

BOOK CLUB KIT

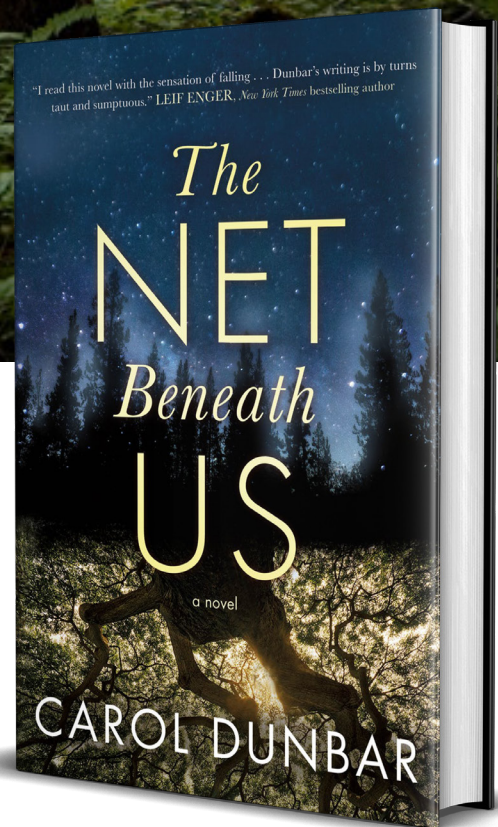
“Some things sneak up on you when you aren’t even looking and spread themselves out across several years’ time; other things change right away, inside the space of a single heartbeat.”

Dear Reader,

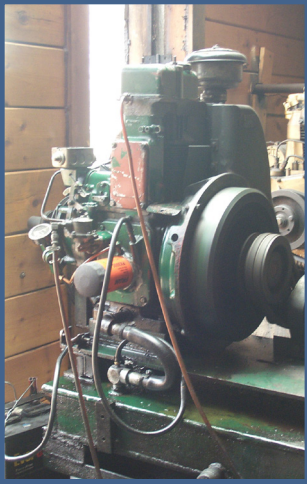
Welcome to the off-grid forest where I live. This is the setting for my debut novel, *The Net Beneath Us*, and I hope you come to love this place as much as I do.

This is a story about a young family building their home in rural Wisconsin when a logging accident alters the course of their lives. Wife and mother Elsa Arnasson must figure out how to carry on while caring for their two small children in the house her husband was building for them—a house with no running water and no split firewood for heat. It’s fall. Winter is coming. But she is determined to stay in the unfinished house because she is haunted by her regrets. Ultimately, this is a story about healing regret—and how our connections to each other and the natural world offer us healing, if we can learn where to look.

The idea for the unfinished house came from a mysterious photo of the house where I live given to me by the previous owners. In the photo, you can see a second story partially constructed with two-by-fours and the roof, and there’s snow on the ground. But I live in this house, and we have no second story. So, I wondered, why someone would do that? Start building, get that far, and then take it down? I developed this story to answer that question.



All photos provided by the author



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CAROL DUNBAR

is a former actor, playwright, and coloratura soprano who left her life in the city to move off the grid. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and on Wisconsin Public Radio. She writes from a solar-powered office on the second floor of a water tower in northern Wisconsin, where she lives in a house in the woods with her husband, two kids, and a giant Alaskan malamute. *The Net Beneath Us* is her first novel.

Living off-grid means we are independent when it comes to our heat, water, and electricity. When we first moved here, we generated electricity using diesel engines, and these are the basis for the generators that Elsa runs in the novel. Our solar array is much larger than the one in the story, and it powers both our house and my office where I write. We also split all our own firewood and heat our home using a woodstove just like the one described in the book.

Our water comes from a well. We pump using a low-draw, solar-powered pump that brings the water out of the ground and up to the holding tanks that reside on the top floor of a water tower. During winter when temperatures drop below zero and stay there for several weeks, our pipes can easily freeze. One winter when our children were small, we lost our running water until the spring thaw. It took us many years to figure out how to properly insulate the water tower, but those experiences taught us something about how to manage our resources.

Like the family in this book, living this way changed me. Being in nature surrounds you in constant beauty. That asked something of me. I didn't know the things I know now about forests when we first moved here. I had to learn how to see things I thought I already understood in new ways, and I had to come up with better responses to life's daily problems because no one can squash every bug. Learning from my environment and specifically the trees isn't just something I wrote about for this story; it's become my daily practice. It is my sincerest hope that some of the tree wisdom in this book can become part of your daily life, too.

Listen to the trees,
Carol Dunbar



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“...and she had been tricked like one of the confused conifers of the forest.”

1. This story is told in a rotating narrative. We hear from each of the four main characters in turn: Ethan, Elsa, Luvera, and Hester. What character did you most look forward to hearing from and why? Whose point of view did you most trust? Whose point of view did you trust the least?
2. Luvera and Elsa are in many ways opposites as women. Luvera is a practical farm wife; Elsa is a dreamer who paints. When Silas continues to breathe after being taken off the machine, Luvera sees a man “fighting for his life” while Elsa sees “a man trying to die.” How do these differences contribute to the growing family divide? Whose point of view were you most sympathetic to and when? Did their ability to eventually come together shed light on the difficult relationships in your own life?
3. After her father’s accident, Hester stops going to school. Why do you think she continues to worry about the Brave Tree? What does this tree represent?
4. Elsa brings her husband home because she believes that love is enough. “Whether her love or God’s love or Luvera and her church, it didn’t matter. Love was what she could do for Silas because she didn’t want to let him go, not yet.” Do you agree that love is enough? Was there ever a time in your life where love wasn’t enough? Was there ever a time when it was more than enough?
5. The chores performed in this story are based on the author’s real life—splitting firewood, hauling water, filling gas cans, and fixing engines are all part of rural life. Could you relate to these physical demands? Have you ever tried to split your own firewood or built a fire to last through the night? What chore seemed the most difficult to you and why?
6. When Big Al first showed up in the woods to help Hester and Finn, did you think he had ulterior motives for being nice to them? Did you understand Elsa’s reasons for not trusting him? In what ways did losing her husband make her more vulnerable as a young mother raising her children in the world?
7. After losing her father, Hester assesses other people based on their ability to see what she thinks of as a “secret color.” Do you agree with her philosophy? She is more easily able to trust Big Al than her mother. How does loss change the way you have compassion for others?
8. All four of the main characters in this story are struggling in some way with their regrets. Luvera regrets never having children; Ethan regrets not going out for one last beer with his brother; Elsa realizes that Silas was the “greatest love of her life, and she’d reciprocated that love too late.” Did you relate to any of these regrets? Do you think it’s possible to live a life without regrets?
9. Did you understand Ethan’s motivations for buying his wife a songbird? Or Luvera’s reasons for running out of the milk house and trying to scare the fainting goat? How does our awareness of another person’s struggles help us to heal our own?
10. Toward the end of the novel, Elsa thinks that now, as a mother, her greatest fear is that she hasn’t loved enough. How is Elsa’s decision to leave at the end motivated by this fear? How does her leaving help to heal her regrets?
11. Right before she learns about her husband’s logging accident, Elsa has a mysterious encounter with a puffball. What did you think was the significance of this experience? Later, she thinks “something out here was trying to get through to her, some ethos trying to teach her something that she needed to know.” Have you ever had a feeling like that or an encounter in nature that made you think something strange was going on? Did you benefit from it in some way? Did you tell anyone?
12. Luvera makes a comment about city folk having “funny expectations of nature.” What do you expect of nature? What do you think nature expects of you?
13. What did you think was taking Elsa’s clothesline down? When did you figure it out?


RECIPES FROM OFF THE GRID

“...because, she had discovered, everything about living in the country was about following a recipe.”

HESTER’S PANCAKES

- 2 Cups whole wheat flour
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. salt
- ½ Cup yoghurt
- 2 eggs
- ½ Cup wild blueberries
- Enough milk to make a pourable batter—about 1½ Cups

Mix the baking soda, baking powder, and salt until combined with the 2 cups of whole wheat flour. Make a well in the flour and drop in the eggs and yoghurt. Gently whisk while pouring in the milk, adding a half cup or so at a time until you have a pourable batter. Gently fold in the blueberries. Let the mixture rest while heating up the griddle or a cast iron frying pan. Ladle out the batter and flip when the edges become set and the bubbles on the surface pop. Serve with pats of butter and warm syrup.

Plain, unsweetened yoghurt works best, but you can substitute flavored. Adding a teaspoon of cinnamon with the blueberries is delicious. If you don’t have berries, try a winter spice mix of nutmeg, cardamom, and cinnamon—about a ½ teaspoon each.

ELSA’S HOMEMADE SYRUP

- 2 Cups dark brown sugar
- 1 Cup water
- 1 tsp. of Mapeline

Bring the water to a rolling boil. Add the sugar until it dissolves, stirring constantly, and with the heat on medium-low. Do not allow the sugar mixture to boil. Remove from heat once dissolved. Stir in the Mapeline. Syrup will thicken as it cools.

ETHAN’S TOAST

- 2 slices of day-old bread
- Butter

Coat one side of each piece of bread with butter and heat up a cast-iron pan. Place the bread butter-side down in the pan. Place something heavy on top of the bread such as a small pot with a lid. When you can smell the toast and the bread is golden, flip over and turn off the flame. The heat from the pan will crisp the other side. Serve while still warm.

FINN'S CHRISTMAS TREE ORNAMENTS

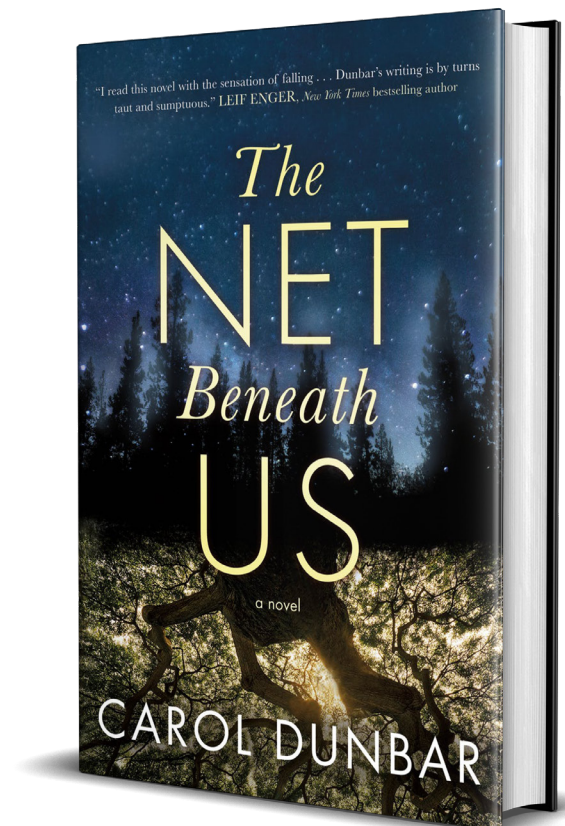
- 4 Cups flour
- 1 Cup salt
- 1 ¼ to 1½ Cups of water

Add water to flour as needed to make a rollable dough. Flour rolling pin and cut out shapes using Christmas cookie cutters: stars, bells, snowmen, etc. Leave dough about ⅛" to ¼" thick. Cut or break a paperclip in half and insert the top of the U into the top of the clay ornament before baking for hanging. With a spatula, carefully lift the ornament onto a foil-lined cookie sheet. Bake at 300 to 325 degrees Fahrenheit until golden—about 1 hour. Paint with beaten egg when almost done and dry-looking. This will give the ornament a nice shine. You may also decorate with acrylic paints.

LUVERA'S RHUBARB SAUCE

- 4 Cups rhubarb, cut into 1" pieces
- 1 Cup water
- 1 Cup sugar
- ¼ tsp. nutmeg.

Combine in a pot, bring to a boil, and simmer for 20 minutes. Cool. Serve over vanilla ice cream.



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Guide by Carol Dunbar