



Gap Creek: A Novel

By Robert Morgan



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A New York Times Bestseller & Oprah's Book Club Pick

Young Julie Harmon works “hard as a man,” they say, so hard that at times she’s not sure she can stop. People depend on her to slaughter the hogs and nurse the dying. People are weak, and there is so much to do. At just seventeen she marries and moves down into the valley of Gap Creek, where perhaps life will be better.

But Julie and Hank’s new life in the valley, in the last years of the nineteenth century, is more complicated than the couple ever imagined. Sometimes it’s hard to tell what to fear most—the fires and floods or the flesh-and-blood grifters, drunks, and busybodies who insinuate themselves into their new life. To survive, they must find out whether love can keep chaos and madness at bay. Their struggles with nature, with work, with the changing century, and with the disappointments and triumphs of their union make *Gap Creek* a timeless story of a marriage.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Oprah Book Club® Selection, January 2000: Robert Morgan's *Gap Creek* opens with one wrenching death and ends with another. In between, this novel of turn-of-the-century Appalachian life works in fire, flood, swindlers, sickness, and starvation--a truly biblical assortment of plagues, all visited on the sturdy shoulders of 17-year-old Julie Harmon. "Human life don't mean a thing in this world," she concludes. And who could blame her? "People could be born and they could suffer, and they could die, and it didn't mean a thing.... The world was exactly like it had been and would always be, going on about its business." For Julie, that business is hard physical labor. Fortunately, she's fully capable of working "like a man"--splitting and hauling wood, butchering hogs, rendering lard, planting crops, and taking care of the stock. Even when Julie meets and marries handsome young Hank Richards, there's no happily-ever-after in store. Nothing comes easy in Julie Harmon's world, and their first year together is no exception.

Throughout the novel, Morgan chronicles Julie's trials in prose of great dignity and clarity, capturing the rhythms of North Carolina speech by using only the subtlest of inflections. Clearly the author has done his research too--the descriptions of physical labor practically leap off the page. (Suffice to say, you'll learn far more about hog slaughtering than you ever dreamed of knowing.) Yet he resists the temptation to make his long-suffering characters into saints. Julie simmers with resentment at being her family's workhorse, and Hank flies into a helpless rage whenever he feels that his authority is questioned. In novels like *The Truest Pleasure* and *The Hinterlands*, Morgan proved his ability to create memorable heroines. In *Gap Creek*, he writes with great feeling--but not a touch of sentimentality--about a life Julie aptly calls "both simple and hard."

From [Booklist](#)

Whatever trials Job suffered were nothing compared to the tribulations that befall Julie Harmon Richards. Following the deaths of her younger brother and father, 17-year-old Julie takes one look at 18-year-old Hank Richards and falls in love. Following their marriage a month later, the two move from their North Carolina homes to Gap Creek, South Carolina, where Hank works at a cotton mill and Julie cooks and cleans for a Mr. Pendergast in exchange for room and board. Pendergast is fatally injured trying to rescue his hidden savings during a devastating fire, and Julie, now pregnant, gives all of Pendergast's money to a man who tells her he is the lawyer for the bank that holds the mortgage on the house. Gap Creek floods and the house is ruined. Julie's baby lives only for a few months. Finally, Pendergast's heirs show up, so Hank and Julie, now pregnant again, leave Gap Creek for an uncertain future. Although Morgan, author of *The Truest Pleasure* (1995), has written better novels, even readers numbed by the seemingly endless series of disasters will respect Julie's strength of character and wish her well. *Nancy Pearl*

From Kirkus Reviews

Morgan, the poet laureate of Appalachia (*The Truest Pleasure*, 1995, etc.) writes with a gritty, elemental candor about a South Carolina couples tumultuous first year of marriage. Julie, the narrator of this turn-of-the-century tale, begins with the story of the death of her brother, followed by the death of her father, all before she has turned 17. Hank passes by her house one day and, with an abrupt simplicity, proposes matrimony. The two marry and set off for remote Gap Creek, South Carolina, where they make an arrangement with a Mr. Pendergast for living quarters. A crotchety malcontent, Pendergast agrees to put up the pair in exchange for housekeeping and laundry. So, Hank goes off in search of work, and Julie resourceful, indifferently brave, and admirably industrious tends to the difficult Pendergast. In a fire, the landlord is injured, and on his deathbed he begins describing hell to an unruffled Julie. Morgan offers vivid

descriptions of killing and butchering a hog, later of plucking and skinning a turkey (Julie does both), as well as of Pendergasts final death and the flood that overtakes the couples small homestead. Calamity follows calamity: Julie is cheated of her small amount of money, there are threatening sleet and ice storms, and the possible return of Pendergasts heirs is a pervading dread. There's also an earthy description of childbirthing, but when the premature infant dies, Julie and Hank find strength with their church and religion. An ideal example of a regional tale: free of local color, respectful of his people, entirely free of condescension, Morgan offers a gliding, unhurried story of sufferings and hope that is simple and ragged, but never seems alien. This couples relentless misfortunes are given no more drama than they need, and all the compassion they deserve. -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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