

## Reading Group Guide

### Questions for Discussion

1. Author Sheri Holman described *Searching for Virginia Dare* in this way: “Marjorie Hudson has beautifully united the personal and the poetic in her quest for the elusive Virginia Dare. By making this as much an autobiographical odyssey as a historical narrative, she challenges us to plumb our own dark interiors and seek out new shores of self.”

- Find passages of Hudson’s poetic narrative. *What makes these sections “poetic”? How do these sections add to the narrative? Find a few personal passages. How do they work with the themes in Virginia Dare’s historic story?*

2. Many people in the mid-Atlantic and Southern states grew up hearing the story of Virginia Dare and the Lost Colony. Some people have grown up knowing very little or nothing about it.

- *What did you learn as a child? Did you know there was a colony before Jamestown and Plymouth? Were you fascinated by the story? Why or why not?*

3. Native Americans feature prominently in the story of Virginia Dare. The author was intrigued by the history of the Lumbee people.

- *Do you know the history of a tribal people near where you live? Does your family or anyone you know claim Native heritage? Had you heard of the Lumbee before?*

4. There are three solar eclipses described in the book. Did you catch them all? Look for the “darkened sun” mentioned in the Thomas Hariot/John White scene in Chapter 2. Then in a memoir section, at grandmother’s house (Chapter 6), there is a brief image of tree leaves’ shadows during an eclipse in the author’s childhood. The third eclipse takes place in Chapter 10, in a brief section in which the author attempts to view the sun’s shape using a pin hole in a piece of tin foil.

- *Read those three sections aloud. How does the idea of an eclipse relate to the themes in the book? How does the idea of an eclipse relate to the story of Virginia Dare?*

5. Prayer figures occasionally in the themes and musings of the book. John White reads from the *Book of Common Prayer* for the baptism ritual. Hudson makes a prayer of thanksgiving for finding her way in Greenville. An Iroquoian prayer for the souls of dead children is invoked.

- *How would prayer have been important to the colonists? How did Christian conversion affect the Lumbee Indians’ fate and identity?*

Hudson speculates that the images in Sallie Southall Cotten's epic poem were meant to be Christian symbols.

- *Do you see Christian themes in Cotten's life and poetry?*

6. "One of the best things about writing this book," Hudson says, "is sharing it with people and hearing the stories they tell back to me— about Virginia Dare, about grandmothers, gardens, growing up, hitchhiking, just about anything."

- *Did Hudson's experiences strike a chord in your life?*

*The book* explores universal themes of missing people, losses, and times of upheaval.

- *Can you point to a time in your life of upheaval and change?*

7. Hudson explores the relationship between facts and myth in the book.

- *Did you learn any new facts that surprised you? Which Virginia Dare myth is your favorite? Do you think the Eleanor Dare Stones were a hoax? Why or why not?*

8. The author describes Virginia Dare's story as a family story, and as an American story. Families move, separate, and forget to pass information along. Children are lost, parents are lost. Those who remain, make things up. As a nation made up of people who come from somewhere else—or who as Natives found their families and cultures devastated by European invasions—our collective memory is rooted in a pattern of loss and memory.

- *How does American history figure in to your family story? Are there any stories in the book—about Indians, for example, or immigration, that remind you of your own life or family?*

9. Hudson also claims that in America family stories are often lost or missing, yet they seem to remain alive inside the descendants.

- *Do you agree? If so, how might this be true in your own life?*

## *Author Comments*

I WAS BORN IN 1953, in a small town in northern Illinois, the part with rolling hills and trees near the Wisconsin border. Our parsonage was next to the church on one side, the barbershop on the other, across from the courthouse and catty corner from the *Piggly Wiggly*. My life took a hard right turn when my family moved east to Washington, D.C., so my father, a minister, could study International Relations and peace. Eight years old, I missed my old life terribly. I remember tracing the highway on the map over my bed each night, following the route west with my finger, touching the places I once knew, lost and far from home. In Washington we grew up face to face with Cuban missile crisis scares, Kennedy assassinations, riots and anti-war demonstrations. My father took me to meet Martin Luther King in 1968; two days later he was assassinated. A sense of yearning for home, a sense of violent disconnection, a sense of the very personal pace of history—all these things had a great effect on me.

Some of this personal history is reflected in *Searching for Virginia Dare*, a mosaic of history, fiction and memoir that turns on the story of first English child born in North America, who disappeared with her family shortly after birth. The book tracks Virginia's imagined steps through the coastal swamps and bays, following legends, tracking down weather studies and scholars, finding "lost tribes" and fanatics, and taking side trips and tangents into the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The book is my love letter to North Carolina—my adopted home for more than 20 years. I live on a farm in the rolling hills of the center of the state, not far from a small town with a courthouse and a church and a *Piggly Wiggly* (now defunct). I have worked most of my adult life as an editor and freelance writer, writing for nature magazines and editing everything from Southern fiction to law books. Now I'm working on a collection of short stories and a novel, both set in a mythical rural county in North Carolina.

<http://www.searchingforvirginiadare.com>