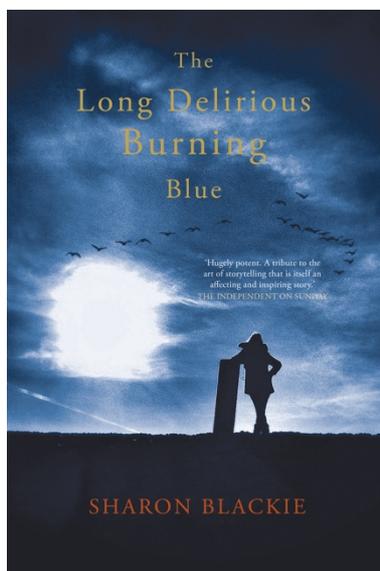


The Long Delirious Burning Blue

by Sharon Blackie

Readers' Guide



Cat Munro's safe, carefully-controlled world as a corporate lawyer in Phoenix is disintegrating, and she is diagnosed with panic disorder just before her fortieth birthday. In a last-ditch attempt to regain control of her life, she faces up to her greatest fear of all: she decides to learn to fly. As she struggles to let go of old memories and the anxieties that have always held her back, Cat faces a choice: should she try to piece her old life back together again, or should she give in to the increasingly urgent compulsion to throw it all away?

Several thousand miles away in Scotland, Cat's mother Laura faces retirement and a growing sense of failure and futility. Alone for the first time in her life, she is forced to face the memories of her violent and abusive marriage, the alcoholism that followed, and her resulting fragile relationship with Cat. But then she joins the local storytelling circle. And as she becomes attuned to the mythical, watery landscape around her, she begins to reconstruct the story of her own life...

*From the excoriating heat of the Arizona desert to the misty flow of a north-west Highland sea-loch, Sharon Blackie's first novel presents us with landscape in all its transformative power. An honest and moving exploration of the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, *The Long Delirious Burning Blue* is above all a story of courage, endurance and redemption.*

To see a video of the author talking about the inspiration for *The Long Delirious Burning Blue*, please visit the book page on www.sharonblackie.net.

Questions and topics for discussion

- Where does Cat's fear of flying come from, and what does it say about who she is?
- Why do you think Cat chooses flying lessons at this moment in her life?
- Have you ever done something which seemed completely out of character at a difficult time in your life, or which other people thought was 'crazy', but which turned out to be a life-saver?

- One of the things Cat is trying to do is free herself from an excessive need to control all the details of her life. How do we navigate the fine line between too much control and too much 'letting go'?
- Cat's way of being in the world is clearly defined in good part by the trauma of her mother's alcoholism and its consequences in her own childhood. It takes Cat a long time to acknowledge its effects in her own life, and to come to terms with it. Why do you think this is?
- Should Cat have forgiven Laura more easily, and sooner?
- A key theme running through this novel is the impact of violence in families, and the ways in which it can run through generations. What do you know about research into the epigenetic influences of trauma on foetuses, or research into the effects of intergenerational trauma? Do you think trauma can run in families? Do you think we are all affected by ancestral trauma? If so, how can we begin to assimilate and transform it in our own lives?
- Another key themes in this book is the nature of storytelling, and the ways stories impact, and perhaps even underpin, our lives. Do you believe stories are primarily entertainment – an escape from reality – or is there more to the way stories affect us? If so, how do you think they can work in our lives?
- In Chapter 2, Meg talks to Laura about 'letting the story find you'. In order to try to make sense of her life and who she has become, Laura turns to story to help her begin to see the patterns underlying it all, and chooses as her guide the story of the selkie who lost her skin. Why does Laura choose the selkie story? How is it helping her to gain perspective on her own life?
- Has a story ever 'found' you? Can you think of a story which highlights some critical issue you're working through in your own life, just as the selkie story did for Laura?
- When Adam throws a party for her, Cat feels that 'this is not my world, these are not my people' in the midst of it all. It's clear that this has become a common phenomenon in Cat's life; she feels the same thing at work, and in every social situation in which she finds herself. Have you ever looked around you and felt the same sense of estrangement in your own life? If so, how did that change you, or inform you about what you thought your place was in the world?
- Cat's experience, at forty years old, is typical of so many people who feel a major call to change at midlife – what used to be called the 'midlife crisis', or more recently the 'midlife transition'. Has that call to change happened to you, or (if you are too young for it yet!) to anyone you know well? Does this seem like a natural phenomenon to you? Where do you think it comes from, and what is its purpose? How do we navigate it well?

- Is Cat's sudden departure from her life with Adam heartless, or born from necessity? Should she – could she – have handled it differently?
- Cat describes flying as 'the edge of death'. Why, at this time in her life, is she actively seeking the edge of death?
- 'You can't put the past behind you until you've stood up and faced it down', Meg tells Laura. Do you think this is true? In what ways might the past be stood up to and faced down?
- Maria Mercedes talks to Cat about 'imperfect mothers' in the context of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe. How do you respond to this idea? Is it possible, anyway, to be a 'perfect mother'? Should any of us expect either to have, or to be, such a thing?
- Another key theme in the novel is the importance of landscape and its impact on our journey through life. Somehow, the wet mistiness of Scotland reflects Laura's mood during these last stages of her life; the uncompromising starkness of the desert helps Cat to see that she can no longer hide from herself and the truth about her way of being in the world. It helps her to 'strip herself bare'. And for the first time, the very ungrounded Cat finds a connection to the Earth while she's flying, by viewing it from above – and seeing it as somehow representing a woman's body. How has landscape impacted your own sense of self? How do the landscapes we live in come to define us?
- If you could design an ideal life for Cat from this point forward (ie from the place she is in at the end of the book) what would it look like?
- If you have read Sharon Blackie's nonfiction book, *If Women Rose Rooted*, you'll know that *The Long Delirious Burning Blue*, whilst clearly being a work of fiction, nevertheless reflects many aspects of her own life and experiences. What parallels did you see between these two books, the writing of which was separated by almost a decade – not just in content, but in themes?

Journaling prompts

- Laura speaks of 'Stories that are forged from the landscape, as we also are forged.' Which landscape, or landscapes, are you forged from?
- What skins have you shed, and why? Where did you leave them? Did they need to be shed, or is there a lost skin you'd like to regain?
- Do you feel as if anyone once stole your skin?

- Have you ever, like Cat in the throes of anxiety, had an experience of an emotion being so accurately mirrored in your body?
- Have you ever dreamed of flying? What does flying represent to you?
- Without saying the word 'memoir', Laura talks to Meg about writing her stories down. 'Write it down and you'll see a pattern,' Meg says to Laura. If you were to write a memoir of your life, do you think you would identify a pattern? What might that be?
- Laura struggles to know where to begin her own story – to identify the 'defining moment', or 'point of change' in her early life. Where would you begin a memoir about your own life? What was the earliest point of change you can think of?
- 'Meg says that everyone has their element,' Laura writes. Hers is water. What's your element?
- 'Sorting. Maybe that's the task of old age', Laura tells herself. What fairy tales do you know with sorting – of different types of seed all mixed together in a pile, for example – as a key task for the heroine? What does this story motif mean to you? What needs to be sorted in your own life right now?

My first novel *The Long Delirious Burning Blue* was described by *The Independent* on Sunday as "Hugely potent. A tribute to the art of storytelling that is itself an affecting and inspiring story"™ and by *The Scotsman* as "powerful (reminiscent of *The English Patient*), filmic, and achieving the kind of symmetry that novels often aspire to, but rarely reach."™