

DISCERNING GOD'S BEST

A Discussion Guide Packet

Keeper of My Heart

by Heidi Gray McGill

Meet Heidi Gray McGill

Heidi Gray McGill writes Christian historical romance set on the American frontier, where faith carries her characters through hardship, found family, and second chances. She is the author of the *Discerning God's Best* series. Heidi makes her home in South Carolina, just below the Charlotte, NC, border, with her husband of 35+ years. Together they enjoy walking, hiking, kayaking, scuba diving, snorkeling, and playing with their three grandsons. Connect with her at heidigraymcgill.com.

Dear Reading Friends

Thank you for choosing *Keeper of My Heart* for your book club. Cecelia and Jimmy come from two entirely different worlds, and I am grateful you would walk with them as they find their footing, in the ranch, in the apothecary, and in each other.

Inside this packet you will find discussion questions organized into short sections, a verse to carry with you from the story, and an activity or two for your gathering. Pick a question or two from each section, or work through the whole guide together. There is no wrong way to do it.

If your club would enjoy a visit, I would love to join you by Zoom or in person if I am nearby. Reach out through the contact form at heidigraymcgill.com.

With gratitude,

Heidi

Icebreakers

- Have you ever had to prove yourself capable in a role others assumed you couldn't handle?
- What's one skill or bit of wisdom passed down in your own family, the way herbal medicine passes through Robin's line?
- Have you ever felt like your worth was tied to your last name, your job, or what you could produce, rather than who you are?

Discussion Questions

Choose one or two questions from each section below, or work through the whole guide as time allows. Chapter numbers are noted so you can revisit a scene together.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Cecelia opens the book already outworking every hand on the ranch, certain she doesn't need a man to prove her worth. What does this introduction tell you about the walls she's built, and why? *(Chapter 1)*

Jimmy arrives in Shumard Oak Bend overwhelmed by noise and mud, counting his breaths just to stay steady. What does his very first scene reveal about how he experiences the world differently than those around him? *(Chapter 1)*

CHARACTER & GROWTH

Robin and Pete take Jimmy in and teach him herbal medicine, treating his quirks as simply part of who he is rather than something to fix. How does their acceptance change the way Jimmy carries himself over the story?

Cecelia's father tells her, "God makes people whole in pieces." How does this idea play out in both Cecelia's and Jimmy's separate journeys toward wholeness?

FAITH & SCRIPTURE

Pastor Hans preaches on Psalm 20:7, some trust in chariots and some in horses. How does this verse speak differently to Cecelia's fierce self-reliance than it does to Jimmy's inherited family name and estate? *(Chapter 17)*

Scripture: Psalm 20:7

When the fever outbreak at the orphanage takes more than it spares, Jimmy's faith nearly buckles under the weight of it. What does the story teach about grief, faith, and the limits of even our best effort? *(Chapters 20–29)*

Scripture: Psalm 73

THEMES & REFLECTION

Hans tells Jimmy plainly that his father may own the estate, but God owns him. Why do you think Jimmy needed to hear it from someone outside his family to finally believe it? *(Chapter 30)*

Cecelia grew up secure in her father's love and her faith; Jimmy grew up under a father who demanded no weakness. What does the book suggest about how our earthly fathers shape, but don't have to determine, how we see God?

PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

Clyde Ames undermines Cecelia at nearly every turn, unable to accept a woman running circles around him. If you worked alongside someone like Clyde day after day, how would you have handled him differently than Cecelia does?

Jimmy receives letter after letter demanding he return to Philadelphia and take up an inheritance he never wanted. If you were being pulled by family obligation away from a life and people you'd finally begun to love, what would you have done?

WRAP-UP & LOOKING BACK

By the story's end, both Cecelia and Jimmy have had to redefine what belonging means, she by learning she doesn't have to earn her place through work alone, he by learning his worth was never tied to the Reeves name. Where do you see each of them finally let go?

What do you think the title *Keeper of My Heart* means, both for Cecelia and for Jimmy?
(*Epilogue*)

ONE VERSE TO CARRY WITH YOU

Psalm 20:7

Open your own Bible and read it together before you begin.

Which Character Are You? A Frontier Faith Quiz

Answer each question, then tally your letters.

1. **When life gets overwhelming, you**

- A. Work harder and push through alone.
- B. Retreat somewhere quiet to steady your thoughts.
- C. Turn to what the land and the old ways have already taught you.

2. **Your idea of strength is**

- A. Never needing anyone's help.
- B. Knowing exactly what you know, and being honest about what you don't.
- C. Patience earned over many years of practice.

3. **People are surprised to learn**

- A. How soft your heart is under all that grit.
- B. How much you notice that others miss.
- C. How much wisdom you're willing to share with anyone who asks.

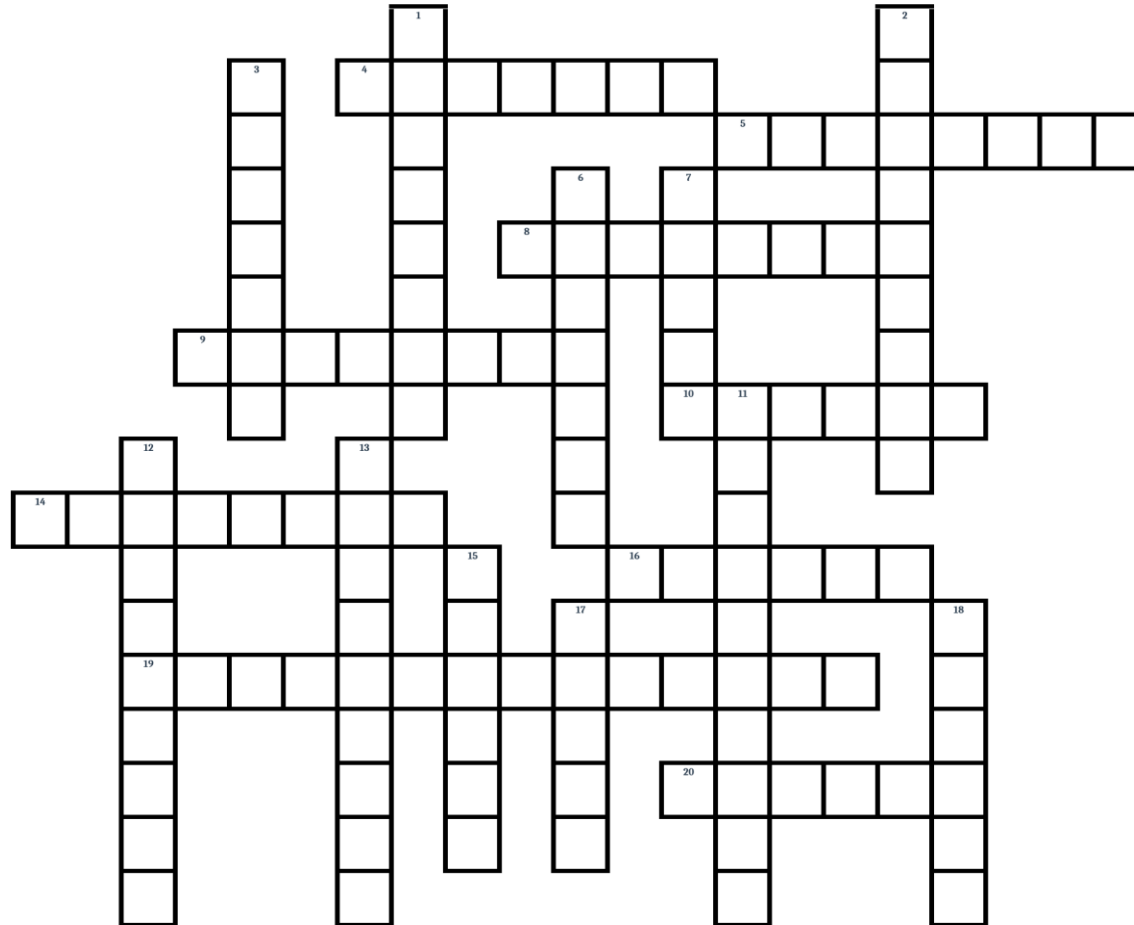
RESULTS

Mostly A's, you're like **Cecelia**. Capable and guarded, you'd rather prove it than say it.

Mostly B's, you're like **Jimmy**. Thoughtful and observant, you take the world in carefully before responding to it.

Mostly C's, you're like **Robin**. Steady and wise, you've learned that healing takes time, and you're willing to give it.

Crossword: Keeper of My Heart



ACROSS

4. Herb nicknamed "knitbone" for its healing reputation
5. A soft, warm herbal paste applied to the skin
8. Its root is used in a soothing cough remedy
9. A medicine made by steeping herbs in liquid
10. Herb historically used to help wounds stop bleeding
14. The untamed edge of settled territory
16. The livestock at the center of ranch life
19. The town where this story takes place (one word, no spaces)
20. The building later turned into an apothecary shop

DOWN

1. A biting pest whose sting calls for a home remedy
2. A yellow-flowered herb used in a healer's remedies
3. The wide open grassland surrounding the ranch
6. A sharp, sour staple used in cleaning and healing alike
7. A natural sweetener used to soothe a sore throat
11. Old-fashioned word for a pharmacy or druggist's shop
12. A family's claimed and settled piece of land
13. One who practices healing with plants and roots
15. A book for recording accounts and figures
17. Where cattle are raised and the books are kept
18. Where the sick and injured are treated in town

Q&A with the Author

What inspired this story?

Cecelia herself is an inspiration. Every female main character in the Discerning God's Best series is strong in her own way, but Cecelia is in a league all her own. I didn't want to make her cocky, so I worked to make her confident and self-assured instead, a strong female character grown out of the rambunctious toddler she was in the earlier books. There's another piece to this puzzle, too. When I sent *Healing of the Heart*, Book 5, to my editor, she was thrilled I'd included a neurodivergent character. I hadn't even realized I'd done it; I just thought Jimmy was quirky, nervous, and a little nerdy. But because my editor is on the spectrum herself, she saw it immediately. I knew Jimmy needed to tell his own story, and I recognized right away that Cecelia was his perfect match, even if it was going to be a challenge for the two of them to see it.

Who is your favorite character?

Cecelia, for all the reasons above.

Who was hardest to write?

Clyde Ames, for a few reasons. He's entitled, and when Cecelia rebuffs him, he turns his attention to Serafina instead, showing exactly how low he's willing to go. But the truly hard part wasn't writing his cruelty, it was writing his death. The fear he felt in that moment was real, because he didn't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It would have been easy, and expected, to tie that up with a neat bow and have him call out to God in his final breath. But that wouldn't have been honest. None of us know when we'll take our last breath, and Clyde's story is a hard reminder of why we need to be ready before that moment comes, not in it.

What's the spiritual heart of this book?

Cecelia grew up inside the church, with her father as a living picture of what a good father, earthly and heavenly, looks like. Her faith was never something she had to fight for; it was handed to her steady and sure, the same way the ranch was. Jimmy came from the opposite direction entirely, a father who barked orders and demanded no weakness, memories of a boy afraid to admit he was hurting, no one who ever simply loved him without conditions attached. Where Cecelia's faith grew like something planted in good soil, Jimmy's had to break through rock. His transformation isn't about learning new information; he already had the book knowledge. It's about learning that God's ownership of him has nothing to do with the Reeves name, the estate, or his father's approval. Read side by side, Cecelia and Jimmy's stories say the same thing from opposite ends: a changed life doesn't depend on where you started.

Teddy's Table

A simple spread built around the recipe at the heart of this book.

- Teddy's cinnamon bread (recipe below)
- Ginger snaps
- Mint tea
- Fresh butter

In Chapter Four, Jimmy arrives at Thomas and Teddy's chaotic, love-filled home just as a thin plume of smoke curls out of the kitchen doorway. “The cinnamon bread!” Teddy cries, and the whole household scrambles after her. This is the bread she was baking, made the way a busy 1877 homestead kitchen would have made it: from the same dough as the day's loaves, rolled thin, layered with butter, cinnamon, and sugar, and left to rise before it goes in the oven.

TEDDY'S CINNAMON BREAD

Yield: 1 loaf, sliced • Rise time: about 2 hours • Bake time: 30 to 35 minutes

Ingredients

1 batch soft white bread dough, risen once and ready to shape (store-bought loaf dough or your own recipe) • 4 tbsp butter, very soft, plus extra for the pan • $\frac{1}{3}$ cup sugar • $1\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp ground cinnamon • 1 egg, beaten with a splash of water, for brushing the top (optional, for shine)

Instructions

1. Turn the risen dough onto a floured board and roll it into a rectangle about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick, roughly 9 by 14 inches.
2. Spread the soft butter evenly over the surface, all the way to the edges.
3. Stir the sugar and cinnamon together and sprinkle evenly over the butter.
4. Starting from a short end, roll the dough into a tight log, pinching the seam closed. Tuck the ends under and set the loaf seam-side down in a greased 9 by 5 inch loaf pan.
5. Cover loosely and let rise until doubled, about an hour and a half in a warm kitchen, longer in a cool one.
6. Brush the top with the egg wash if using. Bake at 350°F for 30 to 35 minutes, until deeply golden and the loaf sounds hollow when tapped.
7. Cool in the pan for ten minutes, then turn out onto a rack. Slice once fully cool, or serve warm with extra butter.

A baker's note: keep an eye on the oven. In the story, this loaf nearly meets its end while Teddy is busy wrangling a houseful of children and a fussy baby. History and fiction agree on this much: cinnamon bread and distraction do not mix.

A Closing Note from Heidi

Dear Reader,

Cecelia and Jimmy came from two entirely different worlds, one built on faith handed down steady and sure, the other built on rock that had to be broken through. I hope their story reminds you that no matter which one is closer to your own, a changed life is always possible. Thank you for reading, and for sharing this story with your book club.

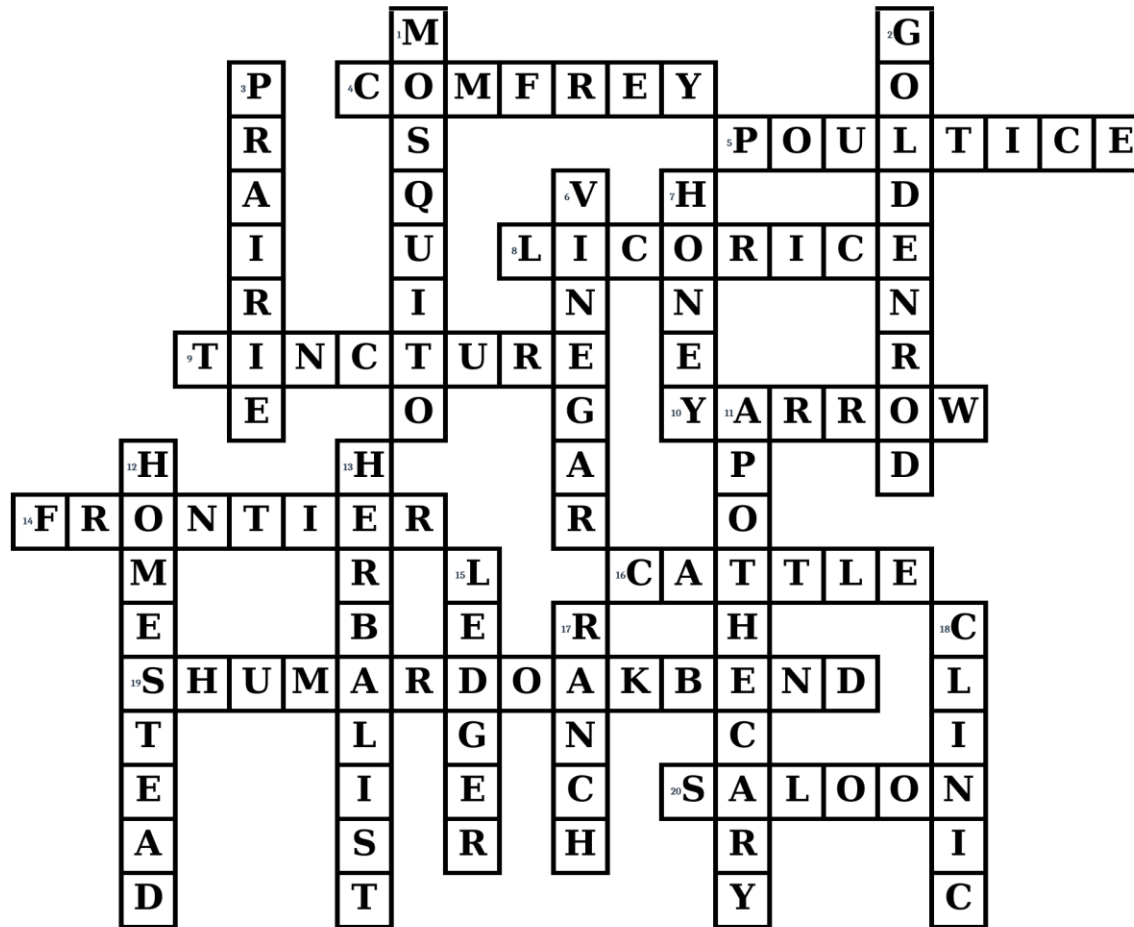
Heidi

Crossword Answer Key

For the Keeper of My Heart crossword.

1. APOTHECARY — Old-fashioned word for a pharmacy or druggist's shop
2. TINCTURE — A medicine made by steeping herbs in liquid
3. COMFREY — Herb nicknamed “knitbone” for its healing reputation
4. YARROW — Herb historically used to help wounds stop bleeding
5. HERBALIST — One who practices healing with plants and roots
6. CLINIC — Where the sick and injured are treated in town
7. HOMESTEAD — A family's claimed and settled piece of land
8. RANCH — Where cattle are raised and the books are kept
9. CATTLE — The livestock at the center of ranch life
10. LEDGER — A book for recording accounts and figures
11. SALOON — The building later turned into an apothecary shop
12. POULTICE — A soft, warm herbal paste applied to the skin
13. HONEY — A natural sweetener used to soothe a sore throat
14. MOSQUITO — A biting pest whose sting calls for a home remedy
15. PRAIRIE — The wide open grassland surrounding the ranch
16. FRONTIER — The untamed edge of settled territory
17. VINEGAR — A sharp, sour staple used in cleaning and healing alike
18. GOLDENROD — A yellow-flowered herb used in a healer's remedies
19. LICORICE — Its root is used in a soothing cough remedy
20. SHUMARDOAKBEND — The town where this story takes place

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