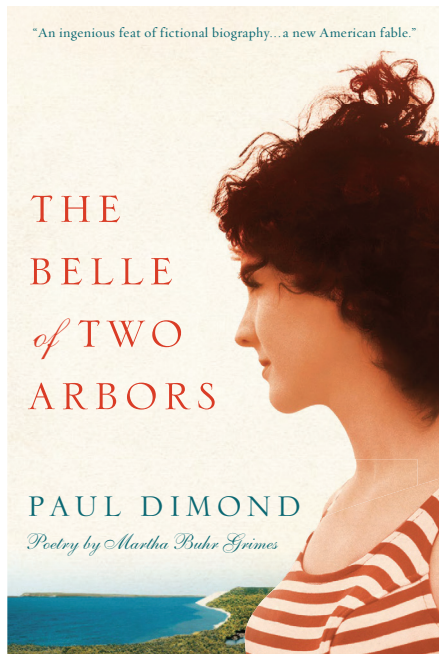


THE BELLE *of* TWO ARBORS

Readers Guide



1. The Belle of Two Arbors lives in the narrative voice and first-person perspective of the lead character. How do her acute senses of seeing and sound drive the story? How does her surprise at being confronted by unforeseen circumstances, new friends and antagonists, and unexpected challenges shape the arc of her life and the novel?
2. The Sleeping Bear Dunes, Lakeshore and Bay provide more than a primary stage and home for the four generations of characters with whom Belle interacts. This setting inspires Belle's poems and her Ojibwe partner David's second sight. It also plays a dynamic role as if another major character throughout the novel: discuss how the great lake as big as an ocean, the dunes as vast as a desert, and the shore as changing as the seasons influence the story-line, plot and interactions between the characters.
3. Belle Cottage and Cambridge House offer Belle two sanctuaries to hide, cope, heal, compose, reach out, and grow. Discuss the particular importance of her bedroom, attic and the study of her cottage in Glen Arbor and of the glass house, pool and study in her home in Ann Arbor to her well-being.
4. Exercise and sport play a major role in the novel, particularly swimming, walking, sailing and tennis for Belle, golf and hockey for her brother Pip. Discuss how each physical activity at different times provides challenge, escape, solace, immersion, disappointment, social interaction, fun or exhilaration to Belle or Pip. Which of these occasions mark a significant passage rather than just play for the two main characters?
5. Belle struggles with her inner demons to confront powerful antagonists throughout the novel. Up north, she battles her father who thinks a woman can't run the family business; clashes with developers like Sven who seek to scar the recovering landscape; and fights all latecomers bent on keeping David Ahgosa and his Ojibwe band down. In Ann Arbor, she challenges the status quo of academic pedants and chauvinists who try to put down creative artists, dreamers and inventors, women and other minorities. Why is Belle able to reconcile with so many of her antagonists over the course of the novel without ever giving up, even when her goals are not fully realized? In contrast, Belle never settles with Ned Strait: discuss how and why this conflict is resolved so differently in the end.
6. How do Emily Dickinson's poetry and Belle's friendship and work with Robert Frost, Ted Roethke and Wystan Auden, influence the lead character's life and her composing what she calls her songs? Why does Belle refuse to publish her poems while alive and instead entrusts all her archives at her death to David's daughter? Why does Belle instruct this Angel to share these papers only with Ruthie upon the death of Belle's last peer? Given the on-going battles over

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the poetry, publishing, archives and legacies of Dickinson and Frost, what do you make of the different choices Belle makes?

7. Is Belle doomed in the novel to be unlucky in love and childless, or is she blessed by many loves who become lifelong friends, partners, colleagues, even a younger generation of three others' offspring she helps raise? Discuss the relationships she has with her three great poet friends, her peers David, Rabbie, Mirja and Kurt, and the next generation Ruthie, Paul and Angel. How do these relationships change over the course of the novel?
8. Belle's brother Pip is odd, distant, sometimes moody, physically challenged and eventually deaf. Yet he turns out to be a tower of strength and support for the older sister who raised him and loves him as if a son and comes to respect him as the genius, tinkerer, business partner, and best friend he becomes. How different would the novel read if written from Pip's point of view and narrative voice? In the second half of the novel, Ruthie plays an increasingly important role: a quarter century after Belle's death, what does the reader discover from Ruthie's new point of view and narrative voice?
9. In many historical novels the author places the fictional characters and plot on the canvas already painted by actual persons, events, and places of the time. Yet bygone history is never static as written and understood by future generations; and, if fictional characters, family and firms had actually lived, they could change history as much as any others who did live at the time. Consider the enterprises of Belle, David and their families up north: to what extent did they change the history of Leelanau peninsula? To what extent do Belle's work and interactions with faculty and staff change history at the University of Michigan? Do such changes fit in the historical landscape because authentic within the context of what these characters could accomplish?
10. In historical novels where real persons are also characters, is it possible that new insights can be gained about these historic figures. Here, for example, Frost, Roethke and Auden can be seen anew in different settings interacting with fictional characters and events. Whatever else may have been said or written about these three poets, how do you read their characters in this novel? May such new understandings be more insightful than those seen through the lens, for example, of the most determined biographers?
11. In the Note at the end of the novel, the author says the lead character "mostly wrote herself." How is this possible? He adds, "I hope you will wonder about Belle long after you put this book down, just as I continue to wonder about her after my last edit, many drafts, and more revisions, long after Belle started blessing me nearly a decade ago." What do you wonder about Belle now? Will she be as hard for you to forget?