

The Day the Falls Stood Still Reading Guide



William “Red” Hill (on right)

Q&A with Cathy Marie Buchanan

1. How did *The Day the Falls Stood Still* evolve as you wrote?

Early on I intended to write a story that more closely paralleled that of real life riverman William “Red” Hill and his family. In the first bit of the book that I wrote—it was long ago scrapped—Bess Heath was an old woman, bitter and hateful of the river. I had conjured her up from the little I knew of Red Hill’s wife, Beatrice, a woman quoted as saying that she hated the river, that she was afraid of it.

In what I envisioned as a prologue to the book, the reader heard from an aged Bess about the long hours she endured waiting for her husband to come home from his beloved river. At times it was a daring rescue that kept him away, but on more than one occasion Bess waited, same as Beatrice Hill, for her husband to return from undertaking a glory-seeking stunt. The prologue laid out other particulars of Bess’s life, all gleaned from what I knew of Beatrice’s: There were four sons, all raised to be rivermen. Two shot the lower rapids and later attempted the plunge over the falls, one plummeting to his death. The youngest was killed by a falling rock while working in a hydroelectric tunnel. The first line of that prologue read, My husband is bewitched by a hateful river, lost to me.

The final scene of that book, as I conceived it, would take place at the whirlpool. As had unfolded in 1931 when Red Hill was shooting the rapids a third time, the barrel of my

fictional riverman would become trapped in the whirlpool and eventually be hauled to shore by the oldest of his sons. The book would close with that fictional boy being paraded about the stone beach of the whirlpool on his father's shoulders, much as had come about for Red Hill's brave boy. The reader would contemplate the scene knowing from the prologue that the same boy would years later die attempting the "big drop" in nothing more than a contraption of inflated rubber tubes, canvas, and fishnet. Readers, I anticipated, would ponder the role a well-intentioned father played in determining his own son's tragic fate.

Plainly, *The Day the Falls Stood Still* deviated greatly from the initial plan. The Tom Cole I found myself setting down on the page was deeply reverent of the river. Its trivialization, whether by the daredevils or the power companies, was offensive to him. For my riverman, shooting the rapids in a barrel was not a possibility.

And for Bess that meant a dramatic shift, away from the bitter woman of my earlier tale.

2. How much of *The Day the Falls Stood Still* is grounded in history rather than the purely imagined?

Before putting pen to paper, I researched the history of Niagara Falls for four months, and throughout the writing, I was constantly turning back to the history books. With Niagara Falls's storied past, I found plenty of fodder. The difficulty lay in figuring out what to use.

The river stunts (Captain Matthew Webb's fateful swim, Maud Willard's suffocation, Walter Campbell's gondolier-like navigation of the rapids, Charles Stephens's daring plunge with an anvil tied to his feet) are based on actual events. The accidents (the careening trolley car at Queenston, the collapse of Table Rock) and the rescues (Ellet's bridge, ice bridge, and scow) are as well. Loretto Academy, Glenview, the Windsor Hotel, the Clifton House, and the power companies are described as they were during the time frame of the book. The story details surrounding the development of hydroelectricity at Niagara Falls are factual. True to history, the term "the day the falls stood still" was coined back in 1848 to describe the day the river became jammed up with ice and ceased to flow. And last, Archbishop Lynch did, in fact, see a picture of the falls as a boy and conjure up prayers floating heavenward with the mist, a notion that years later would lead to the tradition of perpetual adoration at Loretto Academy.

3. Bess struggled with her faith after losing Isabel. Can you discuss?

At one point, after the loss of Isabel, Bess says, "It is in these moments of despair I most miss the idea of God, the idea that life has meaning, the idea that we are something more than the product of the random variations and natural selection Charles Darwin put forth." Her faith has disappeared, and she is anguished. By the end of the book, she is leaning toward again

accepting the existence of the mystical and glimpses “the flickering sliver of light that says Isabel has been with us all along, that Tom is with us still.” This notion is reminiscent of Tom’s conviction that Fergus was, in some way, always with him. In my mind, it’s what Tom wants for Bess—for her to continue to feel his presence—when he says, “Believe in me, Bess,” and, knowing the odds are stacked against him, plunges into the whirlpool.

4. How did having your first novel published change your life?

When I first learned that *The Day the Falls Stood Still* would be published, there was, of course, a lot of screaming and dancing around the office and a hysterical telephone call to my husband. Then reality set in. I had twenty minutes to get to the store and buy my son’s pal a birthday gift and then get to my son’s school to pick him up. Uncharacteristically my husband had taken the car to work. So I set out in boots and a jacket, trudging through mounds of snow. As I broke into a sweat, it occurred to me that, book deal or not, nothing much had changed. All these years later I still mow the lawn, referee my children’s squabbles, and pick up the dirty socks. That said, having readers read and thoughtfully consider my work has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.

Questions for discussion

1. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s idea that Niagara Falls possessed the power to lure those who gazed at it too long into throwing themselves from the brink was once quite widely held. And as Tom says in *The Day the Falls Stood Still*, people once did reference the falls using phrases like “awful grandeur” and “frightful beauty.” In fact, the book’s epigraph from 1885 uses “awful symbol of Infinite Power, in whose dread presence we stand” to invoke Niagara Falls. Whether or not you’ve been, you likely have some idea of Niagara Falls. Has our perception of it changed over time? Will you look at Niagara Falls differently after having read *The Day the Falls Stood Still*? Does having read it make you want to visit Niagara Falls?
2. Bess finds herself angry with Tom after the ice bridge rescue, and then lashes out at him after the scow rescue. Is her anger warranted? Is it a shortcoming of hers that she cannot buy into some notion of Tom being guided on the river?

3. Bess loses her faith in God midway through the book, and Tom comes home from the war a broken man. What parallels are there, if any?
4. At one point, Bess dreams she is unable to lift the caul that is suffocating Jesse (p. 205) What stirs up such a dream? Is it prescient?
5. What does Bess learn from her mother?
6. Kit once says to Bess, “You’re getting more and more like Isabel” (p. 274). What does Kit mean? Is she right?
7. Why is it that Tom is able to predict the whims of the Niagara River? Intuition? Second sight? Keener perception than most? Fergus whispering in his ear? What would Bess say? Would her explanation change over the course of the book? What would Tom say?
8. Just before abandoning the rope tethered to Jesse and plunging into the whirlpool, Tom says, “Believe in me, Bess” (p. 289). What does he mean? Does he know how the events of the day will unfold?
9. Bess wonders if she would have blamed Tom had he not gone in after Jesse. She asks herself, “Had Tom imagined what afterward would have been like and seen what I did? Had it edged him closer to the whirlpool?” (p. 295) How valid is Bess’s guilt?
10. Was the outcome of the story predestined? Are there steps Bess and/or Tom could have taken to improve the odds of a different ending?
11. Do you think Bess will ever again see prayers rising in the mist? What leads you to believe this?
12. Do you think Isabel goes to the falls with intent? Or is she seized by a sudden impulse at the brink of the falls?

13. How might Isabel have fared had she chosen a different route? What might life have been like for her as a laundress at the Victor Home for Women in Toronto? What character traits might she have tapped into?
14. What sort of life do you imagine for Jesse? Will he feel Tom's guiding hand? Be racked with guilt? Will he be Niagara's next great riverman?
15. What do you think about Fergus's story being revealed to the reader through newspaper articles? How else could his story have been told? Would it have been as effective?
16. Given what we now know about the carbon dioxide emissions and pollution caused by coal-mining and -burning, would Tom feel differently about the diversion of water for hydroelectricity today?
17. Hydroelectricity has a reputation as clean energy. How warranted is the reputation?
18. *In The Day the Falls Stood Still*, true to history, Sir Adam Beck's Hydro-Electric Power Commission uses the Hydro Circus, the Hydro Lamp magazine, Hydro stores, advertisements, and floats in parades to up the demand for electricity. How responsible are the power companies for creating today's consumer society? How has their role changed?
19. In a letter home to Bess, Tom describes the Niagara River on occasions when unusual weather had restricted the river's flow. He goes on to say, "The Niagara wasn't all that different from any other river in the world, definitely not something that would cause a man walking by to stop, and maybe fill with wonder for a bit and be lifted up from the drudgery of his day" (p. 169). How valid is the awe that Tom describes as a reason to preserve nature?
20. Are you recommending *The Day the Falls Stood Still* to friends? Why, or why not?