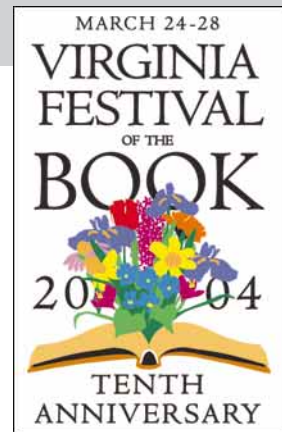


## *The Midwife's Tale* by Gretchen Moran Laskas recommended by Janis Jaquith

A program of the Virginia Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Janis Jaquith—author of *Birdseed Cookies: A Fractured Memoir*, Public-Radio commentator, and columnist for The Charlottesville Daily Progress — recommends *The Midwife's Tale* by Gretchen Moran Laskas. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.

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You know how, when you're a few chapters into some novel that all the reviewers have been praising up and down, you slam the book shut in disgust, heave it across the room and yell, "Tell me a story! For God's sake would you please tell me a STORY!"

Okay, maybe that's just me. But you know what I mean. Sometimes it seems like solid, can't-put-it-down storytelling is a lost art. Whatever happened to the kind of narrative that kept our ancestors spellbound around the evening fire, hanging on every word?

If you long for a novel that not only keeps you turning the pages, but creates a reality so palpable you have to shake it off as you close the book and re-enter the real world, then have I got a book for you: *The Midwife's Tale* by Gretchen Moran Laskas.

The story takes place in the hills of early 20th-century West Virginia, a place where both doctors and roads were in short supply, and a midwife would walk for miles along mountain ridges to deliver a baby. Think of this novel as *The Waltons* meet *Cold Mountain* meets *E.R.*

To open this book is to be drawn into the past, absorbed in the life of Elizabeth Whitely, a woman who, like her mother and grandmother before her, becomes a midwife. It's a story saturated in Appalachian folkways, from coaxing sustenance out of difficult soil, to extricating

babies from the grip of stubborn wombs, to offering healing and comfort through concoctions made with wild plants culled from mountains and hollows -- with a few surprising home remedies along the way.

In this first-person narrative, Laskas evokes the speech rhythms of mountain dwellers a hundred years past, without a trace of condescension. Here's my favorite example:

"[H]is mama did everything she could before calling the doctor. Had poured chamber lye into his ears, still warm from her own body. Chamber lye do be a nice way of saying piss, and if it didn't cause the deafness, I doubt it did much good."

Arching over all of this is the timeless theme of transformation born of acceptance of the power of belief, of love, and of miracles.

What was missing as I read this book was someone to discuss it with me. *The Midwife's Tale* would be an outstanding novel for book clubs, whether a formal group, or something improvised for enhanced enjoyment of this novel. It's the kind of book you want to pass along to your mother, to your sister, to your best friend.

I seldom read a book more than once, but I've just picked this one up again, having read it a few months ago. It is every bit as absorbing the second time around.

This is the kind of story that will haunt you long after you've reached the end and (gently) closed the book. Gretchen Moran Laskas has woven a timeless tale that would hold any fireside gathering spellbound.

*Gretchen Laskas will be among the featured readers at the tenth annual Virginia Festival of the Book, March 24-28, 2004 in Charlottesville. For more information, visit [vabook.org](http://vabook.org).*

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### **Virginia Festival of the Book**

145 Ednam Drive • Charlottesville, VA • 22903-462  
434.924.3296 • [vabook@virginia.edu](mailto:vabook@virginia.edu) • <http://www.vabook.org>