

*Author Essay and
Q&A*



GO AS A RIVER

Shelley Read

*Spiegel
and Grau*



Where I Write

I'm often asked where I write.

The easy answer is that I write in the little slant-roof attic office my husband and I designed and constructed just for me when we built our own home (as in, tool belts on, hammers and power tools in hand, real deal built our own house from the bottom up). My little attic office has pale yellow walls and overflowing bookshelves and prayer flags hand-picked in Nepal by my daughter and a lovely window with a view of, no joke, a dozen mountain peaks.

I'm so grateful for my little writing space, but that is not where I began to write my first novel.

Go as a River began on a summer evening while I was out camping by myself. I was perched on a log in a high alpine meadow, appreciating the sun's slow descent behind a mountain ridge and the cast of golden light all around. Just then, a doe stepped into the clearing very near me, followed by one spotted fawn and, eventually, a second, smaller fawn who was struggling to keep up. The scene played out much as it appears in my novel—I gasped; the deer turned their heads toward me in their elegant but cautious way; they crossed the meadow and disappeared into the forest. My heart ached, as much from bearing witness to the simple beauty

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of their evening walk toward the river as for the vulnerability of that scrawny fawn. How, I wondered, would the doe keep both of her babies alive?

I was so moved by the scene, and by my feeling of kinship with that mother deer, that I wrote it all down in my journal. As dusk faded to twilight, I set my journal aside, donned a down jacket, and lay on my back upon the bare ground to watch the stars come out—one by one until, beneath the entire expanse of the Milky Way, I felt tiny and reverent and filled with wonder. Then I crawled into my tent and wrote throughout the dark night.

In “a tent of one’s own”—as I like to call my solo camping retreats, my own backcountry version of Virginia Woolf’s brilliant call for women to have a place to write—I am able to escape from the demands and busy-ness of my domestic and professional life to just BE. Be quiet. Be still. Be alone. Be in the wilderness. There, the words flow.

The next day, I climbed a mountain and wrote a few more pages of what would become my first novel. The next camping trip or hike or peak climb or afternoon spent admiring a river, I wrote a bit more, and so on . . . for years.

Much of *Go as a River* evolved in the same wild landscape as the novel’s setting because, like Victoria Nash, it is where I listen and where I learn; where I feel as humble and vulnerable as I feel empowered and alive; where my ignorant but wide open human heart tries to comprehend what the mountains and the rivers know. So while I love to sit in my attic office, which is where I am writing from now, and where I’ve been working on my second novel amid stacks of research sources and notes, I will still feel Victoria by my side when I inevitably head out into the wilderness to write, with just a notebook and a pen and a tent of my own.

—Shelley Read

A Couple of Questions with Shelley Read

Q: *Can you tell us about the flooding of the town of Iola?*

Iola, Colorado, was a small cattle ranching community established in 1896. At its peak, Iola had a population of around 250 people—most making a living through ranching, farming, and fly-fishing tourism—until the US government chose that section of the Gunnison Valley for a new dam and reservoir, part of a vast Great Basin water management plan. I grew up knowing about the three towns lying beneath Blue Mesa Reservoir and have long wondered what life and loss was like for the residents.

Q: *Tell us about Colorado peaches—why are they so loved?*

Colorado peaches from the Western Slope are famous for their exquisite sweetness. The cool nights and warm days in the lush farmland of the North Fork and Grand Valleys combine with mineral-rich snow melt to enhance their flavor. Peach blossoms are so delicate and susceptible to spring frost that every Colorado peach seems a miracle but is actually the result of generational farming expertise and vigilant care. Peach trees don't thrive in the high, arid climate of Gunnison County, but this is why I chose "miracle Nash peaches" as a source of unity for the otherwise troubled Nash family, as well as a metaphor for the possibility of growth despite difficult circumstance.