

"*Sing to Me Billy the Kid* is astonishingly well-written. Suspenseful. Beautifully poetic. A wonderful balance between fiction and fact, history and character."

—GERALD HAUSMAN, winner of The American Folklore
Society Award, Author of *Star Song Series*

Sing to Me Billy the Kid



FRANCES
BONNEY JENNER

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Book Club Discussion Guide

***Sing to Me Billy the Kid* by Frances Bonney Jenner**

About the Book

Sing to Me Billy the Kid (released January 2026 by Speaking Volumes) redefines one of the American West's most enduring legends. Written through an empathetic lens, this historical novel strips away the traditional "macho outlaw," tracing the Kid's journey beginning with a young boy singing to his mother, then leading to unpredictable challenge, betrayal, war, romance, unlikely friendships and a deteriorating relationship with God and the Sheriff who hunts him.

This story places the women who knew and loved Billy, including his mother Catherine, as well as Paulita Maxwell, Celsa Gutierrez, and Sallie Chisum, at the center of the narrative. Narrated from the afterlife, the story explores the psychological toll of childhood trauma, a haunting maternal prophecy, and the marginalized native New Mexican community that embraced an orphaned boy as a defender against systemic injustice.

About the Author

Frances Bonney Jenner grew up in a big extended family of eccentric Texas storytellers spinning yarns, including her grandmother, a poet, descended from Kentucky pioneers. As a lover of words, she became a professional librarian, serving both children and teen populations. Frances and her husband traveled all 2000 miles of the California Trail to research her award-winning novel, *Prairie Journey*, published in 2012.

A member of Western Writers of America, Frances holds a degree in American History and Literature. *Sing to Me Billy the Kid* was developed within the competitive Lighthouse Writers Workshop Book Project under professional mentorship, focusing heavily on character-driven prose. Based on firsthand travels through New Mexico's historic Silver City, Lincoln, and Fort Sumner, and extensive research, the historical novel is an empathetic, relationship-driven retelling of one of the West's most famous outlaws.

Where to Buy the Book:

If your members still need to grab a copy, *Sing to Me Billy the Kid* is available on several platforms:

- Purchase physical paperbacks online via [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org) or [Strand Books](https://www.strandbooks.com).
- Download the digital e-book instantly on the [Kindle Store](https://www.amazon.com/kindle-store), [Google Play](https://play.google.com/store/books), or [Kobo](https://www.kobo.com).

- You may also ask your local library to purchase a copy.

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to guide your book club conversation. They focus on the specific structural and emotional themes of the novel.

? Part 1: Icebreakers

1. Logline: How would you describe the book in one sentence?
2. Connections: How, if at all, does the book relate to your own life? Does it evoke any memories or create any connections for you?

? Part 2: Style & Structure

1. The Afterlife Narrator: The novel is written from a unique perspective—lost in the afterlife, Billy the Kid tells his own story. How does this choice of narrator influence your perception of his choices? How reliable is he as a truth-teller of his own story?
2. Lyrical Tone: At the start of the book, we learn that almost-14-year-old Billy can sing and dance better than anybody in town. How does this artistic side of his character contrast with the historical "outlaw" persona we usually see in pop culture?
3. Western Vernacular: The story is told in a western vernacular. How does this style contribute to the authenticity and appropriateness of the voice? Did you find this style easy or hard to read? How long did it take you to get into the book?

? Part 3: Historical Setting

1. Time and Place: The novel is set in 1873-1881 in New Mexico and Arizona. How did the author portray the historical setting and period of this book? Did you learn anything new or interesting about the time and place of the story?
2. Historical Figures: Besides Billy the Kid, there are other famous historical figures in the novel, like John Tunstall, Governor Lew Wallace and Pat Garrett. Did this book challenge your perspective on any historical events or figures? Did it make you want to learn more about them?
3. Time travel: If you could travel back in time to the historical setting (New Mexico, Arizona) and period (1873-81) of this book, what would you do or see?

? Part 4: Character, Plot

1. Favorite Character: During his lifetime, Billy traveled far and wide and had a variety of family, friends, lovers and enemies. Who is your favorite character in the novel and why?

2. The Mother's Prophecy: Before her death from consumption, Billy's mother, Catherine, warns him that he'll hang before he's twenty-one if he doesn't change. How does this prophecy and her death shape his journey throughout the rest of the book?
3. El Chivato & Community: In the book, native New Mexican communities fiercely protect Billy, viewing him as a folk hero. Why do you think he found a truer sense of family and sanctuary with them than within his own Anglo culture?
4. Plot Twists: There are many twists and turns in Billy's life. What is the most memorable or shocking scene or twist in the story and why?

Part 5: Romance & Justice

1. Love on the Run: While hunted by Sheriff Pat Garrett, Billy meets and falls in love with Paulita. How does this romance humanize Billy? How does it raise the stakes of his survival?
 2. Institutional Injustice: Billy finds a steady job and a mentor in rancher John Tunstall. When a rival gang targets Tunstall, Billy is drawn directly into the Lincoln County Wars. Do you view Billy's descent into violence as a choice, or were these circumstances propelling him into a predetermined destiny?
 3. The Pursuit of Redemption: The novel contrasts a call to fight injustice with Billy's desire for redemption. In your opinion, does the book portray Billy as someone who deserves redemption, and by the novel's end, is he redeemed? Why do you think so or not?
 4. Final Scene: Author Gabino Iglesias, who reviewed the book, said that the ending "packs a punch." Do you agree or not and why?
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Historical Context & "Behind the Myth" Fact Sheet

- The Reality of *El Chivato*: In mainstream history, he is always "Billy the Kid." But to the Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico, he was affectionately called *El Chivato* (The Little Goat). He spoke fluent Spanish, danced at the Mexican Bailes, and was trusted by local native families.
- The Santa Fe Ring: The "gang" Billy fought wasn't just a band of outlaws; it was a powerful corporate and political syndicate of crooked politicians, judges, and businessmen who used the law to steal land and monopolize business in New Mexico.
- The Footnoted Women: Paulita Maxwell, Celsa Gutierrez, and Sallie Chisum were real historical figures. Mainstream history often ignores them, but they were complex, resilient women who held the keys to Billy's history.

A Quick Q&A with Frances

- **What inspired you to write *Sing to Me Billy the Kid*?**

I remember when I was eight years old telling my family I wanted to be a writer. I seemed to know it at an early age. When I was a teen, my father asked me to write about Billy. I kept the desire to write the book for many years until I could become skillful enough to pull it off. In writing the novel, I wanted to move past traditional western motifs. By narrating the story from the afterlife, I was able to offer a life review from Billy's perspective, exploring the connection between his inner and outer life that affected his relationships with friends, lovers, and enemies and his life choices.

- **What kind of research did you do?**

For eleven years, I read every book about Billy the Kid I could get my hands on. My husband and I traveled to Silver City, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Lincoln and Fort Sumner—all of Billy's hangouts. I was able to see the exact location where Billy lived with his mother and brother in Silver City as well as the jail there, and in Fort Sumner, the area where his beloved Paulita Maxwell's home was located. Doug and I roamed the streets of Lincoln where the Lincoln County War was fought and climbed the stairs in the Lincoln jail where Billy escaped. I was able to see, touch, smell and feel the settings where Billy wandered. I remember asking a guide at the Lincoln County jail how many did Billy really kill, as it was rumored to be 21. She said, only 3. The rest is all a lie. Historical research questions the twenty-one also. I never forgot our conversation.

- **How did Lighthouse Writers influence the development of your novel?**

I took many workshop and craft classes and workshopped with other authors and writers to develop and write the story. I learned how to build suspense to entice the reader to turn the page and to craft dialogue that seemed natural and real. Structurally, Ben, my mentor, insisted I create patterns in the novel. I call them echoes—so that what happens makes sense. For example, Billy's betrayals and abandonments repeat throughout. And finally, I received three professional reads after finishing the novel as well as ongoing feedback from my longstanding critique group. I revised extensively based on all these readings.

- **As a female author writing a story from the male perspective, how did you put yourself into Billy's shoes?**

As I read about Billy over the years, I felt like I began to know him. It did take some time, but eventually I began to hear his voice talking to me. That's when I began to write as if I were him. I could imagine how he felt about things and could write his actions based on his feelings—they are not so different from mine. I felt a great connection with him and his mother. People who read the book say his voice in the novel is very consistent. I

think that's because I could hear him as I wrote.

- **The women significant to Billy throughout his life are often forgotten in historical accounts. How did you learn about these women and why was it important to you that they were in this story?**

As a woman, it was important for me to write about the women in Billy's life, and the scenes with them were the most fun to write. I felt very comfortable writing about Sallie, Celsa and Paulita. Through the eyes of these women who loved Billy and in their relationships with him, I felt I was able to create Billy more genuinely as a young man. I got to know him through them. I searched for books about Billy and his relationships with women and found only a few. I wrote the kind of book about him that I wanted to read.

There has not been much research about the specific women Billy loved. That freed me to imagine the three relationships I wrote about. I read Sallie Chisum's diary which mentioned Billy and one magazine article about her. There was very little information about Celsa except in Michael Ondaatje's fictional work. Paulita denied loving Billy while she was alive. But after her death, her sister said she loved him but had to hide it because of family pressure. Deputy Jim East later wrote about the famous scene where Billy and Paulita said goodbye in Fort Sumner. And Pat Garrett said the only two women Billy loved were his mother and Paulita. That fact alone helped me write my version of the story about Billy and Paulita.

- **How did you balance the factual evidence in your research with fictional additions in your narrative?**

I didn't try for balance. I tried for story—not all in the novel is 100% factual. It is a novel, after all, and not a non-fiction account. I had to make up scenes sometimes based on differing history. The relationship between Billy and Pat Garrett is a good example. Some historians say they were close and others say no, they were not. I decided to have them be close and then drift apart. Still, I used as much historical fact as I could find and verify. At times I only knew one fact, and had to imagine setting, dialogue, character around that fact. For example, someone saw Josie, Billy's brother in an opium den. That's all I knew. I had to construct where, how, what, who around that fact. I researched opium dens and opium during that time and in western settings. And Ben, my mentor at Lighthouse, was also writing historically about opium dens in Denver during that same time. He let me read his novel to help me with mine. He had done a ton of research. All that helped me construct the opium den scene.

- **Your novel is narrated from the afterlife. Why did you choose to give Billy a voice after death, and how did that choice change your novel?**

I thought Billy's story didn't end with death and wondered what his afterlife experience might be. I didn't even know if I could write it, but I wanted to try. Once I wrote the ending

of the novel, that led me to rewrite the beginning as a circle back to the ending. I realized then that Billy was telling his story almost like a life review. I felt a big part of the story is Billy wanting redemption. From early on he blames himself for not saving his mother, and then later for not saving John Tunstall. Once Billy fell for Paulita, I felt he increasingly wanted to live a new kind of life, to settle down with her and build something reputable. He always wanted that and I tried to portray how it could be redemptive for him if he could just start over with her. But he didn't get that. He only got death. So, I had to imagine what could happen there in an afterlife for him.

What do you hope book clubs take away from the novel?

I hope it makes readers wrestle with these universal questions—

1. How does early grief and loss construct a person's existence?
2. Might there be such a thing as destiny or is there actually free will? What do you notice regarding destiny and free will in the novel and in your own life?
3. How does this novel differ from traditional macho western tropes and how does bringing women and his Hispano friends into Billy's story change a reader's view of him?
4. What can be surmised about good and evil from reading the novel?
5. Billy developed loving relationships with Hispanos and defended them when they experienced racism and abuse. Yet, he killed men to do it. Do you believe an outlaw like him deserves redemption. If so, why?
6. Do you believe there is an afterlife and if so, what is your notion of it? How do you view Billy's death in the context of an afterlife or no afterlife?

Book Club Activity Ideas

- Listen to the Music of the Era: Compile a playlist of traditional 19th-century frontier songs and Mexican folk ballads (corridos) that Billy and his friends would have sung and danced to in the plazas of Lincoln and Fort Sumner.
- Map the Lincoln County War: Print out a historical map of New Mexico territory. Trace Billy's journeys from Silver City to Lincoln and his final days in Fort Sumner to visualize the vast, rugged landscape the characters inhabited.
- The "Two Histories" Debate: Divide your book club into two groups. Have one group defend the Hollywood/textbook version of Billy the Kid as a ruthless killer, and the other defend the novel's empathetic portrait of an exploited youth. Discuss where the absolute truth might lie.

Themed Menu Suggestions

Bring the flavors of the Southwest and New Mexico territory to your meeting:

- The Main Dish: Authentic New Mexican green chili stew or slow-cooked tamales, representing the comfort and warmth Billy found at native New Mexican tables.

- The Sweet Treat: *Bizcochitos*—the traditional crisp, anise-and-cinnamon spiced cookies of New Mexico.
 - The Drink: A smoky mezcal cocktail or fresh Agua de horchata to toast to the spirits of the Old West.
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