

“A mesmerizing Southern tale.”  
—LISA WINGATE,  
*New York Times* bestselling author

# CALL YOUR DAUGHTER HOME

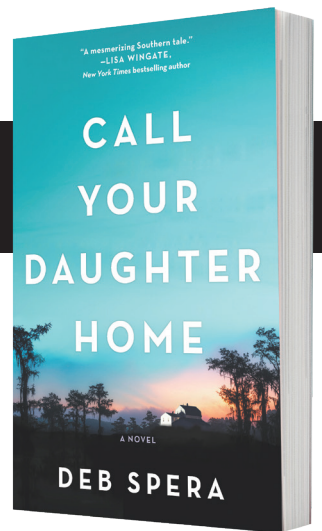
A NOVEL



DEB SPERA

# Discussion Guide

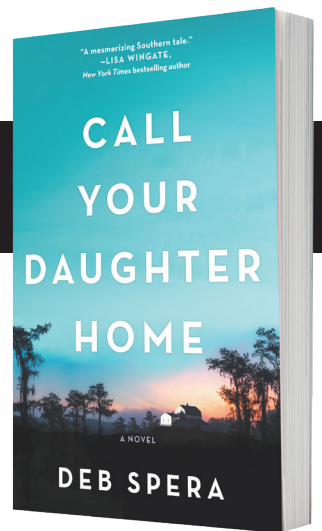
## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. *Call Your Daughter Home* is a historical novel but in what ways is it relevant to contemporary society? Are women treated differently now than they were then? If not, why? If so, how?
2. How does the patriarchal power in this story affect both the men and women who inhabit Branchville, South Carolina?
3. How is class explored within the story? What are the commonalities and differences between Annie, Retta and Gertrude?
4. What blinded Annie to Edwin's actions? Why do you think she has struggled with her ability to mother? Were you surprised by her actions in the end? Do you have empathy for her?
5. Gertrude compares herself to a wild animal. Why?
6. Retta has the gift of sight. Does Retta sense Odell's peril while he is absent from her? If so, can you detect when and how?
7. Why does Retta choose to help Gertrude?
8. Gertrude, Retta and Annie have different ideas on faith. How does that affect the quality of their lives?
9. Are Gertrude's actions throughout the book warranted? With Alvin? Lily? Edwin? How have her circumstances hardened her? How have they enlightened her?
10. How is the environment and landscape used to impact the story?
11. Invention (the telephone, the automobile, etc.) is talked about in the book as an aha moment of life. What other aha moments happen for each of the main characters?
12. Which of the three principal female characters resonates most with you and why?
13. Do you detect a generational echo in the book? From mother to child? If so, how do these echoes affect Gertrude, Annie and Retta? What did they gain from their mothers? What were their mothers' failings? Do Retta, Annie and Gertrude pass those strengths and failings on to their offspring? Have you ever considered what has been passed on to you from your mother and grandmothers?
14. What do we owe our children? And what, if anything do they owe us in return?

# Discussion Guide

## BEHIND THE BOOK



Growing up, I was haunted by stories of family hardships that resonated even more powerfully when I became a mother and raised a family of my own—that haunting found its way into the pages of this book. Though *Call Your Daughter Home* is a work of fiction, my great-grandmother’s and grandmother’s voices accompanied me as I wrote, so strongly that I felt their presence in signs and wonders. I wrote on my back deck and a certain mockingbird visited me daily, following me into the house on three separate occasions over a one-month period. The bird allowed me to capture and hold it in my hands. Some mornings it stood at the back door as if waiting to gain entry. This was one of many happenings that reminded me of how connected we are to the natural world and what lies beyond.

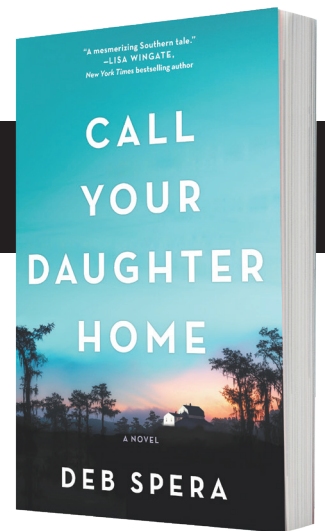
It is a rarely talked about fact that the South was plunged into a deep depression well before the crash on Wall Street in 1929. Cotton was the primary crop throughout the region before the boll weevil infestation decimated its economy from 1918 until the mid-1920s. Many people starved to death. My family, and so many others, suffered the one-two punch of the great depression that soon followed.

As a child, I traveled to Branchville, South Carolina, from Kentucky to visit my great-grandmother Mama Lane. I boiled fresh peanuts, used the outhouse, plucked a chicken and shelled pecans from the yard for winter. Mama Lane raised five children in Branchville, living on Highway 21 (aka Freedom Road), in a small rental house that had no plumbing. A red pump by the kitchen door supplied the family with water for daily needs. My great-grandfather died when the children were young, due to an accident at the sawmill where he worked. After his death, Mama Lane farmed the children out to relatives so they would be fed until she found a job that enabled her to reunite the family.

I spent every weekend and most of my summers with her daughter, my mamaw, who worked all of her childhood picking cotton and scouring porches for a nickel. Those were, as she said, *desperate times*, and she lost her teeth in her teenage years due to malnutrition. She became mother to six, grandmother to eight, and was always afraid of us children getting worms. She believed they were caused by unsanitary conditions, which may explain why she scrubbed us so hard at bath time. A remarkable low-country cook, Mamaw never used measurements, and canned and froze everything she could from her garden. Her peach cobbler recipe was relayed to me as stated in this book.

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Gertrude, Retta and Annie are complete inventions of my imagination, each an amalgamation of many women I found, or know, that have endured hardship because of their circumstance or skin color. While researching this book, I stumbled upon Clelia McGowan, who plays a small cameo in these pages. Clelia is buried in the history books of Charleston, but her existence is a shining example of what opportunity, education and courage can do. Clelia was a single mother to three children after her husband died of pneumonia. She was president of Charleston’s Equal Suffrage League, and once the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in August of 1920, the Governor of South Carolina appointed McGowan to the State Board of Education, making her the first woman to be appointed to public office. In 1923, she, and her colleague Belizant A. Moorner, became the first women elected to the office of Alderman in the city of Charleston.

I wrestled with whether or not to use the N-word in this novel. It is a word I deeply despise, but to avoid it felt dishonest to the place and time. Historically, the N-word has been used as a tool to systematically degrade and dehumanize an entire race of people. To ignore its existence is to ignore the plight of what the African American community has endured at the hands of the white majority. I’ve used the word sparingly in these pages to demonstrate the low moral arc of a society unwilling to take responsibility for the pain and suffering caused to an entire population of people.

Many settings in this book exist today. Shake Rag is a small black neighborhood in Branchville. Though you won’t find it on any map, ask anyone in town where it is and they will point the way. Branchville, or the Branch as it was originally called, was home to three Native American camps, and named for a branch in a trail under an old oak tree where traders came to exchange goods. That trail was so well situated that the Branchville Railroad, built in 1828, runs along those same paths.

Camp is based on Indian Fields Campground in St. George, which has been in existence at this location since 1838. This Methodist revival camp consists of an open-air tabernacle, which seats one thousand people, and ninety-nine cabins (called tents). These tents are passed down from generation to generation, and surround the tabernacle in a circular shape—as a symbol of shared religious experience. Camp still takes place the first week of every October, which historically marks the end of harvest season. Though electricity has been added in recent years, Camp is still quite primitive. Bathroom facilities

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are numbered, designated outhouses, one per tent. An unspoken competition over which tent has the best cook still exists. Pudding, made of ground hog lungs, is a real thing. I've tried it. Not bad.

The more I researched this story, the more in awe I became of the enduring spirit of Mama Lane and Mamaw, who as young women with few resources, stood their ground, and survived, during a great crisis. I am humbled and inspired by the ferocity of their motherhood. Mama Lane and Mamaw are gone now, but I continue to return to Branchville and Charleston. Mama Lane died in 1992 at the age of 92, just one week before my daughter was born. Mamaw died in 1995, eleven months after her son, my uncle Boogie, passed. Before she died she promised she would give me a sign once she got to where she was going, as proof she was all right—*likely*, she said, *through a bird*. Just before she crossed, she heard a choir singing her name. I, too, hear an unnamed voice when I travel to South Carolina. Without fail, as the plane descends over those vast estuaries, the voices come soft, but clear, whispering one word, over and over: *home*.

