



## Reader's Guide to *Cloud of Witnesses*

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### Q & A WITH AUTHOR JANE HERTENSTEIN

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**Q:** *Your story is set in Appalachia. What is your interest in that region?*

**A:** I grew up in southwestern Ohio, outside of Dayton. As a kid I rode my bike *everywhere*. It must have been disconcerting for my mother to wake up and discover me gone, then later in the afternoon receive a call from me from a pay phone saying I was a hundred miles away and too tired to cycle home. Thus, I explored much of backroads Ohio.

The rural Ohio landscape is in my bones. Even with my eyes closed I can see the gentle rolling hills, sun-bleached barns leaning toward ruin, abandoned railroad tracks leading nowhere, small towns with only crossroads. When I went to Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, in the foothills of the Appalachians, I found the hills challenging, but managed to bike up into some remote places where dogs chased me for what seemed like miles. Passing tin-can trailers with tractor-tire flower beds, I always wondered what it must be like to live there. It was a time in my life when I wanted more, yet was afraid of what the future might hold – just like Roland.

My father came from Paris, Kentucky, the Bluegrass region, which shares Appalachian traditions. He remembers coming home from college, hitchhiking to visit his granny, and finding her in the front yard making soap in a big pot over an open fire.

When I was ready to embark on my college student teaching assignment, an instructor told me that some of the rural schools refrained from assigning homework because students didn't have access to electricity and would have to study by kerosene lamp.

There is nothing prettier than southeastern Ohio in the fall with the fires of colored leaves blazing among the hills. The image is burned into my memory.

**Q: *Why did you include an Iranian boy and the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979 in your book?***

A: When I was a sophomore in high school, I met a girl from Iran. She was living with her aunt and uncle so that she could receive medical treatment because she had crashed through a glass window in an accident. Other than wearing a headscarf, she dressed much like the rest of us. I wish I could remember her name.

I think what struck me the most was that she seemed so much like me – except she was quieter.

A few years later, I attended Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, graduating in 1982. During those years, I clearly remember the Revolution, the Hostage Takeover, and the 444-day Hostage Crisis. It seemed a veil had come down over Iran as the United States severed diplomatic relations.

**Q: *How long did it take you to write Cloud of Witnesses?***

A: Don't ask. A long time. Actually, I worked on it, knew it needed something more, put it aside, worked on other manuscripts, came back to it off and on for at least a decade. In other words: *don't give up*. Meanwhile, find a critique group and/or a circle of readers to help you craft your stories.

**Q: *Who's the kid on the cover and in your book trailer? He's kind of cute.***

A: His name is Eden Hill, my friend's son. He was perfect! A great model and willing to suffer through my art direction.

**Q: *What do you think – can I become a writer?***

A: Definitely. In this age of desktop publishing, anyone can become a writer and make books. BUT if you want people to read them, you have to work at it. I'm not saying you have to go to university or spend money on a master's degree, but you have to read and invest hours in discovering your writer's voice. The process is slow and heartbreaking. You must believe in yourself and ignore disparaging remarks.

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## UNIT STUDY #1: APPALACHIA

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### THE LAND

Appalachia does not have definitive boundaries, in terms of where it begins and ends. The term refers to a mountain range along the eastern seaboard of the United States that stretches from the Southern Tier of New York to northern Alabama and Georgia, an area encompassing over 700,000 square miles and eight states. Parts of the Appalachians are also called the Allegheny, Smoky, or Blue Ridge Mountains.

The Appalachians are some of the world's oldest mountains, as compared to newer ranges such as the Tetons. They once were as high as the Alps, but over time have eroded, worn down to the modest mountain range we see today. At one time the mountains were submerged and today one can find marine fossils. The part called the Smokies gets its name from layers of thermal inversion that cause a blue mist to cover the soft peaks, lending them a smoky appearance.

### THE PEOPLE

The area of southern Ohio where Roland lived was inhabited by the Shawnee Indians. There is evidence today of ancient Mound Builders. Indian leaders such as Cornstalk worked for peace and Chief Tecumseh sought to reclaim lands. By 1803, when Ohio became a state, most tribal warfare was subdued. Arrowheads can still be found in the Ohio foothills.

The first white people were hunters, not looking to stay long. After the Revolutionary War, the newly-minted United States looked to expand. Eventually families and farmers made it over the mountains using gaps and following buffalo traces. Some rafted down the rivers into the Ohio Valley. These early immigrants came from all over, but the Scots-Irish predominated, maybe because the land reminded them of the Scottish Highlands.

Since neighbors could be few and far between, the Appalachian frontier forged a self-reliant, independent people. Some clans "ruled" their localities, which led to blood feuds. The short, steep valleys made transportation difficult, so there were few roads and railroads. Most farmers worked 50 acres or fewer. Tobacco and hemp were good cash crops. Hams cured in local smoke houses were highly sought after.

During Prohibition in the 1920s, folks in the remote backwoods set up stills and produced "moonshine." Because alcohol was against the law, a black market was created that, in some places, turned neighbor against neighbor and resulted in bloodshed. In the book, Roland's father tells a story about his brother Lee who was shot in the back by competing gangs.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a War on Poverty, with Appalachia being one of his main targets. It seemed the rest of the world had left the region behind. Access to good food and medicines was hard to come by. Telephones, running water,

flush toilets, and other “modern” conveniences were still rare in the hills. This explains Roland’s fascination with the telephone lines recently installed.

Stereotypes continue to hound the various populations of Appalachia. Many are stigmatized as hillbillies and rednecks. The widespread region is made up of a diversity of folks. Cherokee Indians left a legacy in North Carolina. Scots-Irish settled in coves, bringing their stories and music with them. Escaped slaves found sanctuary in the hills. Italians came to work the mines, and Chinese immigrants opened businesses.

### TODAY

Many people are just now discovering and falling in love with the wild beauty of Appalachia. The region is rich in mineral wealth that has seen a century and a half of mining, leaving some areas ecologically compromised. It is a land of rich and poor. Natural resources are abundant and must be conserved. Today the area is recovering from a widely reported opioid epidemic.

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## UNIT STUDY #2: IRAN

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### ANCIENT PERSIA

The nation of Iran knows about the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. Formerly known as Persia, it is the original Cradle of Civilization in a region sometimes referred to as Mesopotamia. The ancient Persians were unified under Cyrus the Great and the Achaemenid Dynasty in the 7th century BCE. Persepolis, its grand capital, had fabulous palaces, hundreds of pillars, and colossal winged bulls with human heads. The *Shahnameh*, the epic poem Hassan refers to, tells a story of greater Persia. In 330 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Persia and plundered Persepolis. Afterwards Persia fell under the shadow of other empires.

### ROOTS OF MODERN IRAN

World War I brought a reshuffling of national boundaries worldwide and a chance for Iran to forge a new identity. With the help of the British, a new monarchy was formed. In 1925 the Reza Shah took over the throne, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty.

Oil is a major export. In an earlier version of *Cloud of Witnesses*, I had Hassan explaining to Roland while writing their Anne Frank paper that during World War II, many nations were vying for Iran’s support. But Iran chose to be neutral.

Following close on the heels of World War II came the Cold War, in which nations lined up either for or against the Soviet Union. Nations were afraid of a domino effect of Communism, and many were worried that Iran, with its wealth of oil, might fall to the Communists. Despite them having a legitimate government with a freely elected Prime

Minister, the United States helped to bring about a coup in 1953 that gave all the power to Reza Pahlavi. With his expanded powers, the Shah created a secret police force to put down all opposition.

Some of the Shah's most vocal opponents were the Muslim clerics. He had Ayatollah Khomeini jailed and exiled. While trying to modernize Iran, the Shah also ran a campaign of terror. No one wanted to be on the wrong side of the Shah, who did not share the wealth of the country and spent lavishly. In 1971 he held a five-and-a-half-hour banquet for 600 guests and roasted over 50 peacocks – Iran's national symbol – to celebrate 2,500 years of the Persian monarchy. Meanwhile, regular citizens were having their civil rights curtailed and living with double-digit inflation.

### **THE REVOLUTION/HOSTAGE CRISIS**

In 1978, after his government became paralyzed by corruption and strikes, the Shah and his extended family fled to the West. In February 1979 Khomeini returned from exile to help lead the Islamic Republic. Tensions between the United States and Iran were already stretched when President Jimmy Carter made the decision to allow the Shah to come to the United States for medical treatment. Because of the 1953 coup, many Iranians did not trust the United States; they thought the US might try to re-install the Shah. On November 4, 1979 a group of student militants took over the US Embassy in Tehran and took 52 hostages, holding them for 444 days. The Iran Hostage Crisis helped to bring down the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who suffered humiliation because of a botched military rescue attempt. The day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as president, January 20, 1981, the hostages were released.

Since then, the US has had fraught diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **TODAY**

Present-day Iran has the Caspian Sea to its north and the Persian Gulf to its south and is part of a territory called the Middle East. The Elburz mountain range borders the Caspian Sea in the north with Mount Damavand being the tallest, easily seen from Tehran, the country's capital. There are also several great deserts, one of which, Dasht-e Kavir, is comprised mostly of salt.

The people of Iran speak Farsi.

Present-day Iranians practice a form of Islam called Shia, based upon the Twelve Imams. They believe that the last Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, will one day return. There have been significant populations of Jews and Christians living in Iran, but slowly the numbers have been declining, especially since the 1979 Revolution which instituted an Islamic republic where the supreme leader is the Grand Ayatollah, a religious cleric. Iran also has a constitution and holds elections where all the candidates are conservative. Today, even though Iran is a theocratic state, meaning it is ruled and guided by Islamic law, there are many young people who profess no belief.

Women can be elected to parliament, though they cannot sit on the all-male Council of Guardians. They partake in the university system and are allowed to teach and hold positions of authority. Depending on where they live, either in the countryside, which tends to be more traditional and conservative, or in urban centers which allow more color, women must wear either a black chador or long tunic covering their arms and legs completely. Once women and girls begin menstruation, they are required to cover their head with a scarf. The Guardian Council and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps make sure Iranians are dressing and acting according to Islamic law. Music and all of the arts are under their purview.

Iranian children grow up playing soccer or, as they call it, football. Since the global fame of Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls in the 1980s and early 90s, basketball has also become popular.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Families aren't perfect. Larry with his bad teeth and bad driving embarrassed Roland, and Granny could be almost impossible to live with.
  - Have you ever dreamed of another life – for someone to come and rescue you from your present-day situation?
  - Do you imagine living somewhere else, maybe being someone else?
2. *Cloud of Witnesses* was inspired by *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. In that classic English story, a young orphan boy named Pip has big dreams of leaving his village and becoming a gentleman. He starts off with good intentions, but in his drive for success, he leaves those closest to him behind. In the end, friends and family hardly recognize the Pip they once knew.
  - To get ahead, do we have to turn our back on everything, act like we don't need certain friends?
  - Have you ever felt "left behind"?
3. At the Holy Ghost Revival, the preacher Gertie Smith preaches about a "cloud of witnesses." In this instance the cloud of witnesses, saints and sinners, imperfect as they are, was Roland's family.
  - How important is family to you?
4. It's easy to stereotype others. "Throw like a girl." "People who wear glasses are nerds." To say or think stuff like this you don't have to know the person, you just have to repeat the misconception. With *Cloud of Witnesses*, I started with the idea of stereotypes: the dumb jock, the high school drop-out, the poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks – and then turned it around. Neither the characters in *Cloud* nor

people we meet in real-life exactly fit the stereotype. Angie develops an interest in reading, Daddy reveals how he has felt about Roland all along.

- Were there any characters in the book that surprised you?
- How about in your life. Have you ever been wrong about somebody?

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*Iran*, Vijeya Rajendra, New York : Cavendish Square, 2015.

*Appalachia: The Voices of Sleeping Birds*, Cynthia Rylant, San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.

<https://lookingatappalachia.org> various photographers contributed to this website

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## RECOMMENDED BOOKS

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*It Ain't So Awful, Falafel*, Firoozeh Dumas, Boston : Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

*Missing May*, Cynthia Rylant, New York : Scholastic Inc., 2003, 1992.

*When I Was Young in the Mountains* (picture book), Cynthia Rylant, New York : Dutton, 1985, 1982.

*Persepolis* (graphic novel), Marjane Satrapi, New York : Pantheon Books, 2003.

*Hey Kiddo* (graphic novel), Jarrett Krosoczka, New York, NY : Graphix, an imprint of Scholastic, 2018.

*The Lifters*, Dave Eggers, New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

*Foxfire* (series). The Foxfire book series, first published in 1972, included folklore, song-smithing, mountain myths, and practical how-to guides on everything from the art of homebrewing to how to cobble shoes. Young people went into the hills and interviewed residents to gather arcane information. This series continues to be popular, especially in this day and age of makers. Garden City, NY : Anchor Press/Doubleday.