



READING GROUP GUIDE

BLACK DIAMONDS

A CHILDHOOD COLORED BY COAL

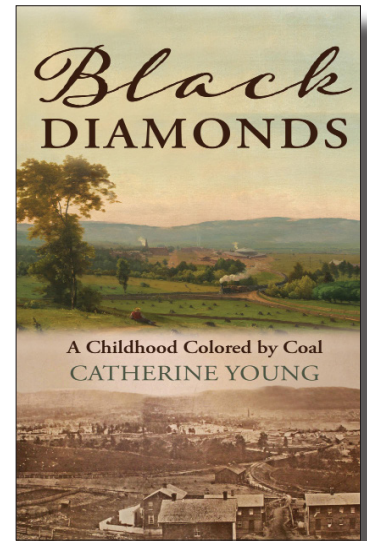
BY CATHERINE YOUNG

“Young’s memoir of her hometown is as powerful a picture as Inness’ painting, revealing its harsh transformation a century later.”

—BOOKLIST

In 1855, the landscape painter George Inness began work on his commissioned painting *The Lackawanna Valley*. A century later, a girl in Scranton, Pennsylvania, looks out over her coal-strewn homeland wishing for beauty and wondering where the artist had stood with his canvas. The interplay between the two stories is at the heart of Catherine Young’s memoir *Black Diamonds: A Childhood Colored by Coal*. Young invites readers into a world now vanished, but which lingers in shimmering portraits. A lyric work of environmental history, *Black Diamonds* gives voice to the birthplace of the industrial revolution in North America and the consequences for the people and the forgotten valley that once powered the nation.

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ABOUT CATHERINE YOUNG

Catherine Young worked as a national park ranger, farmer, educator, and mother before putting her heart into her writing. She is the author of the literary memoir of place, *Black Diamonds: A Childhood Colored by Coal*, and the ecopoetry collection, *Geosmin*, and lives with her family in the Driftless region of Wisconsin. Catherine is available to discuss *Black Diamonds* with reading groups in person or virtually. For more information, please email scout@torreyhouse.org.

ABOUT TORREY HOUSE PRESS

Torrey House Press publishes books at the intersection of the literary arts and environmental advocacy. THP authors explore the diversity of human experiences with place and engage community in conversations about landscape, literature, and the future of our ever-changing planet, inspiring action toward a more just world. We believe that lively, contemporary literature is at the cutting edge of social change. We seek to inform, expand, and reshape the dialogue on environmental justice and stewardship for the human and more-than-human world by elevating literary excellence from diverse voices. www.torreyhouse.org



CONVERSATION STARTERS: *BLACK DIAMONDS*

But how to cross over from one century to the next?

1. *Black Diamonds: A Childhood Colored by Coal* tells two stories: the author's relationship with the 1856 George Inness painting *The Lackawanna Valley*, and a narrative about her childhood experiences in the Valley in the 1960s. In what ways did this piece of art reflect the author's reality? In what ways did this art lack in reflecting the author's reality?
2. Many of Young's experiences are devastating and beautiful, and often reference color—from the gray bunny who she finds to be white, to the anthracite blue flames at night. What was the most striking scene in the book for you and why? Which colors influenced this scene and how?
3. How does the perspective of the child narrator shed new light on the history of the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in North America?
4. Why do you think it is important to tell stories from our recent history in formats that are different from textbooks or history books—such as literary memoirs of place like *Black Diamonds*? What do stories like these add to our perception of history and place?
5. How do you think the author's narrative expands conversations about industry in the United States? And globally?
6. How has industry affected the places that are most significant to you or your family? How do those industries continue to impact your life, home, and memories, and inform your perspective on current environmental concerns?
7. For the author, the railroad became a significant symbol of the Lackawanna Valley and the industries it supported. Do you have any symbols in your hometown that remind you of this symbolism of place and industry? What are they?
8. In what ways are you entangled within the environmental history of the area you live in and resources around you?
9. What do you find most impactful or surprising about the stories in *Black Diamonds*?