

## Educator's Guide

# The Hollow Ground

by **Natalie S. Harnett**

John Gardner Fiction Book Award Winner  
Appalachian Book of the Year Award Winner  
International Dublin Literary Award Longlist

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*"We walk on fire or air, so Daddy liked to say. Basement floors too hot to touch. Steaming green lawns in the dead of winter. Sinkholes, quick and sudden, plunging open at your feet."*

The underground mine fires ravaging Pennsylvania coal country have forced eleven-year-old Brigid Howley and her family to seek refuge with her estranged grandparents, the formidable Gram and the black lung–stricken Gramp. Tragedy is no stranger to the Howleys, a proud Irish-American clan who takes strange pleasure in the “curse” laid upon them generations earlier by a priest who ran afoul of the Molly Maguires. The weight of this legacy rests heavily on a new generation, when Brigid, already struggling to keep her family together, makes a grisly discovery in a long-abandoned bootleg mine shaft. In the aftermath, decades-old secrets threaten to prove just as dangerous to the Howleys as the burning, hollow ground beneath their feet.

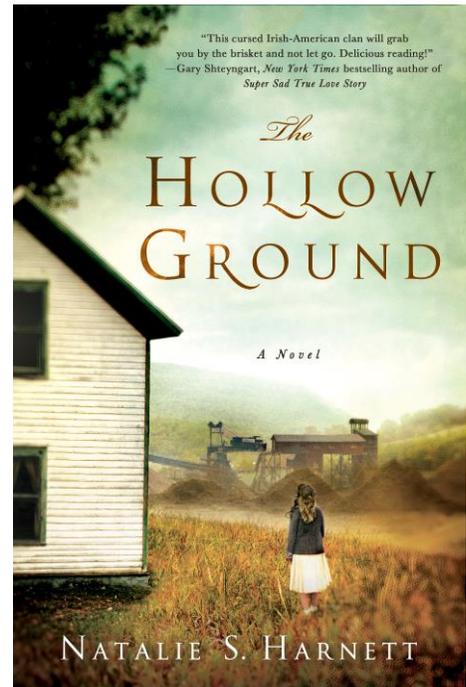
## Pre-Reading Activity

THE HOLLOW GROUND is inspired by real-life events in Centralia and Carbondale, Pennsylvania where devastating coal mine fires irrevocably changed the lives of residents. Before reading THE HOLLOW GROUND have students explore textbooks and the Internet to get some historical perspective on:

- Pennsylvania coal mining
- Northern Appalachian coal mine fires
- The Molly Maguires

## Group Discussion Questions & Writing Assignments

1. In THE HOLLOW GROUND Brigid's story takes place in what's called a Fire Zone. How does this setting contribute to the story? Imagine a different setting. In what ways would this different setting change the story?
2. When Gram was young, Barrendale was a thriving city, a place Daddy described as a “little Philadelphia.” What are the historical events that led to Barrendale's prosperity and what were the events that led to its demise? Using library resources and the Internet, research one of these events and discuss its effect on the American economy.



3. Daddy tells Brother that “there’s nothing wrong with trying to make a wrong situation right.” Name some of the “wrong situations” to which Daddy could be referring. Choose one and create an argument defending whether or not this “wrong situation” could in fact be “made right.” Based on your argument what would you say is your definition of “wrong”? What is your definition of “right”?
4. What is the message in Auntie’s story “The Great Forgetting”? What details in the story convey this message? Write a story of your own that conveys a message. Be sure to use at least one of the techniques discussed in class such as description, dialogue, symbolism, irony, etc.
5. List some of the significant moments in Brigid’s life. Choose one and, imagining that you are Brigid, write a journal entry describing your feelings.
6. Write a short newspaper article about Brigid’s and her friends’ discovery in the abandoned mine shaft. (Remember the journalistic formula of who, what, when, and where that we discussed in class.) Keep in mind that after making the discovery Brigid says that the community reacted with scorn or fear.
7. THE HOLLOW GROUND is a coming-of-age story. Describe the significant events that contribute to Brigid’s “growing up.” Why do you think they caused her to mature at such a young age?
8. What do you think happens to Daddy at the end of the book? Write a different ending to the last chapter of the novel. In what ways does this new ending change the story or the meaning of the novel as a whole?

## Multimedia Activities

1. THE HOLLOW GROUND could be read as a cautionary tale of what happens when we delve underground. Using library resources and the Internet, research fracking or off-shore oil drilling. Make sure you consider definition, purpose, and potential consequences. Once you’ve completed your research, use PowerPoint or Prezi to create a slideshow.
2. Using drawing materials or computer graphics, create 2-3 illustrations of the Fire Zone.

## Additional Resources

- Fire Underground: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Centralia Mine Fire, David DeKok, 2009, Globe Pequot Press
- The West Side Carbondale Pennsylvania Mine Fire, Kathleen Purcell Munley, 2011, University of Scranton Press
- When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times, Thomas Dublin, 1998, Cornell University Press



**NATALIE S. HARNETT** is an MFA graduate of Columbia. Her awards include an Edward Albee Fellowship, a Summer Literary Seminars Fellowship, and a VT Studio Center Writer’s Grant. She was a finalist for the Mary McCarthy Prize in Fiction. Her publications include *The New York Times*, *The Irish Echo*, *The Chicago Quarterly Review* and *The MacGuffin*. *The Hollow Ground* is an Amazon and Audible Bestseller and a Goodreads Book Group Worthy title. She lives on Long Island & in Northeastern PA with her husband and child. Learn more at [www.NatalieHarnett.com](http://www.NatalieHarnett.com).