

## BOOK CLUB KIT

A downtrodden female doctor takes up with a traveling medicine show to support her disabled son, joining a German giantess, a bowlegged musician, an indentured Creek poet, and a handsome tinker under the thumb of a charismatic but menacing swindler on a collision course with the deadliest natural disaster in American history - the Galveston Hurricane of 1900.

"Sometimes medicine presents us with impossible choices.

Sometimes life does as well."

~ PAGE 158

**THE MEDICINE WOMAN OF GALVESTON**  
by  
**AMANDA SKENANDORE**

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Dear Reader,

*The Medicine Woman of Galveston* is truly a passion project, inspired by my fascination with the history of medicine and the incredible women who broke barriers and made a difference in the field, even when the odds were stacked against them.


As a registered nurse, I've always been drawn to stories of resilience, compassion, and the unbreakable human spirit. In creating the character of Dr. Tucia Hatherley, I wanted to pay tribute to the pioneering women who faced countless challenges and prejudices, yet never lost sight of their calling to help and heal others.

When Tucia joins a traveling medicine show, she finds herself part of a colorful cast of characters, each with their own stories and lessons to share. From the Austrian giantess to the indentured Creek poet, the troupe becomes an unexpected family for Tucia, providing support and understanding as she navigates her own personal struggles. Tucia's disabled son is an integral part of the cast, too, shedding light on the joys and challenges of parenting a child with intellectual disabilities in an era when understanding and support were scarce.

As the story builds to the devastating Galveston Hurricane of 1900, I invite you to join Tucia on a journey of redemption, self-discovery, and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity. As you weather your own life's storms, I hope Tucia's journey inspires you to never lose faith in yourself or the inherent goodness of others.

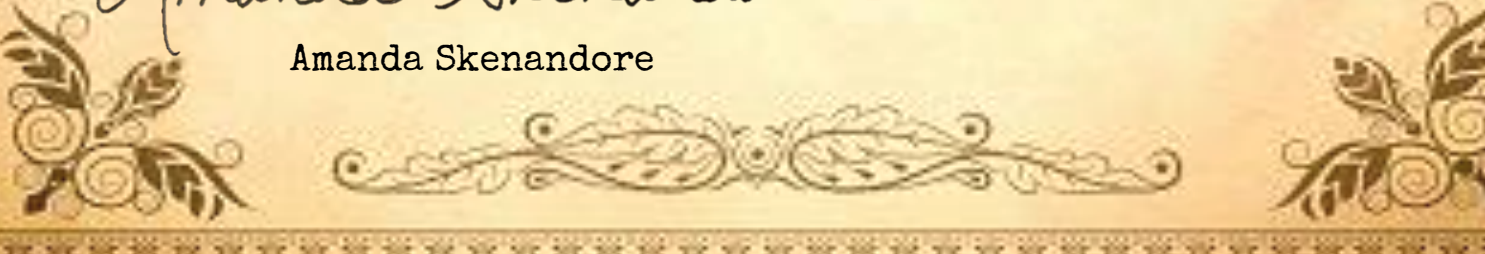
Thank you for embarking on this adventure with me. I'm grateful for your support and can't wait for you to meet Tucia and the rest of the medicine show troupe!

Warmest Wishes,



Amanda Skenandore

Amanda Skenandore



# Q&A

with **AMANDA SKENANDORE**



**Most of your novels touch on some aspect of medical history, and *The Medicine Woman of Galveston* is no exception. What draws you to this topic?**

I'm drawn to writing about medical history for several reasons. First and foremost, health and illness have such a profound impact on our lives—both as individuals and on society as a whole. Our physical and mental well-being shapes nearly every aspect of the human experience.

I'm also fascinated by the incredible medical advancements we've seen in just the past century. Life before antibiotics, vaccines, medical imaging, and so many other innovations was drastically different. Through my writing, I like to explore what healthcare and daily life were like in earlier eras, and to trace the stories of the pioneering doctors, scientists, and patients behind the breakthroughs that have transformed medicine.

As a nurse, I'm especially interested in showcasing the often-overlooked contributions of women to medical progress. History has focused mainly on male physicians and researchers, but women have always played vital roles as nurses, midwives, caregivers, and even doctors when they were allowed. I want to shed light on their struggles, triumphs, and innovations.

By weaving together personal stories with the larger arc of medical history, I hope to highlight how far we've come and the many unsung heroes who got us here. Medicine is ultimately about the human condition—our fragility and resilience, our ingenuity and courage in the face of suffering—and that's really the heart of any novel.

**What inspired you to write a story centered around the 1900 Galveston hurricane?**

When I first learned about the devastation wrought by the storm, it really struck a chord with me. The sheer scale of the loss of life and property was staggering. But as I dug deeper, I discovered these incredible stories of survival, of people coming together to rebuild in the aftermath. It showed the unbreakable spirit of that community.

However, alongside those uplifting tales, I also uncovered troubling examples of racism and exploitation in the wake of the disaster. It was a stark reminder that events like the storm can bring out both the best and the worst in human nature. Some used the chaos to prey upon the vulnerable and sow division.

I also see great parallels with the challenges we face today. Extreme weather events like the devastating Galveston Hurricane pose an increasing threat in our current climate. As global temperatures rise and natural disasters become more frequent and severe, we must confront the consequences of our actions and the urgent need for change.

In *The Medicine Woman of Galveston*, I hope not only to transport readers back to the night of that fateful storm, but also to inspire reflection on our own times and the lessons we can draw from the past to build a more just and resilient future.

### **What inspired you to write a character with Down syndrome?**

The character of Toby, a young boy with Down syndrome in *The Medicine Woman of Galveston*, was inspired by my brother-in-law Berry, to whom the book is dedicated. Berry is truly one of the most remarkable people I've ever known. His kindness, intuition, and empathy never cease to amaze me. Being around Berry has taught me so much—to be more present in the moment, to approach the world with curiosity and an open mind, and to appreciate the beautiful diversity of the human experience. He has enriched my life and the lives of others in countless ways.

As I dove into researching turn-of-the-twentieth-century America for my book, it struck me that while people with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities have been a part of families and communities throughout history, they are so rarely included in the stories we tell about the past. I wanted to change that. My goal was to portray the full humanity of people like Berry—to explore the joys, sorrows, challenges, and triumphs they and their loved ones may have experienced in a time when there was so little understanding of or support for intellectual disabilities.

Through Berry, I've seen firsthand how people with Down syndrome have unique gifts to offer and how much richer the world is because of them. While the social conditions and medical knowledge of Toby's time were very different than today, I wanted to bring that same understanding to my depiction of Toby and his family's journey. My hope—in all my writing—is to shed light on these lesser-explored corners of our history. At its heart, Toby's character grew out of my love and appreciation for Berry and others with Down syndrome. It's important we make space for their stories.

# FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT TRAVELING MEDICINE SHOWS

No.

➤ The heyday of medicine shows lasted about 60 years from roughly 1870-1930. Stricter drug laws and radio entertainment spelled their doom.

➤ Troupes initially traveled by wagon (sometimes train), then later by truck.

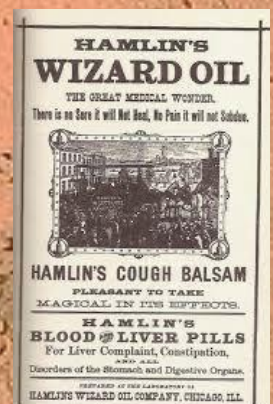


➤ Remedies of all sorts were sold by medicine shows. Catarrh or cough cures, corn-removing salves, and deworming pills were particularly common.

➤ A big part of medicine shows was the ballyhoo, or entertainment. Clowns, ventriloquists, sharpshooters, mind readers, clog dancers, contortionists, and musicians were common performers.



➤ Many medicines contained dubious ingredients. For example, Hamlin's Wizard Oil contained: camphor, ammonia, chloroform, sassafras, cloves, turpentine, and a considerable amount of alcohol. It was advertised to cure a range of ailments, from pneumonia to cancer to hydrophobia.





# Fascinating Facts about the 1900 Galveston Hurricane



- The Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900 was the deadliest natural disaster in United States history, with an estimated death toll between 6,000–12,000 people.
- At the turn of the twentieth century, Galveston was a booming Gulf port, trailing only New Orleans in prominence. It was Texas's fourth-largest city and the third richest city in the United States in proportion to population. The Strand, its main downtown thoroughfare, was dubbed the "Wall Street of the South." The devastating 1900 hurricane, however, altered its fate. Despite rebuilding, Galveston never reclaimed its former glory.
- At one point during the storm, eyewitnesses reported the water around their houses rising four feet in a matter of seconds. At their height, floodwaters in some parts of the city reached an estimated 20 feet.
- The wind was a particularly destructive force during the storm. Gusts are estimated to have reached between 120–145 miles per hour. It felled trees, ripped slate shingles from the roofs, and sent the timber from fallen homes flying. Many people were killed after being struck by airborne debris.

Galveston Hurricane,  
Death toll 12,000



Okeechobee Hurricane,  
Death toll 2,300



Hurricane Katrina,  
Death toll 1,800



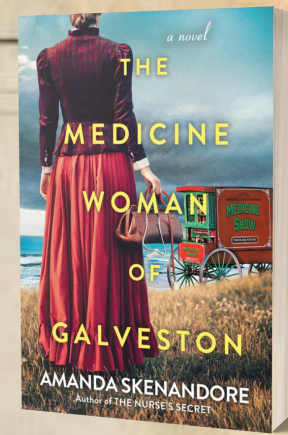
- Several hundred feet of beach were permanently swallowed in the gulf during the storm.
- Two railroad bridges and a wagon bridge connected Galveston Island to the mainland in 1900. All were destroyed by the hurricane, delaying much-needed aid to the survivors.



- Although the practice of categorizing hurricanes (1-5) was not established until the 1970s, it is believed the Galveston hurricane would have been a category 4 storm. Similarly, the hurricane is unnamed, as that convention did not begin until 1953.
- The storm's floodwaters left an immense wall of debris. It rose several feet high and stretched 30 blocks.
- After the storm, the city erected a 17-foot-tall concrete seawall for protection against future storms. Unfortunately, due to climate change, sea levels in Galveston are rising faster than almost anywhere else in the world. Experts worry that another hurricane could overwhelm the seawall and, once again, destroy the city. Efforts are underway to build a higher seawall and miles of man-made dunes to protect the island.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO SPARK CONVERSATION  
AND ENHANCE YOUR READING OF  
**THE MEDICINE WOMAN OF GALVESTON**



1. In 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. By 1900, there were over seven thousand women physicians in the U.S. (almost 6 percent of all physicians). Does that number surprise you? What did you think about Tucia's experiences as a woman doctor during this era?
2. Like Tucia, early women physicians faced many forms of discrimination, from outright exclusion to harassment to marginalization. How does gender-based discrimination still affect the profession, if at all? What about your own profession?
3. Have you ever been in a natural disaster? What was your experience like?
4. After the 1900 hurricane, many people chose to leave Galveston while others stayed to rebuild. If your hometown were destroyed, would you stay or strike out elsewhere?
5. Though medicine shows are long gone, snake oil and snake oil salesmen are terms we still use today. What modern-day institutions or people would you ascribe those words to and why?
6. Tucia says late in the novel, "Perhaps even their nightly show did a little good. The yokels arrived at their lot tired, worried, weighed down by the struggles of their everyday lives. They left lighter. Happier. Who knew how long it lasted, but surely that was worth something." What does she mean by this? Do you agree?
7. Medicine shows relied heavily on racial and ethnic stereotypes—both in the form of entertainment they offered and the way they advertised their medicine. Why do you think this was?

8. What did you think about the chapters dedicated to the other members of the troupe (e.g., The Giant's Story)? Whose story did you find most interesting? Did you notice any commonalities between them?
9. Unrealized dreams and new beginnings are two of the main themes of the novel. How do they play out differently for each character? Have any unmet desires or missed opportunities in your life unexpectedly led you to a new beginning?
10. How is Tucia changed by the end of the novel? Do you think she's cured of her "hysterical attacks," or will aspects of that trauma always be with her?
11. Much of what motivates Tucia throughout the novel is her desire to keep Toby out of an asylum. How have our attitudes and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities changed since 1900?



# TALK LIKE A MEDICINE SHOW PERFORMER!

## A Glossary of Terms



- **Ballyhoo:** flamboyant acts or entertainment used to draw a crowd
- **Burn the lot:** Swindle a town to the point you could not return
- **Coconuts:** money
- **Chump:** sucker
- **Closed town:** a town that refused to sell licenses to medicine shows
- **Corn punk or slum:** any corn cure
- **Gill:** customer
- **Glims:** eye glasses
- **Lot lice:** people who watch the show but don't buy any medicine
- **Reader:** a license to sell
- **Squawker:** a complaining customer
- **Shill:** a partner working covertly in the crowd who offers fake testimony or drums up interest
- **Velvet:** profit



**Amanda Skenandore** is an award-winning author of novels highlighting real, often little-known episodes of medical and public health history, including *The Nurse's Secret*, *The Undertaker's Assistant*, *Between Earth and Sky*, and the 2023 Silicon Valley Reads selection and Hoopla Book Club Pick, *The Second Life of Mirielle West*. As a registered nurse, she adds layers of detail and authenticity to her portrayals of historical medical practices as well as the experiences of patients and medical professionals. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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