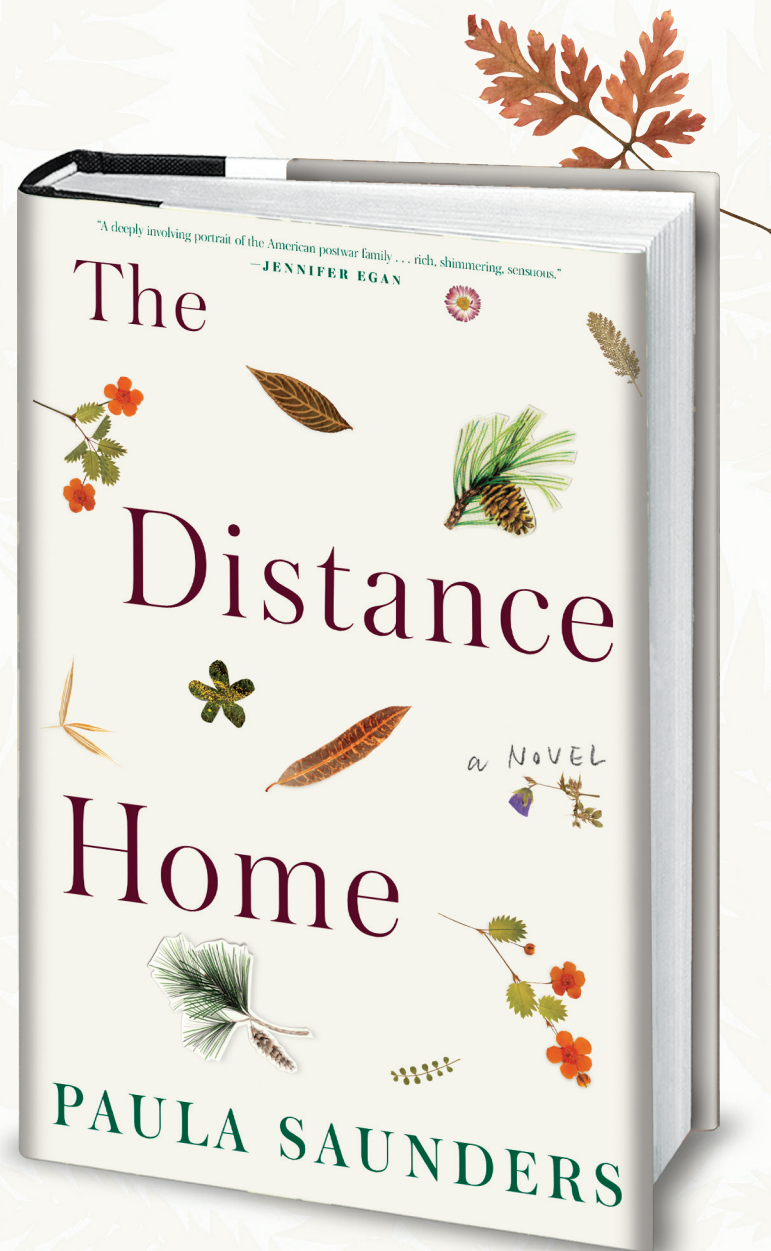


# The Distance Home



Book Club Kit



# Letter from Paula



**THE DISTANCE HOME** is based on the story of how my brother and I grew up in South Dakota, and how our family life influenced us and contributed to shaping the people we became. Our father and grandfather were both cattle traders—the old-fashioned kind: driving long distances, meeting ranchers, looking at livestock. Through a particular series of events, my brother and I became fairly serious students of ballet. (There happened to be a woman in Rapid City who'd been a part of the diaspora of Ballet Russe, and, almost unimaginably, she had started a ballet school there in the Black Hills.)

Given the setting and culture of the Great Plains at that time, along with the general tenor, prejudices, and expectations of the family, this was, of course, easier for me than it was for my brother. In the end, after much turmoil and misdirection, he turned to drugs and alcohol, which became a lifetime struggle for him, while, after difficulties of my own, I left home early to study ballet, and ended up dancing in New York City, as an apprentice with Harkness Ballet, under one of the great ballet masters of our time, David Howard.

Because of the disparate paths my brother and I ended up on in life, this family story is a complicated one for me, with a lot of attached feelings and judgments, and to make it work as a piece of fiction, I first needed to be able to see it from a perspective less tainted by personal pain and blame, and more informed by our impermanence here on the earth and how the love we feel for each other can be buried by immediate concerns and circumstances, by hard feelings or long-held grudges, until, sometimes, we can't see it anymore, or even if we can see it, we can't bring it into action.

Of course, I loved my brother, and I always felt that his experience in our family pointed to issues in the larger culture—to how our ideas of winning and losing, of success and failure, lead us inevitably into various problems with empathy and caring for one another, and how even the smallest, whispered prejudices within a family can change a life.

I knew it was there in my family—the deep love we shared for each other—but in the many confusions and rising circumstances of daily life, it most often seemed lost. My hope in writing this book was to find it again—to locate the source of it, to look at where it went awry, to try to trace the outlines of it—without dismissing the many difficulties or glossing over things, and to show this love and connection, finally, somehow, in an effort to benefit the hearts of those who might read the book.

While I was writing **THE DISTANCE HOME**, I had two words always just to my right, posted on my bulletin board: *Listen* and *Benefit*. So it was my intention with this book to write something that others could relate to from their experience, something that might illuminate a path to looking at one's most difficult experiences from a different perspective or in a new, more open way.

So, that's the idea of **THE DISTANCE HOME**—to try to understand what happens in this family, and to try to see past the hurts and the missed opportunities for caring and love, and get to the core. Because, really, there is so much love here.

**PAULA SAUNDERS**





# Behind the Book photos



Me and my brother helping Dad feed the cattle. Likely somewhere near Philip, South Dakota. Where could my brother have gotten those child-size mechanic's overalls?



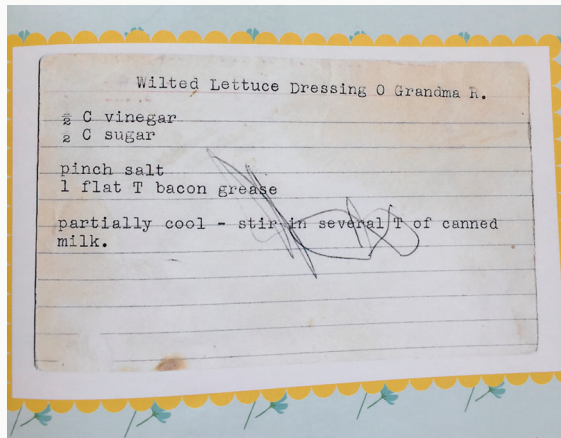
Me and my brother as students of ballet. I love the solemn look on our faces and how perfectly they match. We always had so much fun dancing together.



Mom and Dad in the side yard of my grandmother's house in Fort Pierre, South Dakota. Such a handsome couple.



# Recipes for Your Book Club



## WILTED LETTUCE DRESSING

**½ cup vinegar**

**½ cup sugar**

**pinch of salt**

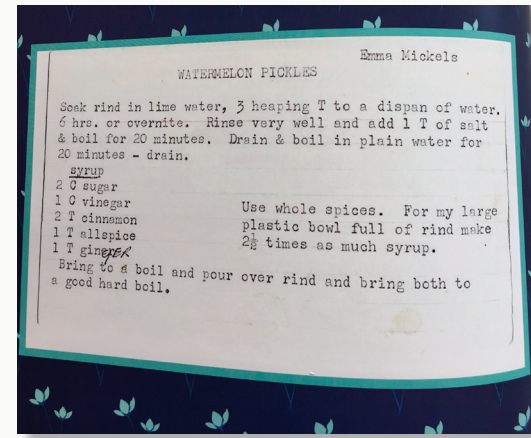
**1 flat Tablespoon of  
bacon grease**

**4 Tablespoons of canned milk**

Combine the vinegar, sugar, salt, and bacon grease;  
partially cool.

Stir in the canned milk.

Enjoy!



## WATERMELON PICKLES

Soak rind in lime water, 3 heaping Tablespoons to a dishpan of water. Leave for 6 hours or overnight. Rinse well and add 1 Tablespoon of salt and boil for 20 minutes. Drain and boil in plain water for 20 minutes—drain.

### SYRUP

**2 cups sugar**

**1 cup vinegar**

**2 Tablespoons cinnamon**

**1 Tablespoon allspice**

**1 Tablespoon ginger**

Use whole spices. Make 2.5x as much syrup as the amount of rinds in your bowl.

Bring to a boil and pour over rind and bring both to a good hard boil.

Serve and enjoy!





# Discussion Questions

1. What does this book depict about the American family? How is it similar/different from other iterations in literature?
2. Discuss the role of violence (both subtle and not-so-subtle) in the novel. Is the violence justifiable? Is it avoidable? How does it shape your interpretations of the characters?
3. How do Rene and Leon differ in the way they approach the tensions in the family? Who do you relate to more? And why?
4. Discuss the role of landscape and setting in the novel. How do they contribute to the story and its themes?
5. How have your own family experiences shaped your interpretation of this particular family's experiences?
6. What makes this a uniquely American novel?
7. Why do you think the author chose ballet as the central passion of this novel? How would the story have changed if the author had chosen some other form of artistic expression?
8. What does this novel make you think about the idea of family in general and how, for good or ill, family members are knitted together throughout their lives? Does it change anything about the way you feel about your own family?
9. How does the author's inclusion of Native Indian/White tensions serve the novel's larger artistic concerns? In your experience, is this representation an accurate portrait of how we, individually and collectively, tend to respond to difference?

