

Readers' Guide

Essential Mary Austin

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Timeline

This outline of notable events places *Essential Mary Austin* in a historical and literary context.

- 1853-1887 Indian reservations are first set up in California. Many of the reservations are small and located on land that isn't arable, that lacks game, and is distant from clean water sources.
- 1861 The first oil well in California is drilled manually in Humboldt County.
- 1868 Mary Austin is born Mary Hunter in Carlinville, Illinois.
- 1890 Austin's mother moves the family to a homestead near the San Joaquin Valley.
- 1891 Austin marries Stafford Wallace Austin. Stafford Wallace Austin was a teacher, a grape farmer, and also managed an irrigation project that failed.
- 1893 The railroad connects to Kern County. The construction of new railroads in the central valley not only aids the fast-growing California oil industry but also causes the emergence of new towns along the railways.
- 1899 The discovery of the Kern River oil field makes Kern County the most successful oil region in the state. The success of oil production in there leads to an increase in railroad lines and mines, both of which have significant detrimental effects on the land of the San Joaquin Valley, including the disruption of the habitats of local animals and plants.
- 1903 Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* is published. The book, which details the harsh yet beautiful California desert landscapes and its animals, plants, and people, is met with success. Austin becomes an instant celebrity, leading her to become friends with luminaries such as George Bernard Shaw, Willa Cather, William Butler Yeats, and Teddy Roosevelt. Shortly after her book is published, Austin leaves her husband.
- 1904 Oil production at Kern River exceeds annual oil production from Texas. Mary Austin moves to Carmel, California, and becomes part of a literary circle that includes Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and George Sterling.

- 1906 The San Francisco earthquake damages the city, but it is the ensuing fires that cause the most destruction and leave many San Franciscans homeless. *The Flock* is published, providing a detailed account of the experience of shepherding in California.
- 1909 *Lost Borders* is published. This collection of short stories highlights Austin's gift for writing for both adults and children, while still preserving the vivid detail of the effects of landscape and culture on experience.
- 1911 California becomes the sixth U.S. state to offer women the vote.
- 1913 The Los Angeles Aqueduct is completed, diverting water from the Owens River to L.A. While providing much needed water to Los Angeles, the creation of the aqueduct was controversial, as it turned the Owens River into a dry valley and impacted the farmers and wildlife by creating an entirely new ecosystem that, without water, could barely sustain life.
- 1914 Austin officially divorces Stafford Wallace Austin.
- 1917 *The Ford* is published. In this novel, Austin describes the battles over water rights that plagued the Central Valley for several years.
- 1920 The Nineteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution gives women the right to vote in national elections.
- 1932 *Earth Horizon* is published. This autobiography recounts not only Austin's life and experiences but also chronicles her development as a writer.
- 1934 Mary Austin dies in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- 1937 Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation is established in the Owens Valley.
- 1988 *Cactus Thorn*, written in 1927, is published posthumously. In this novella, Austin relates a love story that not only critiques women's relationships to men but also one woman's relationship to her homeland.

Questions to Discuss

1. Many of Austin's books are set in the desert. What features of this setting did she focus on and why?
2. In *The Land of Little Rain* and the excerpts from *The Flock*, Austin sometimes relates people and places to characters and motifs found in the Bible. How does this treatment affect these texts?
3. In the selection from *The California Earthquake of 1906*, Austin focuses more on the people affected by the earthquake than the physical damage the city sustained.

- Why do you think she chose to do this? How does she capture the emotions within the city during this event?
4. Why do you think *The Land of Little Rain* was so popular when it was first published in 1903?
 5. In the passages from *Lost Borders*, why do you think Mrs. Wills felt energized after her husband disappeared? What does this reveal about Austin's views on married life during this time?
 6. Austin gives rain, streams, animals, and plants a personality in *The Land of Little Rain* and *The Flock*. How does this help you understand these texts? Where do you find similarities in her descriptions?
 7. Austin includes great detail about the plant life of California in her writing. Did this help you understand the settings better? Why or why not?
 8. In the passages from *The Ford* Austin includes the incident of Kenneth seeing the man jump into one of the oil wells. What kind of statement do you think Austin is making by including this event? Why is this significant?
 9. How important is weather to the shepherds in the excerpts from *The Flock*? How is their relationship to weather different from Austin's, if at all?
 10. In the selection from *Cactus Thorn*, what is it about the woman Arliss meets that makes her so alluring? In what ways do you think she represents (or does not) the desert itself?
 11. How are the excerpts from *Lost Borders* different from Austin's other texts? Do you think Emma Jeffries will really leave? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading

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