



BOOK CLUB GUIDE FOR *Rancho de Amor*

By Dan Harder



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Book Group Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Catherine and Sam at the beginning of the book? How do they change throughout the book?
2. Catherine is a New Yorker who travels to Sisquoc, California. In what ways does the setting influence her?
3. How are Catherine and Sam's lifestyles different? Do you think they could successfully merge their lives together? What events in the book make you think one way or the other?
4. The author, Dan Harder, was inspired by Jane Austen when he wrote *Rancho de Amor*. Can you see any thematic similarities *Rancho de Amor* may share with Austen's novels?
5. Sam was required by contest rules to pretend he was a woman. Do you think there are societal obstacles men face for writing romances or any other genres? Do you think women face societal obstacles when facing particular genres?
6. Had Sam not surprised Catherine in New York at the end, do you think she would have gone back to California to see or talk to him?
7. In Catherine's letter to Sam, she writes, "Honestly, I am not exhibiting courageous vulnerability, at least not yet, but I can't stop feeling a sort of courageous curiosity." What do you think "courageous vulnerability" means?
8. In the beginning of the book, Catherine's book group discusses Vivian Gornick's *The End of the Novel of Love*. Gornick proposes that "love comes as something of an anticlimax." Do you believe that?

AUTHOR Q&A

How did *Rancho de Amor* happen? Where did the idea come from?

I could say it started when I moved from the middle of Los Angeles up to an extremely isolated cattle ranch, there to work for a summer—a rural experience reinforced when, a year later, I moved up to rural Oregon and worked in a lumber mill for six months. These experiences exposed me to genuine rural lifestyles and concerns, different from the very urban experiences I'd lived in Los Angeles, then San Francisco, and eventually for years in Paris. Because I write plays, the sine qua non of which is contrast and conflict, I've been intrigued with those contrasting, sometimes conflicting ways of living and how various characters might interact were they to come from such differing environments.

That's the general background of "how and where." The specific was that my wife and I sold a spec script to a Hollywood producer and were told to come up with new scripts. We didn't have the time or inclination to write full scripts, but we did come up with a couple film treatments. One was structured using two very different characters, one from an urban environment—a NY city book editor, and the other from a rural setting, a young foreman of a large and isolated cattle ranch. How could I ever get these two characters together? Simple: in a whacky romance.

It sounds like you've had a few different careers. Have you always wanted to be a writer? What is writing for you?

Directed daydreaming. For better or worse, my mind's always a whirl with ideas, concerns, fantasies, and writing gives them direction, purpose, and pleasure for me and hopefully my audiences.

One of the main characters in your book is Catherine. Was it difficult to get into a woman's head and heart?

As a human being I am both man and woman (biologically a man's testes are little more than ovaries that needed to cool off outside the body). Let's face it, no one can write fiction if she, he, or they can't imagine what different characters feel, think, and live. If you can imagine what someone else is, thinking, feeling, living, then that other someone becomes a part of—and comes from—who you are and your perception of reality. My characters, whoever they are, are all a part of me and I am a part of all of them. This is also true for readers. To be moved by a book means one is moved by what you imagine some character other than yourself is feeling, thinking, living—and so, in this sense, readers are ALWAYS inviting other characters into their heads. Long may it be so!

Are you more like Catherine or Sam?

Yes.

Did you read other romances before or while you were writing *Rancho de Amor*?

I love Jane Austen both to read and to teach. I find her books, as many people do, incredibly romantic. *Pride and Prejudice* is my favorite.

The country mouse/city mouse theme in the book feels personal to you since you've lived in both urban and rural places. Why do you think this theme is so important?

Four years ago and 25 years after these characters and this plot were sold and then forgotten as a 17-page film treatment, I became painfully aware that one of the faultlines dividing America was the supposedly unbridgeable distance between life in the country and life in the city. This was and is an exaggerated and, unfortunately, a very manipulable division. Yes, there are differences between life in the country and life in the city. I know this because I've lived both. But life in the country and life in the city are not THAT different from one another, and to know, live, and care about both can deeply broaden one's life on earth. They should not be seen as inimical. They should be complementary. And Catherine and Sam show us the way—at least in fiction.

That's why I really liked both of these characters and I really wanted them to meet, like, and fall in love with one another. Finding a way to make this happen was a very exciting process.

What were the most challenging aspects of writing *Rancho de Amor*?

One was having enough time to be able to write and rewrite and rewrite something as long as a novel. A writer has to remember pretty much everything that he or she has written so that a rewrite on page 137 doesn't end up contradicting what was written on page 37. Then there was the challenge of making a fiction as real and vital as possible. And finally, there was the challenge of finding how to ramp up a courtship slowly enough to hurt but sure enough to burn.

You've written in so many different genres, including poetry, journalism, plays, children's books, and now modern romance. Do you prefer one over another? Do you approach them each with a different personality?

I love 'em all and each requires a different approach, a different set of tools (dialogue, cogent clarity, provocatively obscure and revealing metaphors, playful simplicity, strict fact or unfettered fiction), and each results a different—and differently moving—product.

What books are on your bedside table?

My Name is Asher Lev, *The Secrets of Mental Math*, *The Best of Poetry in Motion*, *Dr. Faustus*, *Persuasion*, *Classics for Pleasure*, *The Three Body Problem*, *Knowledge: a Short Introduction*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Unsound Unread*, *Fungipedia*, *The White Boy Shuffle*, *Mushroom Hunters*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Pale King*, *Paternal Tyranny*, *The Calculus of Friendship*, *Paul Robeson – Here I Stand*, and an uncorrected proof of *Rancho de Amor*.



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