Sunny does the prosecutor present to the jury? Why does the jury end up siding with Sunny, even if the prosecutor is closer to the truth of her crimes?
11. During her trial, Sunny realizes, "And in fact in my own inner courtroom I *was* on trial for going to Mexico with another man." (314) Why does Sunny choose Mexico over Paris? How does she atone for her decision?
12. Jackson often speaks of looking *along* a beam of light instead of looking *at* it. (168) What vision does he seek when he looks along a beam of light? What are the rewards and dangers of this point of view?

13. Warren, Sunny's uncle, dies before the novel begins, but he has a strong effect on Sunny and Jackson's lives. What kind of man was Warren, according to Jackson and Sunny's memories of him? How does Warren manage to help his niece, even after his death?
14. In the end, why does Jackson return to Africa? Does it seem likely that he finds what he's looking for, even if Sunny never learns of his whereabouts? Why or why not?
15. Claire's novel, *Kiss of Death*, ends with an engagement in France, while *Snakewoman of Little Egypt* ends with a breakup and a fresh start. Which ending is more satisfying? Which ending captures the "joie de vivre" that Sunny has been seeking since she left prison? (340)
16. Robert Hellenga writes that the "two stories . . . are intertwined (like two snakes) in *Snakewoman of Little Egypt*." (341) How does the author weave the strands of the novel together? What do the communities of Little Egypt and the Ituri Forest have in common, and how are they different? How does Sunny and Jackson's love story unite these two worlds, and why does it ultimately drive them apart?

Suggested reading

Robert Hellenga, *The Sixteen Pleasures* and *The Italian Lover*; Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness: Stories*; Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country*; Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*; Richard Russo, *Bridge of Sighs*; Amy Bloom, *Where the God of Love Hangs Out*; Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*; Hillary Jordan, *Mudbound*; Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People*; Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*.

Robert Hellenga was educated at the University of Michigan and Princeton University. He is a professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and the author of the novels *The Sixteen Pleasures*, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, *Blues Lessons*, *Philosophy Made Simple*, and *The Italian Lover*. Visit his Web site at www.roberthellenga.com.