

WE ARE
THE ASHES,

WE ARE

A crime unpunished.

A story reclaimed.

THE FIRE

JOY McCULLOUGH

Award-winning author of *Blood Water Paint*



READING GUIDE

From the author of the acclaimed *Blood Water Paint*, a new contemporary YA novel in prose and verse about a girl struggling with guilt and a desire for revenge after her sister's rapist escapes with no prison time.

ABOUT

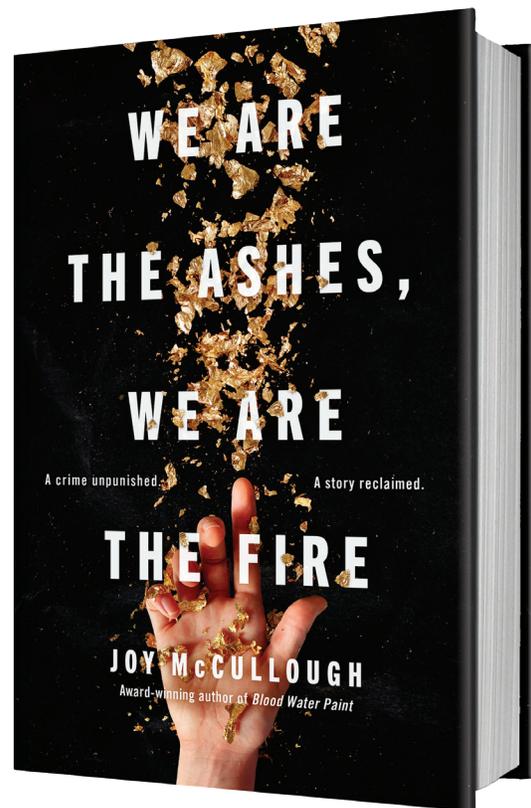
WE ARE THE ASHES, WE ARE THE FIRE

Em Morales's older sister was raped by another student after a frat party. A jury eventually found the rapist guilty on all counts—a remarkable verdict that Em felt more than a little responsible for, since she was her sister's strongest advocate on social media during the trial. Her passion and outspokenness helped dissuade the DA from settling for a plea deal. Em's family would have real justice.

But the victory is short-lived. In a matter of minutes, justice vanishes as the judge turns the Morales family's world upside down again by sentencing the rapist to no prison time. While her family is stunned, Em is literally sick with rage and guilt. To make matters worse, a news clip of her saying that the sentence makes her want to learn "how to use a sword" goes viral.

From this low point, Em must find a new reason to go on and help her family heal, and she finds it in the unlikely form of the story of a fifteenth-century French noblewoman, Marguerite de Bressieux, who is legendary as an avenging knight for rape victims.

We Are the Ashes, We Are the Fire is a searing and nuanced portrait of a young woman torn between a persistent desire for revenge and a burning need for hope.



CHANGE

📖 **“Wouldn’t that be something?” Nor says. “If by telling a story you could change history.”** 📖 – p. 347

1. There is a tone and structure shift between the first poem and the following ones. Aside from the switch to telling Marguerite de Bressieux’s story, what do you think is the cause of this shift? What does it symbolize?
2. Consult pages 64-66 and 288-291. In both of these passages, McCullough shows a young writer consciously editing herself.
 - How does this act of change comment on the quote at the top of the page and the themes of change throughout the book?
 - Both instances of editing show an investigation of internalized racism and sexism. Discuss these themes and the ways in which the author is consciously tackling them.
3. On pg. 4 Em references the lead up to the 2016 election and insinuates that the only way to make change is through political power. As the novel continues, Em and the people around her find other ways of reclaiming power. What are those ways and how does that speak to society post-2016?
4. There are many references to control, both having it and needing to think you have it. What are the differences between the two and how does that play out in each section you’ve identified?
5. There are multiple levels of storytelling and determining who gets to tell the story. Identify these moments and discuss.
6. McCullough picks words throughout the text to define; some examples are below. As you read, what other words do you pull out and what definitions do you give them?
7. As these definitions progress from literal definitions to colloquial meanings, how does that reflect the headspace Em is in and their position in the novel?
 - Page 3 - *Hysterical*: from the Greek word for “uterus.”
 - Page 15 - *Hussy*: a once-neutral term that meant “female head of the household.”
 - Page 90 - *Toxic*: the OED’s 2018 Word of the Year, appearing most frequently alongside 1) chemical and 2) masculinity.
 - Page 144 - *Privilege*: being able to turn one’s back on an angry white dude without worrying about consequences.
 - Page 373 - *Family*: from the Latin word for “servant.”

STORYTELLING

“ He will not / know my story / for I choose not to give it ”

– p. 367

1. Throughout *We Are the Ashes, We Are the Fire* McCullough explores the question of who has the right to stories. Given the various examples of storytelling, what conclusion have you come to? Who has the right to tell our story and do we owe our narratives to other people?
2. When Em finds out about her own mother’s deeply held trauma, she wonders if knowing her mother’s story from the beginning would have changed anything for her or Nor. What do you think of this question? Would it have changed anything? Does her mother owe Em and Nor this part of her life?
3. Later, Em decides that her mother doesn’t owe her story to Em or anyone else, and that asking her about it “would only hurt her all over again” – p. 273. How is this realization juxtaposed with Em pushing Nor to prosecute her rapist, and Em’s role in the newspaper writing profiles of other rape victims?
4. The quote at the top of the page continues saying “but I can weave a tale / of vengeance / for my loving father / and it is not a lie. // It’s simply not the truth” – p. 367.
 - What do you make of this juxtaposition between lies and truth?
 - Is weaving a tale, or writing fiction, always an act of untruth, or can we find facts within it?
5. When discussing whether Marguerite de Bressieux actually lived or not, Nor says “Because awesome women were erased from the narrative way more than they were invented” – p. 349. What does that imply about the fictional awesome women that this book is about?
6. “There are many examples of storytelling throughout the novel. Pull as many of these examples as you can, then discuss using the quote ‘So much would depend on who was doing the telling’ – p. 348 as your guide. How does who is doing the telling relate to who has the power?”
7. “Ultimately, I think you’re telling a story about sisters. And violence. And being a girl in the world. That *is* your story to tell” – p. 347. This is what Nor thinks of Em’s novel about Marguerite, but what do you think the end goal of McCullough’s story is? What is it about? How is it the same and different from the story that Em is telling?

EM & MARGUERITE

“It’s something to consider,” Jess says.
“The roles we’re given.” – p. 64

1. In the poems about Marguerite de Bressieux there are many examples of hierarchy and station as something to find comfort in while experiencing tragedy, two examples of which are below. How does this transcend Marguerite’s story and find its way into Em’s?
2. How do these seemingly opposing ideas of comfort and discomfort in the status quo exist in the same story? How do they work both together and apart?
3. In many ways both Em and Marguerite believe themselves to be alone. How does this show up throughout the novel? How does it affect both of their actions? How are they proved wrong?
4. On page 90, Em thinks that “It’s almost worse for a reasonable code to exist and be ignored.” While this is during a discussion of Chalon’s actions during the destruction of Marguerite’s home, what does this sentiment say in Em’s own life?
5. Em’s mom says “Only the compliant women are good, and the women with any power at all are evil” – p. 6. This sets the tone for the novel and in many ways for Em and Marguerite themselves. How does this statement show itself past page 6 and how does such a strong statement in the first chapter shape the reader’s vision of the narrative?
6. Look at the interior art that Jess, through the art of Maia Kobabe, adds to Marguerite’s story. There is a blending of both the medieval and the modern. How is this replicated in the text itself? How do the illuminations on the page act as both a supplement and distraction to the story? Use Em and Jess’s experiences at the *Illuminated Manuscripts* exhibit, starting on page 86, as a jumping off point for this discussion.
7. Use the quote at the top of the page as a jumping off point for discussion on the roles in the story, including the roles of women, of nonbinary people, of people of color, of victims, of survivors, of writers, of characters, and more.



Art by Maia Kobabe

CONNECTING TO

BLOOD WATER PAINT

1. *Blood Water Paint* ends in a courtroom and *We Are the Ashes, We Are the Fire* begins in one. These two stories take place over 400 years apart, and yet they are remarkably similar.
 - What similarities and differences can you find between the two trials and their outcomes?
 - What does this say about rape culture in both the 1600s and in modern times?
2. In both of McCullough's novels, she plays with the merging of past and present. Why do you think she includes two timelines in both stories? How does each time period impact our understanding of women throughout the ages? Are there tangible ways that Biblical times, the Medieval era, the Baroque era, and the 2020s differ or stay the same?
3. Victimhood means different things in both novels – in one, Artemesia is a victim herself; in the other, Em is the sister of a victim, and yet is still often victimized. Discuss.
4. The writing vehicle has switched between these two novels – in *Blood Water Paint*, Artemesia's story is in verse, while the supporting stories of Judith and Susanna are in prose. In *We Are the Ashes, We are the Fire*, Em's story is in prose, while Marguerite's story is in verse. Why do you think McCullough made this change? What do you think each format lends to each story?
5. There is a direct parallel between Judith using a sword to slay Holofernes and Em's statement of "I feel like learning how to use a fucking sword" (p. 24). What other parallels can you draw between the characters in the two novels? Do you see other parallels for either Em or Judith?
6. There are several female duos in both novels – Em and Nor, Marguerite and Zahra, Artemesia and her mother, Judith and Abra, Susanna and Rebecca. How do these women lend their strength to one another? What does this say about the power of female connection?
7. McCullough has a distinct style in her poetry that echoes itself between the two novels. What points of comparison can you find? Start by discussing the similarities in text, but difference in situation of the two quotes below:

"Either way / I'll show this monster /
what a woman can do"
– p. 334, *We Are the Ashes, We Are the Fire*

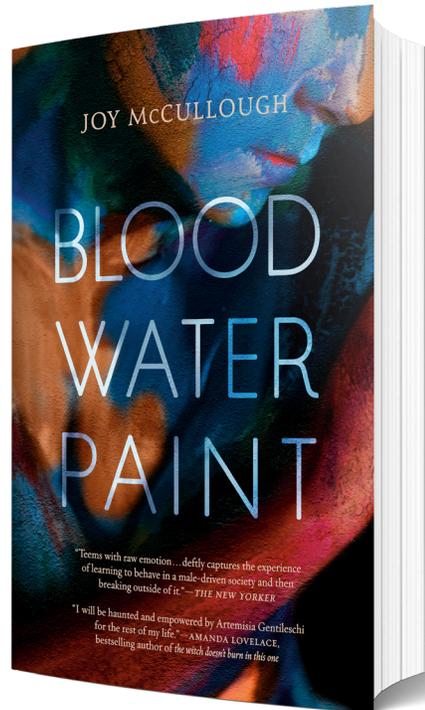
"I will show you /
what a woman can do"
– p. 291, *Blood Water Paint*

ABOUT

BLOOD WATER PAINT

Her mother died when she was twelve, and suddenly Artemisia Gentileschi had a stark choice: a life as a nun in a convent or a life grinding pigment for her father's paint. She chose paint.

By the time she was seventeen, Artemisia did more than grind pigment. She was one of Rome's most talented painters, even if no one knew her name. But Rome in 1610 was a city where men took what they wanted from women, and in the aftermath of rape Artemisia faced another terrible choice: a life of silence or a life of truth, no matter the cost.



*He will not consume
my every thought.
I am a painter.
I will paint.*

JOY MCCULLOUGH'S bold novel in verse is a portrait of an artist as a young woman, filled with the soaring highs of creative inspiration and the devastating setbacks of a system built to break her. McCullough weaves Artemisia's heartbreaking story with the stories of the ancient heroines Susanna and Judith, who become not only the subjects of two of Artemisia's most famous paintings but sources of strength as she battles to paint a woman's timeless truth in the face of unspeakable and all-too-familiar violence.

*I will show you
what a woman can do.*

Download the discussion guides to *Blood Water Paint* by clicking here:
<https://penguinclassroom.com/books/blood-water-paint/>

— PRAISE FOR —

WE ARE THE ASHES, WE ARE THE FIRE

- ★ “Intense, unrelenting, and inspiring.” —**KIRKUS REVIEWS**, starred review
- ★ “... [R]eaders will find [McCullough’s] story all the more affecting because of its seemingly eternal relevance.” —**BOOKLIST**, starred review
- ★ “McCullough emphatically confronts the toll that sexual violence takes and deftly questions who gets to control history’s narrative.”
—**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, starred review

— PRAISE FOR —

BLOOD WATER PAINT

- ★ “A captivating and impressive.” —**BOOKLIST**, starred review
- ★ “Belongs on every YA shelf.” —**SLJ**, starred review
- ★ “Haunting.” —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, starred review
- ★ “Luminous.” —**SHELF AWARENESS**, starred review



Photo © John Ulman

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOY MCCULLOUGH writes books and plays from her home in the Seattle area, where she lives with her family. She studied theater at Northwestern University, fell in love with her husband atop a Guatemalan volcano, and now spends her days surrounded by books and kids and chocolate. Her debut novel, *Blood Water Paint*, was longlisted for the National Book Award and was a finalist for the William C. Morris Debut Award.



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