

Saving Yellowstone By Megan Kate Nelson

Discussion Questions

The adventurers who headed to Yellowstone took on many roles. Assuming you were physically able, which job would you want: collecting specimens, taking scientific measurements, hunting game, cooking, setting up and tearing down camp, boat building and navigating, sketching, photographing, map making, fund raising, report writing and editing, or something else?

Congress funded expeditions to explore possibilities for settlement and commercialization, not to preserve natural wonders. Yet they were convinced of the importance of Yellowstone and protected it legally. How would you compare attitudes about conservation versus commercialization to attitudes today? What similarities and differences do you see?

What did you think of Ferdinand Hayden's lobbying/marketing campaign to get his expedition funded? What do you think was key to his success? How would you compare his efforts to those used today by people who want Congress to pass legislation or fund a pet project?

While Hayden and his expedition provide a major plot line, this book is all about putting the Yellowstone story into context—political, geographical, financial, cultural, etc. Did that approach make the story more interesting or engaging? Did it add to or take away from the main story line?

Reports of exploration of uncharted territory were very popular in the 1800s. Nelson compares the expeditions to the Rover landing on Mars—a scientific accomplishment that lifted national spirits. Do you find that to be an apt comparison?

What do you see as the benefit (if any) of having a painter such as Thomas Moran along when the expedition also had a photographer? Nelson says Moran's huge Yellowstone painting created a sense that "America was nature's nation." Do you think it did? If you were organizing an expedition today, would you take along a landscape painter—or just a photographer with some great camera equipment? Whose work would you rather hang on your wall at home?

Were there places in the book that Nelson made you feel like you were there?

For those who have been to Yellowstone—what was your experience like? Was there any way in which it was like what the book tells us?

Sitting Bull's story is one of both courage and tragedy. Do you imagine any circumstances under which the Lakota could have prevailed against U.S. troops in the long run?

Although the book focused on the Lakota, there are 26 tribal nations that have connections to Yellowstone. What do we owe them? How might their history in the park be recognized?

The book covers a lot of territory with the different protagonists. Was there anything you learned that you found particularly interesting? Did you ever think of western settlement and protection of Blacks in the South as competing priorities? Or consider the disparity of western settlers being given land while freed slaves were not? Or wonder about the financing of the railroad?

Many of the people mentioned in the book were major risk takers, risking their lives and their resources to pursue their goals. Some risks paid off and some did not. Think about one of the protagonists you found interesting—Were his actions well considered or did you think he went way too far out on a limb? We have the benefit of hindsight today, but do you think you would have done anything differently if you had been living at the time?

Megan Kate Nelson's previous book, *The Three-Cornered War*, deals with the Civil War in the West and the government's war against native people during that time. She tells the story through individuals from all sides. Would you like to read that book?

What questions do you want to ask her when she Zooms with us?