

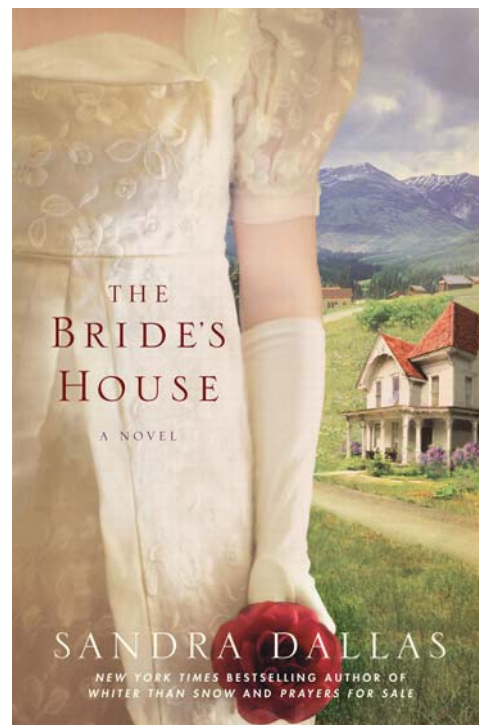


# *The Bride's House*

by *Sandra Dallas*

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-60016-7

ISBN-10: 0-312-60016-X



## About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Bride's House* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Bride's House*.

## About the Book

It's 1880, and for Nealie Bent, seventeen, the splendid Victorian house under construction in Georgetown, Colorado, is like a fairy tale come to life. She dreams of living in "the Bride's House," as she calls it, with Will Spaulding, the young entrepreneur sent from the East by his grandfather to learn about the mining business. Will is not the only one who courts Nealie. Charlie Dumas, a miner who lacks Will's polish, wants to marry the hired girl, too, and although Nealie rebuffs him, Charlie refuses to give up. Ultimately, Nealie must deal with lies, secrets, and heartache before choosing the man who will give her the Bride's House.

For the motherless Pearl, growing up in the Bride's House is akin to being raised in a mausoleum. Her father, robbed of the life he envisioned with Nealie, has fashioned the house into a shrine to the woman he loved. He keeps his daughter close. When the enterprising young Frank Curry comes along and asks for Pearl's hand in marriage, Pearl's father sabotages the union. But Pearl has inherited her mother's tenacity of heart, and her father underestimates the lengths to which the women in the Bride's House will go for love.

Susan is the latest in the line of strong and willful women in the Bride's House. She's proud of the women who came before her. Their legacy and the Bride's House's secrets force Susan to question what she wants and who she loves.

## Praise for *Sandra Dallas*

"It is a story of tragedy and redemption and, arguably, Dallas' best work to date."

—*The Denver Post* on *Whiter Than Snow*

"This satisfying novel will immediately draw readers into Hennie and Nit's lives, and the unexpected twists will keep them hooked through to the bittersweet denouement."

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Prayers for Sale*

"*Whiter Than Snow* adds to Dallas' luster as a superb storyteller whose work is grounded in the redemptive power of kindness."

—*Richmond Times Dispatch* on *Whiter Than Snow*

"Dallas's terrific characters, unerring ear for regional dialects and ability to evoke the sights and sounds of the 1940s make this a special treat." --*Publishers Weekly* on *Tallgrass*

"Forgiveness and redemption are the themes of this gentle novel about hardscrabble lives."

—*Kirkus* on *Prayers for Sale*

## About the Author

SANDRA DALLAS is the author of nine novels, including *Whiter Than Snow*, *Prayers for Sale*, *Tallgrass* and *New Mercies*. She is a former Denver bureau chief for *Business Week* magazine and lives in Denver, Colorado.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the immediate appeal of Will? Of Charlie? Would you have chosen Will or Charlie as Nealie's husband?
2. Do you believe Mrs. Travers knew Nealie was pregnant? What were the options and limitations an unmarried pregnant woman in 1880.
3. What was the real reason Charlie married Nealie—love or money? What evidence do you have for your opinion?
4. Why did Charlie want to control Pearl? Why does any parent want to control their child?
5. Do you believe Frank's motivations for pursuing Pearl were mercenary or genuinely emotional? Did they change from his initial relationship with her?
6. Why did Pearl remain in the Bride's House after she discovered her father's role in Frank's breaking the engagement?
7. Describe what you think Pearl's reaction would have been in finding and reading the documents in the strong box. Would she have forgiven her father for keeping secrets?
8. Describes Pearl's strengths and weaknesses as a mother.
9. If Peter had lived, would Susan have married him? Would it have been a happy marriage? If she chose not to marry him, would she have regretted that choice?
10. What do you think Susan's daughter—her baby has to be a daughter, of course—would be like?
11. What ways are the three women—Nalie, Pearl, and Susan—alike? In what ways different? With whom did you most identify? With whom did you feel the most sympathy?
12. Should the secrets have been kept? How would the women's lives have been different if they had known about the documents in the strong box?

# A Conversation with Sandra Dallas

## **Did you always want to be a writer?**

No, of course not. I wanted to be a movie star. Then I tried out for the high school play and had to find Plan B. I figured writing would be the next best way to become rich and famous with a minimum amount of work.

I did not intend to write novels, however. I was a journalist for thirty-five years, working for *Business Week Magazine*. In fact, I was the magazine's first female bureau chief. At the same time, I wrote nonfiction books on the West.

I got into fiction when two friends and I decided to write a bodice-buster. We didn't get far with it, but working on it, I discovered I loved writing fiction.

Fiction turned out to be more satisfying than acting ever would have been, and I don't have to have face lifts.

## **Was it hard making the transition from nonfiction to fiction?**

It was easier than I'd thought. I'd figured the two types of writing had about as much in common as textbooks and poetry. But I discovered there were many similarities. With journalism, you're looking for story line; that's plot. Reporters want quotes; quotes are dialogue. And in journalism, you learn discipline. You sit down every day and write whether you feel like it or not. If as a reporter, you complain of writer's block, you find another job.

## **So what are the differences?**

In nonfiction, the information is what matters. Good writing is icing on the cake. With fiction, it's all about the writing.

**Which do you like better?**

Definitely fiction. I like the creativity. And if you can't find a fact you need—the name of a hotel in Hannibal, Missouri, during the Civil War, for instance—you just make it up.

**Which of your books is your favorite?**

That's like asking which is my favorite daughter. In fact, I love all the novels, or rather I should say I love the characters. They are real people to me, which is why I often give characters from previous books walk-on roles in subsequent ones.

**Each of your books is different. Why is that?**

I hadn't really thought about that until a book store owner introduced me at a signing by saying he'd heard each of my books was different, although he'd never read any of them. (I was gratified when the audience booed.) I guess I don't want to write the same book over and over again. That's why I don't do a series. That would bore me. I like trying something new with each book. *The Bride's House* is different because it's a novel of three generations. I've never done that before.

**Is that why you've never written a sequel to, say, *The Persian Pickle Club*?**

No, I've never come up with an idea for a sequel. Ideas are the hardest part of writing fiction for me. I guess that's because as a journalist, the story line was always there. I never had to think up a plot.

**Does that mean no sequel to *The Bride's House*?**

Not necessarily. I never know what I'm going to write next until the idea hits me. Maybe I'll wait until Susan's daughter grows up and write about her.

## Essay

My husband, Bob, and I first toured the real Bride's House in Georgetown, Colorado, in 2007. I'd loved the house for years. It is a tall, stately Victorian with a tower, built by lumberman Charles Bullock in 1881. I'd told Bob that if it ever went onto the market, we ought to buy it. Of course, we knew that the house had deteriorated over the years. After all, the exterior was a shabby relic of its former glory, the paint sanded off by the wind and snow. Abandoned cars were parked in the yard, which were mostly weeds. But it wasn't until we went inside that we understood the massive amount of restoration work the house required. Remodeling over the years had stripped the house of its Victorian charm. Half of another house had been shoved against the side to serve as a bedroom; it was resting on an I-beam. Rain came through the roof, and raccoons lived in the tower. The structure couldn't just be fixed up; it would have to be taken down to the studs and rebuilt.

Disappointed, we left the house only to run into our friend Gary Long, a preservation architect. We told him we'd just gone through the place and found it overwhelming. We wouldn't touch it, we said. Too much work, too much money.

"Let's think about that for a minute," was his fateful reply.

So a few days later, we toured the house again, this time with Gary and his wife, Kathy Hoeft, also an architect. The two of them took in the sorry shape of the place and the amount of work needed, but when they saw the sleek stairway, the only remaining Victorian element in the house, they smiled. Gary raised his arms and declared, "It's a Bride's House!" At that, Bob decided we ought to buy the place. I decided "the bride's house" was the perfect title for a book. We were hooked.

As soon as we closed on what we're calling the Bullock House, I left Bob with the chore of removing two giant pine trees that threatened to take down half the block if they were ever blown over in Georgetown's fierce wind, and took off for Turkey with our daughter Dana. I was sitting on a balcony in Istanbul overlooking a grove of fig trees at the ocean when I got the idea for Nealie's section of *The Bride's House*. I knew I wanted to write about three generations of women who lived in the house. In fact, I had always hoped to write a generational novel, and the house gave me the perfect setting for it. In addition, I wanted both the house and the town to be characters in the book, and I wanted to write about the heyday of a mountain mining town. The idea for Nealie's story allowed me to incorporate all those elements.

Just a year later, Dana and I were on a bus in Fiesole, high above Florence when the idea for Pearl's section came to me. Her story would let me to write about a mining town after the boom was over, about the people who stay on.

Dana and I stayed home the following year, which was a shame, because I had more trouble coming up with a third section than with anything else I've ever written. I couldn't even decide on a name for Pearl's daughter. I wrote half-a-dozen versions of the last part of the book, changing the story as well as the character's name each time. I was so frustrated that I put aside the book and wrote *Whiter Than Snow*. After that was finished, I went back to *The Bride's House*, but I still had problems. It took another nine months after I returned to the book to complete a third story that worked.

Meanwhile, the Bullock House had its own problems. Our goal was to complete the remodeling in a little over a year. Because of the harsh mountain winters, we wouldn't be able to start work until the spring after we bought it, but we figured we could be in by Christmas of the

next year. Anybody who knows remodeling will laugh at that. We discovered a myriad of unexpected problems. For instance, the contractor called one day to ask if we knew that the house had never had a sewer hookup.

But eventually the Bullock House, like the book, was completed. Both projects wound up taking three years. We love our bride's house, and think it was worth it. I hope you love *The Bride's House* and think it was worth it, too.

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