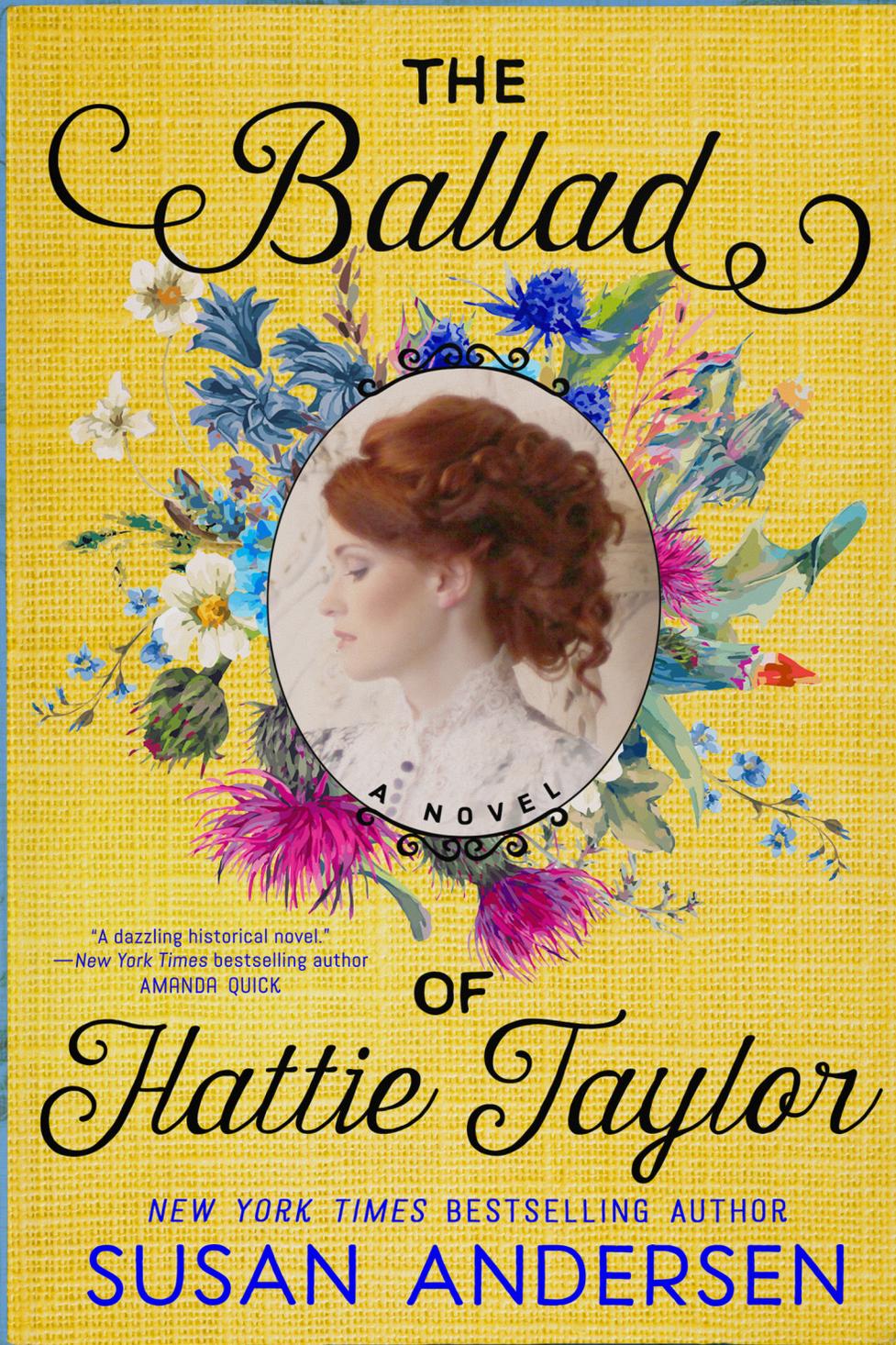


# Book Club Kit



"A dazzling historical novel."  
—New York Times bestselling author  
AMANDA QUICK

OF

*Hattie Taylor*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUSAN ANDERSEN



## *Dear book club members*

I am so tickled you chose *The Ballad of Hattie Taylor* as your current book club pick. I am over-the-moon excited about Hattie's story; it was a project especially dear to my heart. It being different from anything I'd written before and set in a time period I'd never explored might lead one to believe that turning my writing process on its head would be a problem. Instead, Hattie and her story sank deep into my imagination and generated a whole new wave of creativity. It was kind of thrilling.

I am often asked where I get my ideas. I'm all about the characters, so personalities start speaking to me long before plots do. They often even end up directing the plot. I broke some rules with this book, because what I thought would be a historical romance kept taking me down paths I hadn't envisioned, and I simply could not contain this story when it had so many issues and people tempting my vision for the book to go in new directions. I let my characters lead me where they would, because their paths were interesting and fresh and I had to see where they were headed before I broke out the whip and chair to take back control. (Confession: never did fully manage that last part.)

As you no doubt have inferred from the book title, Hattie Taylor is my primary character. She first took up residence in my head as an eleven-year-old girl. Gotta admit, that surprised me, as I mostly write protagonists in their early to mid-thirties rather than mouthy prepubescent girls. I learned Hattie came from a good family on her mama's side but had been allowed to run wild in a Nevada mining town during the years following her mother's death. Our story begins when she arrives in the fictitious town of Mattawa, Oregon, to live with and be guided into society by her "Aunt" Augusta Witherspoon Murdock, a cousin so many times removed few remember where the precise relationship lines are drawn. Hattie sprang to life for me full of confrontation, attitude, and vulnerability, and, boom! This kid had me wrapped around her less-than-pristine little finger faster than I could say, "Anyone get the engine number of the train that just mowed me down?"

But, hey, what's a writer to do? Clearly, I had no option but to usher Hattie from childhood into womanhood. And because I am not a proponent of grim books that end up even grimmer—I made sure Hattie received the happy ending she deserved.

*Susan*

# *A conversation with Susan Andersen*

## **Tell us about *The Ballad of Hattie Taylor*! What inspired you to write this story?**

This book is a combination of historical saga, romance, and women's issues. I built my career in contemporary novels, so this is unlike anything I have previously written. *Ballad* started with a voice itching in the back of my mind. The only thing I knew at first was it belonged to a female and she was young, brash, outspoken, and determined to have her story told. At the same time, she only imparted teasing fragments here and there, so it was a far-from-complete story.

The latter is hardly unique. My books are character-driven, so my general process as I am wrapping up my current project is to have new characters begin displaying bits and pieces of themselves in my head. But Hattie took it to a whole new level. Lord, that girl seized my imagination and simply refused to let go. I fell in love with her so hard I was flat-out driven to usher her into adulthood and secure her a happy ending.

## **What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in *The Ballad of Hattie Taylor*?**

I got to explore what it must be like to be different in an age of rigid mores and expectations. Women had very little control when it came to directing their own lives in the early twentieth century, and when they married, too many were woefully unprepared for the sexual aspect. And God forbid if a woman was raped. She could fight like a demon to prevent it, but should it become public knowledge, she was ruined.

*Ballad* is also about family and friendships, but Hattie came to female friendships much later than most. Her only friend growing up was a boy, and since this was during a time when such alliances were firmly discouraged the moment a girl reached puberty, that was just one more black mark keeping Hattie an outsider.

## **Did the book require any special research? If so, please provide any interesting details about your research.**

This book necessitated reams of research into nearly everything related to the early twentieth century. And me and research? That combo is all but guaranteed to result in the

occasional great sucking sound heard around the world. I can't tell you how many times I found myself caught up in something not remotely related to the information I was pursuing, which led to something else unrelated, which led to—Well, I think you can see where this is going.

One of my favorite bits of information (that had nothing to do with *Ballad*) was that Wyoming was by far at the front of the pack when it came to granting women's suffrage. I thought my state (Washington) was ahead of the curve. The territory of Washington gave women the right to vote in 1883 (and the state followed suit in 1910). Hattie's state of Oregon granted women the right in 1912, as well as several other states that allowed women to vote much earlier than that—let alone the official ratification date in 1920—if only in local elections. But Wyoming was waaaay ahead of the curve. They granted suffrage in 1869. Then in 1890, when the US Congress demanded Wyoming rescind women's right to vote if they wanted to be allowed statehood, Wyoming fired back a telegram that read: "We will remain out of the Union 100 years rather than come in without the women." This may have been because they wanted to attract more females to the state, as there were only 1,000 to the 6,000 men in Wyoming at the time. Regardless of the reasons, Congress gave in, and in becoming the forty-fourth state, Wyoming became the first state in which women could vote in all elections.

### **How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?**

I am a total seat-of-the-pants writer, which is another way of saying I basically wing it. All I know starting out is my characters, so I write largely by correction. Limping out my original thoughts can be frustrating, but *The Ballad of Hattie Taylor* is my twenty-sixth book and somewhere along the line I accepted that original writing doesn't have to be perfect—or even particularly good. It just has to be written. I can fix anything—the trick is getting something down to fix.

In that respect, not much changed for Hattie's story. But I definitely had to adjust my contemporary voice, because while Hattie faced issues that women still confront today, they were seen through a different worldview. At the same time, Hattie was exceptionally vivid in my mind. I knew her and her earliest issues when I began, and that knowledge made this one of my faster-flowing manuscripts, with fewer *This sucks* moments.

### **What do you hope readers will take away from this story?**

I hope you find *The Ballad of Hattie Taylor* as full of life as I heard it in my head. I hope it makes you laugh, makes you cry, but most of all makes you think of the many ways in which life has changed for women since Hattie's era. And, perhaps more importantly, of the way things have yet to change enough. I hope it starts conversations with your friends.

# Discussion Questions

1. In Hattie's youth, most times inadvertently but sometimes intentionally, she broke many of the accepted conventions ruling women's behavior. Can you think of a few examples? How would you describe the town's reactions to Hattie? How would her behavior be received today?
2. In the early 1900s, women's sexuality was rarely discussed with young women, and they were often left unprepared for their first experience with intercourse. Jane-Ellen feared everything about sex and simply could not find enjoyment in the act. Why do you think the author chose to include a character with this perspective?
3. Until Hattie left Mattawa to attend normal school, her only real friend was Moses Marks. Do you think it is possible to have an equally close friendship with the opposite sex as most of us enjoy with our own gender? Why or why not?
4. In that same vein, Hattie was eighteen years old before she made her first female friend. In what ways do her friendships with Nell and Moses differ? In what ways are they similar? Is one friendship stronger or deeper than the other? Be specific.
5. Why do you think Hattie chooses to accept the teaching position, knowing it means she will have to return to Mattawa? Do you see changes in Hattie when she returns home? In what ways does her occupation provide a sense of fulfillment?

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6. Why do you think the author chose to include a sexual assault? How do you feel each character handles learning about the assault? What role do you think Hattie's female friends and relatives play in her healing process?
  7. Why do you think Hattie initially refuses to tell Jake about the assault? Do you agree or empathize with her decision? Why or why not?
  8. How does the novel explore the concept of justice? Do you feel satisfied with Roger's fate? How does this relate to current conversations surrounding the #MeToo movement and gender politics?
  9. Which of Hattie's age-specific characteristics, first as a child, then as a young adult, then as a woman, could you most identify with, and why? Did you experience any of Hattie's struggle to fit in with a peer group and the wider community of adults? If so, how do you feel that impacted you as an adult, and did it have long-term effects?
  10. A little over a hundred years ago, women were not allowed to vote, let alone sit on a jury panel. Women's right to vote was ratified, nationwide, on August 18, 1920, but even then it excluded nonwhite women. The West Coast ratified women's right to vote almost a decade earlier. Washington State's women got the vote in 1910, California's in 1911, and Oregon's in 1912. Do you know when your female ancestors first voted, or what your current state allowed in the early 1900s?



# Susan Andersen

is a *New York Times* bestselling author most widely known for her contemporary romantic suspense. The proud mother of a grown son, Susan is a native of the Pacific Northwest, where she lives with her husband and two cats.

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