

OUT OF ESAU

by Michelle Webster-Hein

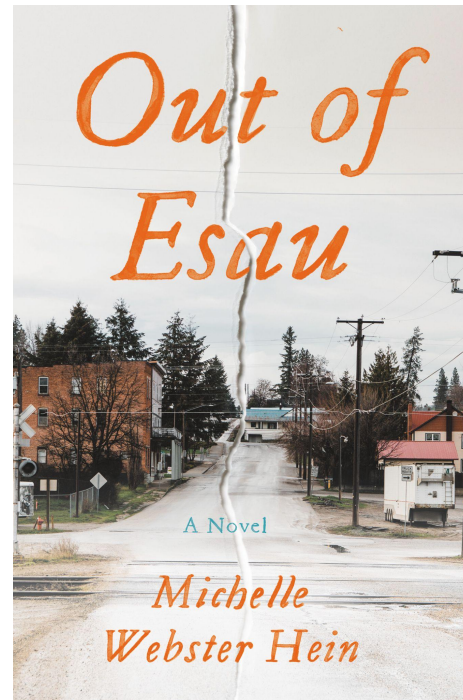
READING GROUP GUIDE

About the Book

When a woman questioning her marriage encounters the kind and steadfast pastor of her small town, they are both forced to reconsider their pasts, their faith, and their future

Robert Glory has never quite felt as though he fit in the small town of Esau, Michigan, but he finds solace in his role as the pastor of Esau Baptist and in his spare, orderly routine. When Susan Shearer arrives at his church seeking the strength to stay true to her increasingly volatile husband, neither expect that their immediate connection will upend both of their lives. As their relationship deepens and Susan's life at home becomes more unstable, Robert and Susan are forced to confront the wounds that have shaped them and discover if they still have the power to change.

Told from five different perspectives—including Susan's husband, Randy, her brilliant but high-strung young daughter, Willa, and Robert's long-estranged mother, Leotie—*Out of Esau* is a visceral look at the dynamics of an abusive marriage, a nuanced portrait of faith and its loss, and a sweeping story of redemption.



About the Author

Michelle Webster-Hein is a graduate of Vermont College's MFA program. Her work has been recognized in the Best American series, nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize and published in *Midwestern Gothic*, *Ruminant Magazine*, *River Teeth*, and *Hunger Mountain*, among other places. She lives on a homestead in rural Michigan with her husband and children.

“*Out of Esau* is a tremendous achievement. A literary page-turner with prose that dips and soars, and characters that leap off the page. I was deeply moved by this tale of love, faith, and family, and I know you will be, too. This wonderful novel is one of the best books of the year.”

—David Heska Wanbli Weiden, author of *Winter Counts*

Discussion Questions

1. What meanings do you make from the title “Out of Esau,” besides its connection to the final scene of the novel?
2. The biblical story of Jacob and Esau is woven throughout the novel, with Robert coming to view Esau as the victim of the story rather than the villain. How does this mirror Robert's shift in how he sees himself?
3. The story of Jacob and Esau also relates to the theme of inheritance. How do you see each character grappling with what they've inherited?
4. Which of the five perspectives struck you as reliable, and which did not?
5. In one way, *Out of Esau* is a story of outsiders. How does each character's outsider status contribute to the stuck situation in which they find themselves?
6. Leotie, a victim of forced sterilization, loses custody of Robert as a child. After a time, she stops trying to get him back, and at first Robert holds her to blame for this. Do you think he is right to do so? Why or why not?
7. Robert and Randy have both faced significant trauma throughout their lives, but the trauma has shaped each of them in strikingly different ways. Why do you think this is?
8. Would you consider Randy a villain? Why or why not?
9. After a date with Randy early in the novel Susan reflects that, “it was the ordinary things that kept you where you were—the places you landed together in relief, after the jags you traveled over to get there.” Ultimately, though, Susan finds this revelation insufficient. What is it that finally pushes her to abandon the ordinary for the possibility of a better life?
10. At the end of the novel, Willa is able to give away the angel statue that she relied so heavily on. What events most affected this transformation and how?
11. What similarities does the village of Esau share with the characters of the novel?
12. Near the novel's beginning, while contemplating the story of Jacob and Esau, Robert wonders, “Was he, Robert, Esau? Was he repenting for something he'd never even done? What had he sold for this church, this pretense of belonging, this morsel of meat?” How do you think Robert would answer this question when he arrives at the end of the book?
13. Do you think Robert sees himself as leaving his faith behind? Why or why not?