

DISCERNING GOD'S BEST

A Discussion Guide Packet

Written on 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 *Written on My Heart* for your book club. Gabe has been part of this family since he was a boy called Little Sun, and I am grateful you would walk with him through the hardest chapter of his story.

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

- Has your worth ever felt tied to what you could do, rather than who you are?
- Have you ever watched someone talented be overlooked for reasons that had nothing to do with their ability?
- Who is someone in your life who has stood up for you the way Sheriff Adkins stands up for Gabe?

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

Gabe tracks and single-handedly captures the Iron Horse Bandits in the opening chapter, using skills passed down through his upbringing. What does this opening tell you about how Gabe sees himself, and how the town might see him differently? (*Chapter 1*)

Betsy is introduced through the eyes of others as an “old maid, a spinster schoolteacher,” teaching in a one-room schoolhouse on the edge of town. What does this first impression reveal about the box the town has put her in? (*Chapter 2*)

CHARACTER & GROWTH

Gabe went from a boy nicknamed Little Sun for his ever-present smile to a man whose smile “rarely reaches his eyes.” What do you think caused that shift, and where do you see the old Gabe resurface over the story? (*Chapters 1–2*)

Sheriff Adkins consistently backs Gabe, both professionally and personally, even ordering him to rest when he won't rest himself. How does that steady support shape the choices Gabe makes later in the book? (*Chapter 8*)

FAITH & SCRIPTURE

Pete tells Gabe that his worth comes from what God says about him, not what others say or what he tells himself. How does this truth challenge the way Gabe has been living up to that point? (*Chapter 11*)

Scripture: Psalm 139:14

Nancy Taylor tells Betsy to do what God says, not man, no matter what others think. Why do you think this same counsel applies just as much to Gabe's situation as it does to Betsy's? (*Chapter 9*)

Scripture: Philippians 4:6–7

THEMES & REFLECTION

Gabe was denied the chance to attend medical school because of his heritage, despite matching or exceeding Thomas in both book knowledge and the natural healing wisdom passed down from his mother. What does the story ask you to sit with regarding talent, opportunity, and the barriers some people face that have nothing to do with ability?

Luther Conrad harasses Betsy throughout the book and, years earlier, fired Gabe from the Rolla mines. What does the story show you about how one man's cruelty can reach into more than one life at once?

PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

Gabe spends years measuring his worth by what he can do, how well he fights, how fast he draws, how hard he works. If your own sense of worth were suddenly stripped of everything you're good at, what would be left?

Town gossips openly speculate about Betsy's future and her suitors right in front of her, weighing Luther against Gabe as though she has no say in the matter. If you overheard people talking about your life that way, how would you have responded? (*Chapter 21*)

WRAP-UP & LOOKING BACK

By the story's end, Gabe finally understands that his worth was never in what he had done, but in who he is in Christ. What moment finally brings him to that realization, and why do you think it took so long to get there? (*Chapter 31*)

What do you think the title *Written on My Heart* means, both for Gabe and for the town that finally comes around to him? (*Epilogue*)

ONE VERSE TO CARRY WITH YOU

Psalm 139:14

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 someone doubts you, your instinct is to**

- A. Prove them wrong through sheer skill and effort.
- B. Hold your head high and keep going on your own terms.
- C. Stand beside the person being doubted and back them publicly.

2. **You measure your own worth by**

- A. What you're able to accomplish.
- B. Whether you're respected for your mind and your work.
- C. Whether the people around you are treated fairly.

3. **People who know you would call you**

- A. Guarded, but fiercely loyal underneath.
- B. Sharp-minded and quietly determined.
- C. Steady, fair, and impossible to intimidate.

RESULTS

Mostly A's, you're like **Gabe**. Skilled and guarded, you've learned to let your actions speak first.

Mostly B's, you're like **Betsy**. Capable and composed, you refuse to shrink to fit anyone else's expectations.

Mostly C's, you're like **Sheriff Adkins**. Fair-minded and unshakeable, you're the one who shows up for people others overlook.

Could You Pass Betsy's Class?

A note before you dig in: this exam is dated 1895, twenty years after Betsy's classroom in 1875, but a one-room schoolhouse curriculum changed very little in that stretch, so it stands in fairly for what her own students would have faced.

GRAMMAR

Name the parts of speech and define those that have no modifications.

Define verse, stanza, and paragraph.

ARITHMETIC

A wagon box is 2 ft. deep, 10 ft. long, and 3 ft. wide. How many bushels of wheat will it hold?

Find the interest of \$512.60 for 8 months and 18 days at 7 percent.

U.S. HISTORY

Give an account of the discovery of America by Columbus.

Name events connected with the following dates: 1607, 1620, 1776, 1849, and 1865.

ORTHOGRAPHY (SPELLING)

What is meant by the following: alphabet, phonetic orthography, etymology, syllabication?

Give two rules for spelling words with a final "e." Name an exception to each.

GEOGRAPHY

What is climate? Upon what does it depend?

Why is the Atlantic coast colder than the Pacific at the same latitude?

A note for your club: some of these have a clean factual answer; others, like the composition and history questions, were meant to be argued and discussed, not just answered. Read a few aloud and see who in your group would have passed the eighth grade in 1895. Answers are on the last page of this packet.

Did You Know? School in Betsy's Day

- One teacher, often not much older than her oldest students, taught all eight grades at once in a single room.
- The youngest beginners were nicknamed “Abecedarians,” for the alphabet they were just learning.
- Rural schools typically ran five to seven months a year, built around planting and harvest, when children were needed on the farm.
- For most students, **eighth grade was the finish line**. High schools existed but were mostly a city convenience; a farm family rarely had the means or the reason to send a child further.
- The McGuffey Readers were the backbone of most classrooms, teaching reading, morals, and manners all at once.
- Penmanship meant copying maxims like “Lost time is never found” over and over, in the same looping Spencerian script used on the Declaration of Independence.
- To be certified, teachers like Betsy had to pass their own exam first, covering spelling, grammar, geography, and U.S. history, sometimes given by the county the way a bar exam is given today.

Q&A with the Author

What inspired this story?

If you've followed this series from the beginning, you know how close Thomas and Gabe were growing up. I kept coming back to the injustice of how differently their lives turned out for reasons that had nothing to do with ability, only heritage. My former ESL students surfaced in my mind again here. I had students in that program who were lawyers, pharmacists, teachers, accountants, several with master's degrees, who could not find work suited to their training once they arrived here. Many ended up cleaning homes or working in restaurants, jobs they would have hired someone else to do back home. That gap between what a person is capable of and what the world allows them to become is what I wanted Gabe to carry. He outpaced Thomas at nearly everything growing up, and he carried not only the same book knowledge but the natural healing wisdom passed down from his mother. None of that mattered to the doors closed in front of him.

Who is your favorite character?

A supporting character this time: Sheriff Adkins. The way he stood up for Gabe, supported him, and believed in him when so much of the town would not, made him a joy to write.

Who was hardest to write?

Luther Conrad, without question. There were nights I couldn't sleep because he'd upset me so much during the day's writing, and mornings I dreaded sitting down because I knew a scene with him in it was waiting for me. He was the first truly "bad" character I ever wrote, and there were days I felt like I needed a bath afterward.

What's the spiritual heart of this book?

Gabe's arc. He has to come to the place where he accepts that because he has given his heart to the Lord, what other people think of him no longer has the final word, only what God thinks does. Pete says it to him plainly early on: "Not what others say. Not even what you tell yourself. But what God says about you. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. That means you're His workmanship, Gabe. Not an accident. Not a mistake." Gabe spends most of the book still measuring his worth by what he can do, how well he fights, how fast he draws, how hard he works, until he finally understands that none of that ever defined him. His worth was never in what he'd done. It was in who he was in Christ.

Fun Facts About Wild West & Pioneer Foods

Cowboys and pioneers didn't have modern kitchens, but they knew how to turn simple ingredients into hearty, flavorful meals that kept them fueled on the trail. A few fun and surprising facts about frontier food, straight from the research behind this series.

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

Beans, beans, and more beans. Cowboys called them “cowboy caviar,” cheap, filling, and perfect for long rides.

The chuck wagon was the original food truck. Invented by Charles Goodnight, this rolling kitchen held everything a cowboy needed to eat on the move.

Coffee worth fighting for. Arbuckle's coffee famously came with a peppermint stick tucked inside, meant for whoever was on cooking duty that day.

TRAIL STAPLES & FRONTIER INGENUITY

A sourdough starter was treated like a lifelong friend. Cowboys treasured their bubbling starter, since it made biscuits, flapjacks, and more.

Corn dodgers and johnnycakes turned cornmeal, salt, and bacon grease into crispy, comforting cakes.

Hardtack earned its nickname “the tooth-breaker.” It was so hard, it had to be soaked before eating.

MAKING IT LAST

Jerky wasn't just a snack, it was survival: salted, dried meat that could outlast any journey.

Nearly everything was salted, smoked, or dried. Dried apples, smoked venison, and salted pork kept bellies full between towns.

Hard cheese dipped in wax could stay good for months on the trail.

FRONTIER “DELICACIES”

Vinegar pie and sorrel pie were mock lemon pies, made from whatever tart ingredient was on hand, the same trick behind the vinegar crust in this series.

Calf's foot jelly, boiled calf's feet turned into a sweet, jiggly dessert, was considered a treat.

Prairie oysters had nothing to do with the ocean, and frontier cooks made use of every part of the animal, possum and skunk included.

FUN FOOD FACTS TO CHEW ON

- Cowboys called breakfast “son of a gun in a sack.”
- Pioneer kids loved popcorn balls held together with molasses.
- “Trail butter” mixed bacon grease and beans.
- Some wagon cooks made ice cream by shaking cream in snow.

A note for your club: if anyone wants to try their hand at a vinegar pie for the gathering, it's the same crust used for Harriet's zucchini mock apple pie in Healing of the Heart.

A Closing Note from Heidi

Dear Reader,

Gabe's whole life, he measured himself by what he could do. I hope his story reminds you, the way it reminded me while writing it, that your worth was never something you had to earn. It was written on your heart long before you did a single thing to deserve it. Thank you for reading, and for sharing this story with your book club.

Heidi

Exam Answer Key

For “Could You Pass Betsy's Class?” A few of these are open for discussion rather than a single right answer, noted below.

GRAMMAR

1. The eight parts of speech are noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, and interjection. Prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections do not change form regardless of number, tense, or case.
2. A verse is a single line of poetry. A stanza is a grouped set of lines, the poetic equivalent of a paragraph. A paragraph is a section of prose focused on a single idea, set off by indentation.

ARITHMETIC

3. The wagon box holds 60 cubic feet (2 x 10 x 3). At roughly 1.24 cubic feet per bushel, that works out to about 48 bushels.
4. Using the period's standard 360-day interest year, the interest comes to about \$25.72.

U.S. HISTORY

5. Open for discussion. Most answers cover Columbus's 1492 voyage, sponsored by Spain, and his landfall in the Bahamas while searching for a western route to Asia.
6. 1607, Jamestown founded. 1620, the Mayflower lands at Plymouth. 1776, the Declaration of Independence. 1849, the California Gold Rush. 1865, the Civil War ends and Lincoln is assassinated.

ORTHOGRAPHY

7. Alphabet: the set of letters used to write a language. Phonetic orthography: spelling that represents a word's sounds. Etymology: a word's origin and history. Syllabication: dividing a word into syllables.
8. Two common rules: drop the silent e before a suffix beginning with a vowel (hope + ing = hoping), except words ending in ce or ge often keep the e before able or ous to preserve the soft sound (noticeable, courageous). Keep the silent e before a suffix beginning with a consonant (hope + ful = hopeful), except words like true + ly = truly or argue + ment = argument, which drop it.

GEOGRAPHY

9. Climate is the typical weather pattern of a region over time. It depends on latitude, elevation, distance from the ocean, prevailing winds, and ocean currents.

10. Ocean currents. The Pacific coast is warmed by currents and prevailing westerlies off the ocean, while the Atlantic coast is affected by colder currents and continental air masses.