

Riding Like the Wind: The Life of Sanora Babb

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS



1

In her introduction, Iris Jamahl Dunkle writes that her grandmother did not like the way that John Steinbeck depicted the survivors of the Dust Bowl in *The Grapes of Wrath* because it made her people look like victims. Have you or your family ever been misrepresented in history? Or, has one of your relatives ever told you a story that changed the way you understood an event?

2

How did you feel when you learned about the conditions in which Babb was growing up? Could you have survived living in a dugout that felt as Babb describes it “like a grave?”

3

Babb had a difficult childhood, but she had a strong connection with her Grandfather, Konkie. He didn’t speak much, but somehow he taught her more about life than either of her parents. What do you think Konkie offered Babb that she needed, and what did she learn from him?

4

Gambling and prostitution were frowned upon in towns in the Oklahoma Panhandle; however, both existed, and many powerful men took part in one or both activities. Would you say Sanora suffered in her childhood, and what, if anything, do parents owe their children?

5

When Babb decided to leave the Midwest to become a writer, she let her father flip a coin to determine where she would move, Los Angeles or New York. The coin landed on Los Angeles, and so that’s where Babb ended up starting her new life. Do you think that choice ultimately served her—or would outcomes be different had she chosen New York? Have you ever made a huge life decision based on an arbitrary action like flipping a coin?

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On the way back from the Writers Congress in New York City, Babb hitchhiked and walked back from Chicago to Los Angeles. The time she spent on the road alone solidified something in her about what she wanted from her life. What do you think she learned about herself on this trip, and what pivotal moments in your life do you recognize from these moments with Babb?

7

Babb had close relationships with so many important writers from her time: Carlos Bulosan, William Saroyan and Ralph Ellison. Her literary friendships carried her through many of the struggles she faced during her life. What friendships (personal or professional) have carried you through your darkest times? Or have lifted you up to success?

8

When Babb traveled through Europe on her way to the Soviet Union she saw the rise of fascism in Germany and Poland and was utterly surprised by it. Do you ever feel like there is a disconnect between what you see in the news and what you see actually happening around you? How do you make sense of those differences? Babb famously took copious field notes while she was working for Tom Collins at the FSA Camps and writing her first novel, *Whose Names Are Unknown* and she shared those notes (per Collins request) with John Steinbeck who then used her notes in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Do you think it is fair that Steinbeck appropriated her notes?? How does this impact your view of Steinbeck's work?

9

Why do you think it was so tricky for Babb to get her second book, *The Lost Traveler*, published?

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Babb returned to the stories of her childhood in her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*. In one of the chapters, she recounts Daft, the ghost horse that visits her and her grandfather. Do you think this was a real encounter or just something that Babb made up? Have you ever had a supernatural encounter that you couldn't explain?

11

In the end, Babb did get to publish her book, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, thanks to the hard work of her friends and supporters. Yet, the book remains little known. After reading this book, how does that make you feel?

