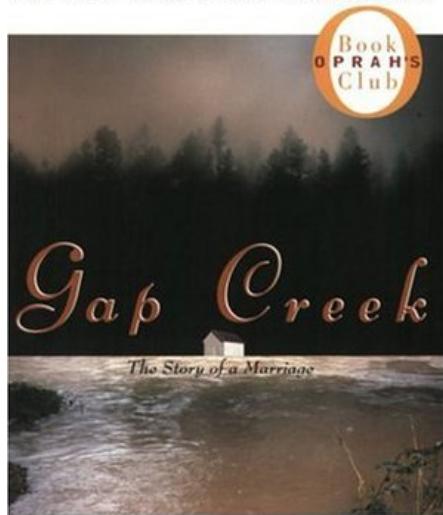


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



"At their finest, his stripped-down and almost primitive sentences burn with the raw, lonesome pathos of Hank Williams's best songs."  
—The New York Times Book Review

ROBERT MORGAN

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## Gap Creek

*Robert Morgan*

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# Gap Creek

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## Gap Creek Robert Morgan

Young Julie Harmon works "hard as a man," they say, so hard that at times she's not sure she can stop. People depend on her to slaughter the hogs and nurse the dying. People are weak, and there is so much to do. At just seventeen she marries and moves down into the valley of Gap Creek, where perhaps life will be better.

But Julie and Hank's new life in the valley, in the last years of the nineteenth century, is more complicated than the couple ever imagined. Sometimes it's hard to tell what to fear most—the fires and floods or the flesh-and-blood grifters, drunks, and busybodies who insinuate themselves into their new life. To survive, they must find out whether love can keep chaos and madness at bay. Their struggles with nature, with work, with the changing century, and with the disappointments and triumphs of their union make Gap Creek a timeless story of a marriage.

A native of the North Carolina mountains, Robert Morgan was raised on land settled by his Welsh ancestors. An accomplished novelist and poet, he has won the James B. Hanes Poetry Prize, the North Carolina Award in Literature, and the Jacaranda Review Fiction Prize. His short stories have appeared in Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards and New Stories from the South, and his novel *The Truest Pleasure* was a finalist for the Southern Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.

## Gap Creek Details

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Author : Robert Morgan

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## From Reader Review Gap Creek for online ebook

### Suzanna says

I loved this book. I selected it to read because my public library's website said that if you liked "These is My Words", you would like this one. However, between requesting it from there and starting it, I read some Goodreads reviews and thought, ugh, I picked a bummer. Not so! In that light, I want to address some of the negatives I read on this site from other readers.

This book is, indeed, written by a man. And it is told from a young woman's perspective. But I found the author to be extremely insightful, and I'm sure if he had used a woman's penname I would never have guessed his gender. Not only does he grasp what it is to be a woman, he has the naïveté of what it is to be a newlywed, young woman, down pat. He also understands how women perceive men, and how the actions of a husband affect a wife. And he showed insight into how one grows in the beginning of marriage. So, as far as I am concerned, the author's gender is not a problem.

Another issue I noticed in several reviews is that some readers feel this book is depressing. Now this is going to sound harsh, but it's how I feel. Either they are reading from an unsophisticated, naive or very young perspective, or they read the Cliffs Notes version and didn't get everything out of it they should have. Yes, the main character in this novel faces some terrible times. That's life, and it was certainly how life was during the 19th century for the average working person in the mountains of America. People on farms then, and similarly now, dealt with death on sometimes a daily basis, at least in some form. And at that time, illness was terrible and people died from things that don't kill normally healthy people now. What apparently was lost on these readers is the strength and perseverance of the main character, Julie. Julie is a powerhouse of courage and hope. She gets handed lemons in life, and she makes lemonade every time, even when she doesn't feel like it. She delights in the small joys of life - such as the blueness of the summer sky and frost on morning grass, and birds in the trees. When she reaches that point that a trial is over, she feels cleansed or strengthened. And no matter what happens or how bad things get, she never gives up, and always clings to hope - whether for herself or for someone she loves. And the book ends with that very sentiment - hope.

The last of the concerns expressed by other readers I want to address was the graphic details of some of the events, such as a hog killing and butchering. I did not feel it was indulgent. It was graphic, but why wouldn't it be? I'm not sure hog butchering is something you can effectively sugarcoat. And I doubt that the average reader would grasp what a chore it is for a woman to help with hog killing and butchering without some details. Like other events in the book, it's explained in a manner that makes the reader understand it, and in a way that I think a woman who had to go through it might actually explain it.

I'll wrap up by saying one of the things I loved about this book is that it is not terribly romantic, at least in the traditional sense. I don't like books (or movies for that matter) that are fluff. Real life is about people hanging onto each other and relationships through what is described in wedding vows - for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. Julie falls in love with her husband just like so many women do. He is physically attractive to her, he appears to be strong in character, and he appears to be ready to do anything in the world to make her happy. But when he disappoints her, and when life is rough, and that "sickness" and "worse" come into play, they learn how to hang onto each other, and how to make a life together - in spite of differences and difficulties. If you need fluff to make you happy, this book is not for you.

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## **Christine says**

This book was not so bad but it wasn't as intriguing to me as the other books I read. I don't like to read about any sort of books containing rural background.

I really enjoyed how Julie, the main character just gets things done whether she wants to or not. I, on the other hand, cannot be like her because at home when I'm assigned to do chores, I do them when I'm done with my homework or if I really don't like doing it, I don't get it done at all.

Julie is a hard working woman who, had seen her father and little brother die before her eyes. They say "she works hard like a man". In the story she had to chop up the pig into pieces and have them as dinner. In my mind, I was completely disgusted when it came to that part. If I were Julie, I don't think I can last 1 minute of chopping up that pig.

So, overall, I think this book was okay, not good but not bad. I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys learning about family building and... pig chopping.. :)

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## **AJ says**

Robert Morgan's "Gap Creek" is written in a simple manner, easy to read, but raw. If you think your life is rough, read this book. The primary root of trouble in this story is the land of Gap Creek itself. In fact, the earth itself is so extraordinarily pervasive and alive, that Morgan almost allows it to become its own rich, cumbersome but generous character. In this story, the land of Gap Creek rears itself up and fights against the main characters Julie, Hank and the other mountain people on the boarder of South Carolina at the turn of the century. Death, floods, winter storms, poverty, childbirth, accidents... they were as common place as the amount of work on the homestead that Julie went through from sun up to sun down. Morgan also depicted Julie as the earth itself; she struggled against it, but it made her who she was. Although it wore out both Julie and Hank, the land itself forged their character for better or for worse. There were no pretenses in this book; the sheer arduous difficulty of life brought out quickly each character's true inner person, testing them and causing them to change in ways they probably would not have, had they been born in another century or town.

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## **Kathryn Yaste says**

I hated this book for so many reasons! Here are the top five.

1. I don't buy Robert Morgan writing as a female. It just doesn't wash.
2. The sex scenes are beyond unbelievable - they read like some weird hill-billy acid trip synesthesia. It's very distracting.
3. I don't buy that such a strong female character would tolerate such an abusive, whiny husband. My tough ol' granny would have shot him and thrown his ass in the creek.
4. On a related note, I hated Hank and was waiting for him to die. I was disappointed when he didn't.
5. The book is written in the first person, and the character's grammar wasn't consistent. It slipped between normal and dialect for no apparent reason and pulled me right out of the story.

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### **Suzanne Moore says**

Set in South Carolina during the late 1800s, Gap Creek is where newlyweds Julie and Hank set out to make a life. Married at a young age, they find whatever happens ... strength comes in their love for each other. Julie narrates this story, telling of sorrows and joy. Her faith in God helps her live through sadness and trials. I think it is her endurance that gives Hank hope in surviving the worst of times, from a terrible fire, a dangerous flash flood, and the loss of their firstborn. A simple, hard life says it all. I learned a lot about survival, hog dressing, burial customs, seeds, and other affairs of plain living. Reading Morgan's novel seemed like a real Foxfire experience.

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### **Heather says**

Gap Creek takes you back in time to Julie Harmon's life at the turn of the century. She grew up helping her father and mother run their house and farm. Julie watches her brother and then her father die, and is the one the family depends on to care for these two as they are ill. Events take a quick turn after these deaths when Julie meets Hank Richards, and marries at the young age of 17. Robert Morgan takes you through the day to day struggles of life and ends the tale emotionally with yet another death to Julie and her family.

This book was wonderful, but yet I am surprised to see that Oprah chose it as a Book Club pick. It is written more at a Young Adult level and because of the time period the author chose to use language that may have been more domineering to that time of life. For example using was instead of were or vice versa.

Overall this was a very touching, great book.

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### **Kristy says**

Uhhhhh.... What exactly was the point of what I just read??!! Oh, there wasn't one??!! Ok. Just checking. Was this bad? No. Boring at times, yes.

I mean this is a Oprah 's book club read....the praise for it is borderline overwhelming. But, I just can't gush. I can't tell you it was horrid. I'm not going to remember this book. The only memorable moment was the baby death scene. Even that wasn't written extraordinarily well.

The characters were hard to get to know. None were super likeable  
likeable. And, what was up with the baby sister jealousy? Those moments really bothered me.

Meh. 2.5 stars. Not for me.

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## #artdamnit Reads says

Spoilers ahead

Gap Creek by Robert Morgan was also a free friday book and it was an Oprah Book of the Month book as well. Oprah, you did not pick a winner here. The story is about the first year of marriage between a young couple in 1900 South Carolina. It started out strong, with Julie being an unusually hard working and dedicated woman, and that doesn't change. But at some point she totally stops standing up for herself. At one point of the story she gets conned and when her husband finds out he slaps her in the face and calls her a "stupid heifer" and what does she do? NOTHING!! If i was her i would slapped him right back and walked out the door. And the whole rest of the book her husband is temperamental and just about useless. Until the end when he kind of redeems himself (not really) when he takes care of Julie and their sick baby after Julie birthed the baby at home, by herself. And in the end they lose everything they worked for and wind up leaving their home. WTF.

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## [Shai] The Bibliophage says

I rated this 5 stars because of the way it was written and the twists in this couple's story. But if I have to rate the characters in this novel, I would definitely rate Julie 4.5 stars and her husband Hank only 1 star. This couple is two different souls who just hurriedly tied the knot without even having the slightest idea about each other. Hank was just strong in physique but not on the inside because of how he easily snap and breakdown during problems.

I know that other reviews on this book were not that good but for me, I enjoyed reading it. It showed us that marriage is not pure bliss and that couples must be headstrong and should help each other in times of struggles. And before I could forget, I was really amazed that a man written this because of how he portrayed women/wives stronger than them, guys.

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## Camden says

This book alone managed convince me to ignore Oprah's Book Club. The situation was interesting enough but I decided that Robert Morgan should not try to write from a woman's perspective. In my opinion he got it all wrong. Not worth recommending and i can't figure out why so many people loved it.

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## Suzie says

This book had few redeeming characteristics. I don't recommend it for anybody. The only reason that I gave it a rating of 2 is because it was well written and because I felt compelled to keep reading to see what would happen to the heroine, hoping that something good would come her way. I read the book in one sitting, 3.5 hours.

Robert Morgan tried to write this period novel from a woman's point of view, I assume, since the main character is a woman who is telling her own story. The result of his effort is that it seemed to me that he was

telling his version of how a woman should feel about and react to a whole bunch of bad things that happened to her and her family.

The book was a total downer, wrought with nothing but sadness, extreme hard work resulting in bad outcomes, and death. She married in her mid-teens to an 18-year-old self-centered, thoughtless, and inconsiderate boy who didn't want to be told anything by anybody else, and he would decide when and if he would do something/anything. And according to the author, all this was acceptable, though, because she could make herself and her husband feel better by having good sex. The book was not explicit, or titillating, at all but the author was still able to impart this information he deemed important.

Seriously, this book made me feel depressed for a couple of days, so don't read it unless you need a reality check about life at the turn of the 20th century.

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### **Beth says**

I went to Oprah's book club to find some new reads and happened on Morgan. I was attracted to this because it takes place in the Appalachians.

His writing is very poetical and descriptive, with an almost musical lilt to some of his writing. Add to that the country way of speaking that lends a charm of its own.

*"The ground was deep in fresh-fell leaves, and leaves sparkled like they was waxed and oiled. I kicked up a cloud of leaves. I kicked up a fog of new-fell leaves. I kicked away the leaves in front of me like deep fresh snow. Leaves swarmed around my head, clicking as they touched. I waved my arms and swatted them away. I danced with the leaves and made them swirl faster. I laughed out loud and laughed at the top of my voice. I caught leaves in my apron and pitched them away."*

Julie is such a strong character, and she helped me feel how hard it was to live and survive back not too long ago. There was lots of work that had to be done, like it or not. And Julie just kept doing the next thing, even when it seemed impossible.

There's a strength in all of us that we'll never realize til we're pushed to our limit and made to pull out every bit of grit and gumption. It's very empowering to get to that point and then through it. It builds you up for the next hard thing you'll have to face.

This book takes you on the journey with Julie.

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### **Jenn says**

I thought this one started strong but ended weak. The subtitle is "The Story of a Marriage," but I don't find that accurate, since the story doesn't follow the marriage through--we only get a glimpse at the very

beginnings of a marriage. I expected, based on the title, to get the whole story, and I feel a bit jipped. Also, the further along I got, the more I skimmed because I started getting bored. Overall, though, I enjoyed the story, and I think MOrgan accurately portrays the Appalachian lifestyle at the turn of the century, and I am always interested in stories that capture what life was like there then. I also appreciate the depiction of a strong female character.

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### **Linda says**

I've been an Oprah Book Club fan since the beginning, may be in the minority. I thought this book was great, simple but raw. I love books set in the Appalachian's. My first book by Robert Morgan, I like his style of writing. Look forward to more fm this author!

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### **Jordan says**

I picked this book up from the second-hand bookstore near where I work on a particularly rainy and grey Sunday. Since I haven't been reading like I used to, I wanted something easy to get me back in the groove, and this book, and the snippet of review from the NYT on the cover, caught my eye.

It's interesting enough, and the first 50 pages or so drew me in like crazy (hint: gruesome death), but as I neared the end, I realized that there wasn't really ever going to be any story or any real resolution to this novel. It's well-written enough, though the honky-tonk drawl of the first-person narrator can be a bit distracting. The main beef I had with this book was the (male) author's penchant for writing long descriptive passages of exclusively female experiences (like childbirth, and sex - which really read like an account of what men THINK sex is like for women but bears no resemblance to my experience of it, anyway). I don't want to be a gender elitist here, but it wasn't convincing, and it seemed a bit patronising.

All in all, this was a fine summer read, but it didn't make me think anything new, though it did prime the pump for something with a little more bite.

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### **Alisa says**

It's amusing that this novel is recommended by the Oprah Book Club juggernaut alongside Faulkner, because Morgan is *trying* for the Faulkner unreliable narrator, first-person regional dialect. I don't think he's entirely successful, though.

The dust jacket let us know he's from North Carolina mountain stock, and the setting feels pretty authentic. I think it's late 1800s or around the turn of the century, but it's not entirely clear. I do wish that had been more obvious, but then the narrator, Julie Richards, is clearly uneducated and fairly unobservant. She's more of a reporter of events, which are mostly tragedies. I couldn't help but compare it to *My Antonia*, which is a similar tale of hardship (this time on the prairie) but with significantly more literary aplomb. It's clear that Morgan did extensive research, and he certainly seems to have his facts and details right, but all that comes at the expense of the narrative; it feels self-conscious and I found myself easily distracted. The words he puts

in Julie's mouth overcompensate for his being a man writing in a female voice, and she is forced to give clunky exposition.

I could never wrap my mind around the characterization of either Julie or her husband Hank; the tertiary characters, on the other hand, are given distinct personalities, though we are told more than we see. Hank in particular is an enigma, and I don't think it does the story any favors to have him be so mysterious and hostile. The conclusion wasn't particularly satisfying, though I was relieved that the sadness was over, at least.

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### **Lynne Spreen says**

"The hardest work I did on Gap Creek was trying to get the voice right," says Robert Morgan, who has been called the poet laureate of Appalachia. The voice, as it happens, is of seventeen-year-old Julie Harmon. At seventeen, she's a good girl, and strong, working as hard as a man alongside her father in this gritty, realistic portrayal of life in late-nineteenth-century North Carolina.

Morgan starts us off with the depiction of a horrifying illness in the very first chapter. When her younger brother dies, followed a bit later by her father, Julie becomes the head of the family, caring for her mother and sisters until a handsome boy passes through the holler. After a few weeks, she and the boy, Hank, marry and move the distance of a day's walk to Gap Creek. Since homes are few and far between, they rent a room with a stinky, lewd and mean old widower in exchange for Julie's serving as the maid and housekeeper. While Hank works at a distant mill, Julie cleans, cooks, tends the fields and the farm animals, splits and hauls wood and even butchers a hog, the rendering of whose fat causes disaster. Written in a voice similar to *Cold Mountain*, *Gap Creek* tells the story of a can-do kind of young woman who works so hard it hurts your back to read about it.

Morgan portrays the delicate evolution of a marriage, and of a girl trying to define her identity in relation to the union, a timeless theme for sure, but one made more nuanced by the circumstances in which Julie lives. On one level this is a love story, comparable to that of any impoverished but earnest young couple determined to carve out an existence in their world.

It's just that their world is so Darwinian. Julie's strength and skills are essential in a time and place where the only food you eat is what you can raise or kill yourself; the only shelter you live in is what you build or maintain alone. Medical care is a matter of family knowledge handed down for better or worse from generation to generation. Superstition carries unquestioned curative or destructive power. She and Hank live at the meanest edge of subsistence, with no electricity or running water, and just one injury, illness, or crop failure between death and survival.

Morgan uses simple descriptions to transport us into Julie's everyday world:

"I stepped out to the back porch and looked in the yard. Like in any backyard, there was a woodshed and a smokehouse, a clothesline, a path to the toilet on the right, and a path to the spring on the left. And further out there was a barn and hogpen. The washpot was on the trail to the spring. And there was a table and a wooden tub on the trail next to the pot. I looked around the porch and found a washboard and a bucket. And by the water bucket was a cake of Octagon soap.

"I grabbed that bucket and carried several gallons of water from the spring and poured them in the pot. And then I got some kindling and wood from the shed and started a fire under the pot...it took me four trips just

to carry Mr. Pendergast's clothes out to the wash table."

Earnest, loyal and naïve – but not stupid – Julie isn't daunted by the need to work like a mule. In a metaphor for her resilience, she finds solace in hard work. Hank is weak, a whiner, impulsive, with a bad temper. The two of them weather fire, flood, extortion, swindling, poverty and hunger. She is so much stronger than him, but by the end of the story he changes.

The challenges are endless, the struggle Sisyphean. She works and works, yet the problems never slow down, and her effort seemingly pointless in clawing some security from the soil. What, I wonder, was Morgan trying to tell us? He said the book is based on his grandmother, that he wanted to explore what life was like for women who worked so hard for everybody else. Examples of hard work? How about washing and dressing a dead man? Butchering a hog? In that sense the story is a portrait of self-sufficiency, and the kind of strength you don't see so much anymore.

There is a primitive rawness to the world in which Julie lives, leaving little indication of divine intervention. In two major scenes she seems deflated by the world's indifference, given over to an existentialist's sad musings:

"I sat there on the cold ground feeling that human life didn't mean a thing in this world. People could be born and they could die, and it didn't mean a thing...little Masenier was dead. There was nothing we could do about it, and nothing cared except Papa and me. The world was exactly like it had been and would always be, going on about its business."

When Julie "finds religion" it's more a matter, I think, of finding community with other earnest human beings, and garnering strength from their friendship. She is helped and is grateful, and in this Morgan makes a profound yet subtle affirmation of the essential bond between human beings.

In the end, this book is about innate strength, and the courage to make a life, to enjoy carnal and spiritual love, and to battle hard luck and crushing circumstance. I found it inspiring.

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### **Shelley says**

I picked this up and it immediately caught my attention. I read a little bit at night before bed over a couple of nights and then took it to work today where I sat and finished it in a couple of hours. I know a lot of people did not like the way it was written but I had no problem overlooking the "ignorant" speech of the characters. They were what they were. The other complaint that some of my friends had was that the title would seem to indicate it covered the whole marriage or at least a good part of it. Instead, it was just a glimpse into the early part (like about the first year or so) of a marriage. It was about the beginning and the laying of the foundation of a marriage I would say. The story was touching and sad and made me infinitely grateful to live in a time where life is easier. The way uneducated and poor people lived was hard and life was an uncertain for the young and old alike. This book gave me a tiny peek into the life of a girl who had to grow up too fast and take on responsibilities in order for her family to survive. Marriage provided no relief and she had to work even harder in order to make a life with her husband. She had this deep well of inner strength that only grew stronger as each trial came her way. I found myself wanting the Julie and Hank to make it, but at the same time, I wanted to smack Hank and make him man up. They were both so young and so ignorant about things. All that being said, this was a great book and was well worth the time.

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### **?Lilbookworm? says**

Forgot to update as I was reading this. A very compelling book, loved the determination through out. Is there a follow up to this book? My first book by this author, would love to read more by him.

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### **Tricia says**

I picked up a nice copy of this book from my library book sale for 10 cents awhile back. I decided to read it this week as my final book for the Southern Literature Challenge because it won the Southern Book Critic Circle Award.

However, it is also an Oprah book. Next time I pick up an Oprah book, somebody please just slap me. This book is more depressing than a sunless day in January. How depressing? Read on...

\*\*\*Spoilers\*\*\*

Set in 1899, the book opens with 17-year old protagonist Julie Harmon describing the gruesome death of her younger brother. That's followed with the death of her father. Then she marries Hank, whom she has known for all of a few days. They move down from the mountains of North Carolina to the Appalachian valley over the border in South Carolina. Julie takes care of a nasty old widower in exchange for free rent while Hank works in town making bricks.

We get a lot of detail into their tough and rugged lives, including an in-depth look into the slaughtering of a hog. Julie burns down the kitchen, the widower dies, they are swindled out of every dime they own, Hank smacks Julie around and loses his job, they loose what little they have left in a flood, Julie gives birth to a premature baby that subsequently dies, and then they get tossed out of the house.

And that's the end.

I'm only giving it two stars instead of one because I liked this passage:

The good Lord made the world so we could earn our joy, Ma said. But it's no guarantee we'll ever be happy.

I agree with the concept that we have to work hard to earn joy and happiness in life. And sometimes I think happiness is a decision. However, I know that life can be difficult and even brutal. I just would have appreciated a little more sunshine in this book.

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