



BOOK CLUB KIT



"Powerful . . . Reminds us to hold our loved ones close . . . [and] treat the land as sacred."
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

KENDRA
ATLEWORK

MIRACLE
COUNTRY

MIRACLE COUNTRY

A Memoir of a Family
and a Landscape



ALBANY
PAPERBACKS

KENDRA ATLEWORK

KENDRA ATLEWORK'S PLAYLIST FOR *MIRACLE COUNTRY*

Visit LargeheartedBoy.com to read Atleework's comments on this playlist and how each song relates to her memoir. And click [here](#) to listen to this playlist on Spotify.

"Here in California"

Kate Wolf

"Fast Car"

Tracy Chapman

"Love Will Tear Us Apart"

José González

"Sister"

Angel Olsen

"One More Hour"

Sleater-Kinney

"Your Hand in Mine"

Explosions in the Sky

"Peach Plum Pear"

Joanna Newsom

"Night Rider's Lament"

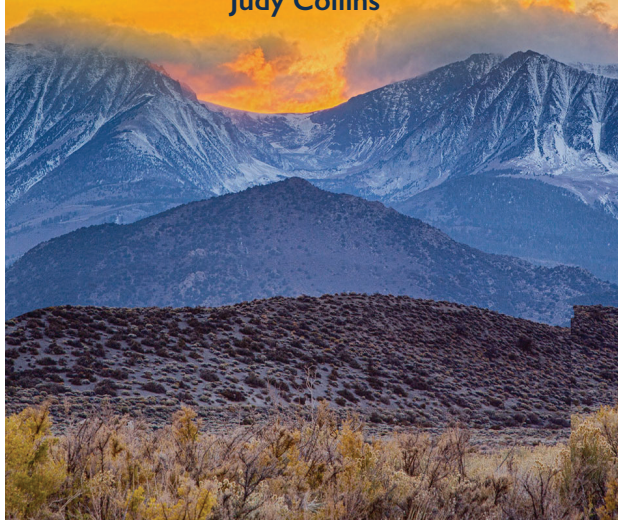
Don Edwards

"I'm Gonna Be a Country Girl Again"

Buffy Sainte-Marie

"Both Sides Now"

Judy Collins



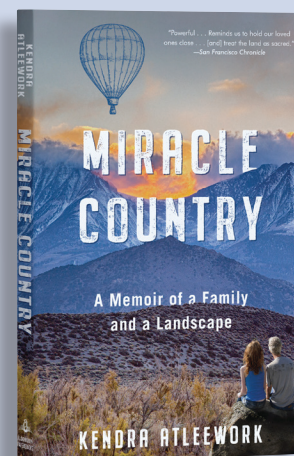
Dear Reader,

The work of writing *Miracle Country* began when I first put words in a childhood diary my grandmother gave me. I wrote: *Susan is having her kittens! Right now! It is 10:25 p.m. and we are all (including Anthony, woken up) huddled around her box. She has been crying out for some time. She isn't mewling; she is yelling. We see a tail (black) and a little bit of blood.* Those words now appear in a chapter of *Miracle Country*, part of a memory of my mother and the lessons of beauty and loss that she taught, both in her life and in her death. I never dreamed when I wrote those words as a twelve-year-old that my mom would be gone within four years. I couldn't envision the book I would write to tell her story, our story, the story of our wild mountainside and the desert below.

All my life I've collected the pieces that form this book: the chill of mornings in the valley, the roar of the propane burner in my father's hot air balloon as it drifted over saltgrass, the smell of the wildfire that burned our town. It took years to write it all down. In the end, by telling this story, I was able to come home. Now, it is the great honor of my life to share it with you.

Sincerely,

Kendra Atleework



ALGONQUIN PAPERBACKS

MIRACLE COUNTRY

by Kendra Atleework

Questions for Discussion

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST KENDRA ATLEEWORK AT YOUR BOOK CLUB?

Kendra is offering free virtual author events for groups of eight or more. To arrange a session with your book club, bookstore, or library, please visit Atleework.com for details.

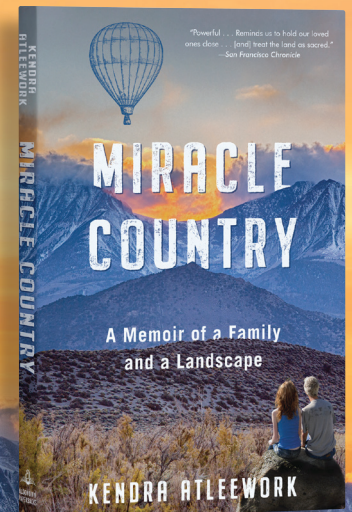
1. Every family creates its own culture, its own version of normal. What aspects of the Atleeworks resonated with your own idea of family?
2. What did you notice about the parenting styles of Kendra's mom and dad? How did they differ? How did they align?
3. In *Miracle Country*, California is presented as a land of optimism and innovation, of hope and forgetfulness, of tragedy and disaster. How does the Atleework family represent, and also differ from, the qualities of their home state?
4. The Los Angeles Aqueduct was built, and the water was taken from Owens Valley/Payahuunadu, because the people with power at the time had agreed to pursue "the greatest good for the greatest number." The author considers what "good" means and who gets to define that. Can you think of instances when you've observed something being taken for granted as good that might not have been?
5. Why do you think the book is titled *Miracle Country*?
6. What do you picture when you think of California? How has the way you think about the desert changed after reading *Miracle Country*? How has this affected your ideas of California?
7. Kendra had to leave home and do her own research to learn the story of the Indigenous people of her valley, the Paiute/Numu. What do you know about the history and contemporary reality of Indigenous people where you live? Why do you think many people are not taught this about their own homes?
8. Kendra decides to move home to Bishop for many reasons. Which ones stood out to you the most?
9. *Miracle Country* is as much about the author's home as it is about her life and family. What effect did the pairing of a personal story with the story of a place have on you?
10. *Miracle Country* is in part about living deeply in a place: committing to making it better and not just depleting it of resources and moving on. In what ways is your own home a deeply lived-in place? In what ways is it not?
11. Which family member's relationship to home most resonated with you? Why?
12. Is William Mulholland, the engineer of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, a villain, or should he be forgiven for upholding the values of his time?
13. How would you describe Kendra's feelings about losing her mother by the time she moves home? What are the different roles loss plays in *Miracle Country*? How does the author's attitude toward the loss of her mother change by the end of the book?
14. What role does Mary Austin play in the book? How does she help us understand the place and especially the women, like Kendra and her mom, who love it?
15. What emotions and ideas about your own home did *Miracle Country* stir?

Connect with Kendra Atleework online:

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ALGONQUIN PAPERBACKS

CHASING BALLOONS

The Author Interviews Her Father, Robert Atlee

Miracle Country tells the story of my family's life in our remote desert home, at the base of the Sierra Nevada. I grew up roaming the mountains as my parents passed on lessons of how to love a wild place. After my mother's death, my father raised my siblings and me alone.



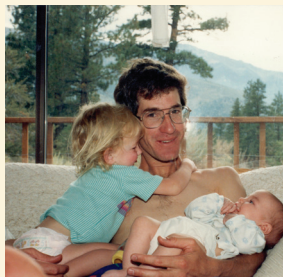
Miracle Country explores how our family was fractured by that loss, and how, amid drought and wildfire, we came together again.

These days, I live just a mile from my father, not far from the small hospital where I was born. On a windy evening, Pop and I sat at his kitchen table and talked about the journey that has led each of us to this moment in this little town, and the book that tells the story of our family and our home.

—Kendra Atleework

Kendra: What was it like being a single dad to the three of us?

Pop: It was ... interesting! There was always something... different going on. We were all a little disconnected. You guys wanted to be left alone but at the same time you needed attention. By that age you were completely independent, working at Tom's Place. Kaela was 80% independent because she was working in Mammoth and staying with friends.



Pop, Kendra, and Kaela.

And Anthony was a grumpy twelve-year-old who had to be at home because he couldn't be anywhere else, ha! I made dinners most every night. And Anthony always had homework, which he wouldn't do—he'd just sit in his room! So we'd have dinner and then I'd help Anthony with his homework, when he'd cooperate.



Pop and Anthony take on a steep hill in their vehicles of choice.

But it wasn't like I was exhausted or anything. I'd play and ski and do my work, and then I'd be around for you guys in the evenings.

Dealing with you guys was kind of a distraction. I didn't look at it like, Oh, this is really hard, I can't do this. I just thought, Ha! This is kind of a pain!

Kendra: What went through your head when you realized you were going to have three teenagers by yourself?

Pop: Mom had left me an operating manual. You read a lot of that. And that really helped. I'd just look at it and go, Oh, here's what Mom suggested for this situation.

Kendra: You didn't do some of it—Kaela never learned to type!

Pop: No, ha! But Anthony did! It was a transition. I never felt like I had to process all my own grief and didn't have time for you guys. I walked at night. That was my therapy, I think. I'd always go for a walk with Ricky for an hour. Or two. And then when everyone was gone, I walked with Ricky more.

It was probably harder then—when you went away for college and Kaela took off for South America and Anthony was in his desert trouble school. Then I really was by myself. And I had more time to think. And I was still okay—I had friends who checked in on me. But I think it was harder a couple years after Mom died. Before that, I had to buy food, I had to keep an eye on



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all the school stuff, I had to keep the house going. So that kept me busy.

Kendra: When we were little, you were a stay-at-home dad. What was that life like for you and Mom?

Pop: Mom worked full-time—a little bit more than full-time. So I fixed the cars, did the yardwork, took care of the house, did the grocery shopping, cleaned the house, did the cooking, took care of kids after school, and ran my hot air balloon business. I was the soccer mom. I drove the team around and coached the team. I would haul you all around in the big old map delivery van.



The Atleework family on the shore of the Pacific Ocean.

Kendra: And you dressed up as Abe Lincoln and came to school every year for his birthday.

Pop: That's right, ha! There was a lot of variety, so I liked it. And I still had fun. It was a good life.

Kendra: I remember Mom mostly coming home from the office at the end of the day and then she would hang out with us while you cooked dinner. And on the weekend she'd do the laundry.

Pop: She did laundry. That was her home chore. And then on Saturday nights we'd make dinner together, so it wasn't my cooking all the time.

Kendra: She could cook, like, two things! Whenever she was responsible for dinner by herself it was scrambled eggs. Steamed broccoli and scrambled eggs.

Pop: She could read a cookbook. She could make quiche!

Kendra: And popcorn. Bowls and bowls of popcorn.

So tell me about how you wound up being a hot air balloon pilot.

Pop: I was 26 and living in Bishop in the burned Rocking K restaurant. A couple of friends needed to go to a wedding in Colorado. I was working at the Bishop airport at the time and flying short charter flights. So I flew them to Colorado, and they went to the wedding, and I rented a bike and was riding around. There was a balloon flying in the distance, and I started chasing it on the bike. I rode underneath it for about ten miles until it landed, and then I started chatting with the pilot.



Baby Kendra sits on Pop's airplane.

He said where are you from, and I said Mammoth, and he said do you have a balloon company there, and I said no! And he said you need a balloon company! You have a pilot's license—I can sign you off to fly a balloon in a week.

Which is really dangerous. You should fly with someone for six months to learn how to be a safe pilot. But he found us a used balloon and he came out to Bishop in his little Dobson pickup. He felt the winds here and said yeah, this would be a good place to fly. He flew with us—me and my friend Dave—for one week, and then he went home.

Dave had four-wheel-drive trucks and an old trailer and knew all the back roads from hunting. And I'd been living in the Rocking K restaurant and saving money. So for \$25,000 we started a balloon company.

We learned a lot in the next five years. And we're really lucky that we didn't kill anybody or kill ourselves. Because flying in the mountains is really dangerous.

I found it was safest to fly out in the basin by Crowley Lake. I flew for ten years out there and I never had a windy landing. Somebody could still start a balloon company again and do pretty well flying for the tourists out there.



Kendra: Tell me about that one bad accident.

Pop: That was the day of the Mammoth balloon festival. It was a windy morning and I canceled the whole festival and went home and went to bed. Dave and a friend found a calm pocket and they launched, and the sky just went crazy. It was the mountain rotors—the Sierra Wave. He was going up a thousand feet a minute and down a thousand feet a minute out near those huge power lines by the gorge.

Eventually the chase crew came around a corner and saw the balloon way up in the sky, and then they saw it go flat and streamer down and slam into the ground. The crew thought everyone was dead.

Before that, Dave had hit the desert floor really hard at twenty or thirty miles per hour, and dragged, and filled the gondola up with sand, and the balloon separated from the gondola. And it's good that it did, because the balloon still had some hot air in it, and it went up with the propane tanks and everything. It almost got Dave's girlfriend. She had a rope partially wrapped around her, but as the balloon was tearing away, Dave pulled it off. She got pretty bad rope burn, but the balloon could have taken her up and dropped her, and she would have been killed.

It went up probably 500 feet, and then it collapsed and streamered down.

The chase crew saw it hit the desert floor. When they drove to it, they saw there was no basket. They're looking for the basket, and then they see Dave and the others waving from two miles away.

Kendra: What did you think when you knew I was writing a book with all your wild stories about our family?

Pop: I thought it was great. We've got a lot of stories! We've got a lot of history here. And you loved the mountains. People ask me what I've done since I moved here in 1982, almost 40 years of living in the Eastern Sierra, and you found out and wrote it down.

Kendra: And now that the book is all over the country and all over town?

Pop: People just kind of confirm—they say, we always knew you were kind of kooky! But people have been really warm. They say to me, "Oh, I know all about you now." And they like it! They like to know about you.



Pop and baby Kendra at the piano.

Kendra: People like feeling connected with another family's story. Somebody in an interview said that *Miracle Country* is unusual in that it's a happy memoir.

Pop: Even though your mom dies of cancer.

Kendra: Before that, my childhood was really happy. And we still had the lessons that came from her that we carried forward. And we get to live here, in Bishop. Can you imagine what your life would look like if you hadn't wound up here?

Pop: I would have probably worked for a big food corporation in a factory job supporting an industry that's been proven to be unhealthy for children and other living things! I might have accidentally gotten married and started a family and then had bills and payments, and I probably would have been okay. Because I've always been happy. I might have been fine in a corporate job in Battle Creek, Michigan.



The family by a high country lake.

Kendra: It's hard to imagine you in that life. The Eastern Sierra—it's what you map, and flying over the landscape and knowing the way the wind and the weather interact with the land has been the way you make a living. In that way, for a technology-oriented culture, it's



unusual to have that much of your life wrapped up in where you live.

And it's kind of unusual in our culture to live in a small town and have your children still live within two miles of you. Do you think you caused that by making your children weird and unable to fit in anywhere else?

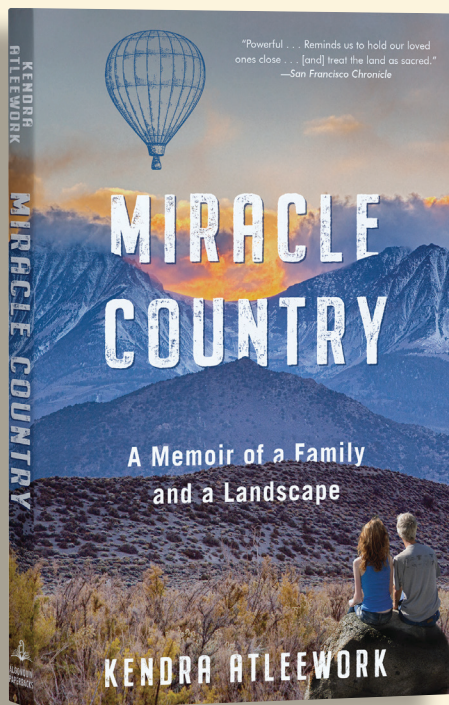
Pop: Well, it's partially my fault because I tried to make it pretty fun, and nice to be at home. I tried to make home not a stressful place. I want to say that I caused it, because I like to think you guys enjoy spending time with me and you enjoy being home. But I didn't try to cause it. I wanted you guys to go out and do whatever you needed to do to be happy. I didn't try to keep any of you at home, especially when you left at first. I encouraged you to branch out and do things. But it's my fault for being a parent, and living in a beautiful place, and making it home.



A typical Atlework family Christmas card photo featuring the family pets.

Visit the author online at Atlework.com, where you may sign up for updates from Kendra on the Contact page.

For more information about *Miracle Country* and other Algonquin titles, visit algonquin.com.



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