

BOOK CLUB NEWS

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Ladies of the Canyons: A League of Extraordinary Women and Their Adventures in the American Southwest

by Lesley Poling-Kempes



Discussion Leader: Derry Levy (in absentia)

From the frontispiece: *“Women, when they are old enough to have done with the business of being women, and can let loose their strength, must be the most powerful creatures in the world.”* - Isak Dinesen

Four Extraordinary women:

- ❖ Carol Bishop Stanley Pfaffle (1879-1948), founder of Ghost Ranch
- ❖ Natalie Curtis Burlin (1875-1921), known for her transcription of Native American songs.
- ❖ Alice Ellen Klauber (1871-1951), artist who developed the artistic and cultural life of San Diego
- ❖ Mary Cabot Wheelwright (1878-1958), anthropologist and founder of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe

Since author Derry was unable to join us from San Diego, Ginger and Loren stepped in to organize the agenda of our discussion using the notes Derry forwarded. While nearly 30 readers gathered in the Learning Center, Loren set up a video of [Navajo Music](#) to set the ambience. He followed that with a video of an interview with the author at: <http://www.pbs.org/video/report-santa-fe-produced-kenw-ladies-canyons/>. Ginger shared books from an extraordinary collection of pictures showing works by Hosteen Klah, a Navajo artist whose

works can be seen in the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe and by Edward Curtis, who specialized in painting Native American people and their culture.

During a conversation with Derry before our meeting, she shared with me that upon a second reading of the book, she was struck by the main themes, and that was how we started. The first theme identified by readers was of course women, and, by extension, women's issues. Readers expressed reverence and awe for these brave women. We discussed the significance that these were women of means, childless, and with significant connections, that they were passionate and educated. What role did they play in the Women's Rights movement? Why did the Native Americans accept these women? How were they able to build the teams of influential people necessary to carry out their goals? What do the accomplishments of these women say about their parents? Discuss these women's relationships with men... How are women's issues then relevant today?

The second most important theme was the development of the Southwest and, unknown by most readers, the impressive role women played in it. A most disturbing theme was the U.S. government's policy towards the Native Americans at the time. What was the mission of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and why did the Bureau require Native American children to attend schools taught in English? How is the story of these four extraordinary women signal the transition away from Victorianism? What role does the landscape play? What was the primary motivation to go west? What did the women do for money to carry out their plans?



Readers were impressed with and thrilled to learn about the accomplishments of these four remarkable women and their roles in the development of the Southwest. Not so thrilling were comments about the

author's style, notwithstanding Poling-Kempes' scholarship and research. Many found the style tedious, overwhelming with sometimes repetitive detail, in need of editing, impossible to see the forest for the trees. One reader wanted to know more of how people who populated the book really lived: hygiene, bathing, food, body smell (Native Americans did not like the white man's body odor). Another reader found it more palatable to read one chapter at a time. Several shared personal stories; i.e. picturing places at having visited them. One reader found the second half easier to read; several stopped reading half-way through. And finally, one reader lamented that Nathalie should have returned to Greenwich Village to start a newspaper encouraging women to break the chains and go west. One reader: impressive women; impressive research; but a slog to read.

Thank you, Derry, Ginger, and Loren for your efforts to make this discussion a success. Join us December 15, 2017, at 2 PM for a discussion of *Lab Girl*, by Hope Jahren led by Tori Hurst. Happy reading!