Discussion Questions for *Impatient with Desire*

Gabrielle will visit your book club in person if geographically feasible or on Skype. Email to arrange a book club discussion visit.

The following questions approach the novel from a number of different angles -- including how the novel functions as a work of art, how it addresses fundamental questions of humanity, and how it engages the reader.

A good discussion tends to start with our “heads” and end with our “hearts.” Therefore, you may want to save subjective opinions of taste until after you have discussed the more objective elements of this work. It is tempting to begin with, “What did everyone think?” But if a number of people didn’t enjoy the novel, their opinions may derail a discussion of the novel’s merits.

On the other hand, I recommend starting with a few accessible questions and asking every member to respond to ensure that all voices are present and heard from the beginning. Just a few suggestions -- most importantly, enjoy...!

Warm up questions:

- Gabrielle Burton is the author of *I'm Running Away From Home but I'm Not Allowed to Cross the Street*, *Heartbreak Hotel*, and *Searching for Tamsen Donner*. Has anyone read any of Burton’s other books? If so, how did this novel compare? Was this novel what you expected? If not, does *Impatient with Desire* encourage you to read other works by Burton?

- Notice the cover of the novel:
How affected are you by the cover of a novel? What was the effect of this particular cover image on your first impressions of this novel?

1) What was your previous knowledge of the Donner Party? How did this affect your experience of *Impatient with Desire*? What was most surprising to you, based on your previous knowledge? What was the effect of knowing the ending as you read Tamsen’s journal?

2) *Impatient with Desire* begins with the following sentence: “Imagine all the roads a woman and a man walk until the reach the road they’ll walk together.”

What multiple levels of meanings does this sentence have within the context of the novel? Why is the metaphor of a road an especially evocative first impression for *Impatient with Desire*?

Notice how our first impressions of Tamsen are formed: “In Ohio, and in Illinois, even an outspoken woman like me has her pick of men...I thought I had buried my heart with Tully.” (1)

Then, near the end, Tamsen reflects on how her entire life was affected by her personality:

“My whole life my heart was big with hope and *Impatient with Desire*. When anyone ever went anywhere, I always wondered: What will they see? What is there that is not here? What waits for them that I am missing? I cannot bear it if no one knows what has gone on here. What I have seen. What was waiting for me here that I have not missed.” (206)

Why do you think Burton chose to write this novel as a journal, from Tamsen’s first person perspective? Were you sympathetic toward Tamsen or did you judge her decisions? Did you identify with her? Ultimately, did you admire Tamsen or not? Why?

3) The concept of “desire” runs throughout the narrative – desire for food, for adventure, for freedom, for respect. On page 140, Tamsen stated:

“Yet, every time I bid one of our Ohio-bound neighbors farewell, desire leapt in me. All my life, I have wondered about the place I’m not in. You either are that way or you aren’t, and you can’t imagine the opposite state.” (140)

Do you agree with Tamsen? Which state do you align with? Can you understand the other perspective?

4) This novel tackles a myriad of subjects -- from marriage to motherhood to adventure to independence to Manifest Destiny to survival. Which of these topics does the novel cover in an
especially unique or compelling manner? Which topic is least essential to the overall meaning of the novel? If you were asked to describe this novel in one sentence, what would your synopsis focus on?

5) Notice the first few words George speaks to Tamsen, when he finds her in his field with a group of students: “You need permission to be in this field ma’am... I’ll still need to know when you’re here, ma’am. When the corn gets taller, I may have to send in a search party for you.” (1-2)

Notice how Tamsen describes George to her sister: “I find my new husband a kind friend who does all in his power to promote my happiness & I have as fair a prospect for a pleasant old age as anyone.” (2)

How are George’s first words and Tamsen’s note to her sister unfortunately ironic?

6) Were you surprised at the number and ages of children in the party (22 children under the age of 10)? How might the children have contributed to the events? Did the presence of the children make you more or less compassionate toward the adults and their actions? Since all five of the Donner daughters survive, why do you think there still so much mystery surrounding what happened?

7) On page 77-78, Tamsen reflects,

“I’ve lived years on farms, and know incontestably that the strong survive, the weak die off. That is the way of nature, but I used to argue that we can improve on nature, or at least not be as brutal as nature. I don’t have the luxury of theoretical debates anymore, nor am I sentimental as I once was.”

After resorting to cannibalism to keep her children alive, Tamsen thinks: “And now the great violation is done once, twice, and as many more times as needed, and all I feel is deep relief that the children are visibly stronger and an equally deep anger.” (205)

As omnivores, humans are able to eat just about anything, but choose not to for moral and ethical reasons. Cannibalism is one of our greatest cultural taboos. However, what would YOU do to save your children? Whom do you think Tamsen was angry at?

8) Burton did extensive research prior to writing this novel and comments on this in her Notes:

“*Impatient with Desire* is a work of fiction about an actual historic event and real people. By definition, it’s a work of imagination, which in some ways suits the subject well, since so few hard facts are known about the Donner Party. The story of the Donner Party may be the best-known, least substantiated, tale of the nineteenth-century American overland emigration. There are few primary sources and countless
contradictory secondary sources, which started to appear soon after the event and continue to the present... It is my deep wish that the reader come to see all these people as real, their ordeal, almost buried by morbid jokes, become alive.” (240)

How did you find that reading a work of historical fiction differs from reading a work of non-historical fiction? In what ways did Burton’s record of Tamsen Donner seem authentic?

9) The events of this story occur in the mid-nineteenth century, a time when death was ever-present and lives were much shorter than today. On page 15, George and Tamsen discuss the motivations of the early settlers:

“George and I have often talked about how the explorers went westward for knowledge or glory, the missionaries for converts, and the mountain men for adventure and fortune, but we of ’46 have thought of ourselves from the beginning as bringing a civilization. We are the first year of the families on the Trail: a responsibility and a privilege that we have borne eagerly, indeed with pride.”

Burton states at the end of her Author’s Note:

“To me, almost all the members of the Donner Party, and the California and Oregon emigrants in general are heroes, even if they didn’t always behave heroically. They had strengths and failings because they were complex humans. Every American is indebted to them for opening up the way before us.” (244)

Did you feel a similar sense of gratitude to these people for their willingness to risk their fragile lives in order to broaden the span of the United States?

10) How did this earlier century differ from our own? What was most surprising or intriguing about this period of time? After reading the book, have you gained a new perspective of the mid-nineteenth century —or did the book affirm your prior views?

11) We learn during the section titled “Hastings Cutoff” that if the women had been able to influence the route with their votes, the party may have never been stranded. However, Tamsen never blames George for their predicament. Why not?

12) We learn from reading the dedication of this novel that the author, similar to Tamsen Donner, has five daughters. How might this commonality have influenced Burton’s decision to write about the Donners? In her Author’s Notes, Burton asks, “Why are we so drawn to [the Donner Party story]? Because it’s the American dream turned nightmare? Because we wonder what we would have done had we been there?” (244) Why do you think people have been fascinated by this story for so
long? How do you approach this period of history differently now?

13) On page 81, Tamsen writes to her sister, “...I find that, when I revisit the past, it often reveals something quite unexpected – too often some humbling or unpleasant truth that seems clear as day now.” What does revisiting the Donner tragedy reveal to us as individuals as well as culturally?

14) What type of reader do you think would enjoy this novel? Would you see a movie made on this novel? Would you read a sequel – for example, a work that focused on the Donner daughters? If this novel were written from a different character’s perspective, who would you choose?

15) What “life lesson” can be learned from Tamsen’s story?
Gabrielle Burton, author of Impatient with Desire, Shares Part I and II

by Gwen

Yesterday, I reviewed Impatient with Desire and shared that I had talked with the author, Gabrielle Burton. I asked her how she first learned of the Donner Party, what was it about Tamsen Donner that intrigued her, about the intense research she did had to do, and about how hard it was to get published.

Her very gracious response was a story in itself and rather than get all crazy and edit it, I have decided to let her story do all of the talking. (I am going to split it up into two posts though)

Take it away Gabrielle Burton....

In 1972, I went to Bread Loaf Writer’s Conference with a small sheaf of poems—the first time I had been away from home alone since I married ten years before; I weaned the baby from breastfeeding in order to go. One day a writer, William Lederer, said, “Last night, I dreamt you were going to write a book about people eating each other to survive.” “What does that mean?” I asked. “Most people eat each other to survive,” he said. “You’re going to write a book that shows a different way.” “How do I do that?” I asked. “How would I know?” he said. “It’s your book, not mine”. I didn’t tell anyone that story.

Months later, I was writing a short story about a cross-country trip, and my husband was helping me with the geography. “You’d have to go over Donner Pass,” he said. “What’s that?” I asked. “You know,” he said, “where they ate each other to survive.”

This was the first time I had ever heard of the Donner Party and, when I got out books on them, Tamsen Donner leapt off the page. I was drawn to her initially because she had five daughters and so did I. She was a remarkable woman and I was looking for heroines for myself and for my daughters. I’d always been interested in survival stories, wondering how I would fare in a similar situation.
I wove a little bit about Tamsen and her lost journal into the story I was writing, which became a 550 page novel and consumed the next seven years. During those years, I went—with my husband and five daughters—to all the places Tamsen had been: her birthplace in Newburyport, MA, North Carolina where she taught school, her farm in Illinois, as well as retracing the Oregon Trail. She was still a small fraction of the novel, but I wanted the research to be accurate, and I was so drawn to her. She practically became a member of our family. Even our dog was named Tamsen. The novel, however, was the occasion of so many raised and dashed hopes that I put it away and started another (Heartbreak Hotel, which took another seven years and twenty eight rejections to be published.)

In 1987, Heartbreak Hotel just out, we were living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I transcribed all the tapes I’d recorded nine years earlier the summer we retraced the CA/Oregon Trail, and wrote a first draft of our trip. My editor wanted more family in it, but I didn’t want to write about my family in depth, because I’m private, and I secretly feared that if I wrote about how extraordinary my family was, something terrible might happen. I tried a couple more drafts, then turned to other things.

In 1997, because my family badgered me, I went to the Donner Party Sesquicentennial and everything I knew about the Donners came flooding back. I realized that over the years, without any intention, I had become an expert on the Donner Party. Through luck and persistence, I gained access to some of Tamsen Donner’s letters that the family had just given to the Huntington Museum, seen by few outside her descendants. Those letters filled in many missing parts of my research and I felt, without getting woo-woo about it, that Tamsen Donner was speaking to me.

I was in film school at the time and I wrote my 2nd screenplay on the Donner Party. Now there are 87 characters in the D.P. and it took countless drafts and some years for me to realize that I didn’t want to write about the Donner Party, but about Tamsen Donner, and not in a historical way but to be true to her spirit.

In Feb. 2006, despite having a screenplay made into a movie, winning prizes for another screenplay, writing fiction and non fiction steadily, some published, some not, I felt my career was at a dead end. I took out the draft of our CA/Oregon Trail trip and was sick to see that my editor’s last notes were in 1988! Where had the time gone? Oh, I could tote it all up—that was the year my daughters, husband, and I traveled from Branson, MO to Juneau, AK with our movie, Manna from Heaven, that was the year my mother, sister, and dog died, those were the two years I went to film school, that was the year my husband had open heart surgery, that was the year we moved... But although my life was rich, full, and blessed, I had not achieved what I wanted to in writing and felt the pressure of time, alone, and very sorry for myself. After a day of feeling bad, I talked sternly to myself, Look, G, this is a dead end track. No one is going to knock on your door. Anything that happens you have to make happen. Don’t expect it to be easy. Nobody cares about your writing as much as you do and you’re doggone lucky to be in a position to do something about it.

Then I wrote down what I wanted to do:
“1. write the trip book,

2. write the Tamsen movie, and

3. a distant 3rd, might be fun to write a Tamsen and George novel.”

And followed that with what I had going for me:

“drafts of 1 & 2 (dozens of them), people who will help me if I ask,

time, if I discipline it, enough money so I don’t have to stop to do something else, health.”

Then I listed in order all the things I needed to do. Read good non fiction to avoid indulgent writing. Exercise. Work hard. Believe in myself. Ask for help.

By the end of 2007, University of Nebraska Press had accepted the trip book, Searching for Tamsen Donner. I had also rewritten the screenplay, gone to Africa, and written the novel, Impatient with Desire, which was sold May, ’08.

It sounds smoother than it was, but it was pretty amazing. 19 agents gave rave rejections to Searching for Tamsen Donner—“Love it, but who’s the niche?”—before I found the perfect home. I said to my husband more than once, “If no one ever publishes this book, I’m going to publish Tamsen’s 17 letters myself and drive to Donner Pass and get the museum to sell them.” After U of Nebraska took it, almost a year passed of going through readers, committees, and boards and one more rewrite before the deal was sealed.

The hardest, scariest part was that after writing intermittently about Tamsen and the Donner Party for decades, I wasn’t always sure what was fact and what was my imagining. I pored over dozens of Donner books to make sure I hadn’t taken someone else’s words years before and now thought they were mine.

Kristin Johnson, the Donner Party scholar, who I met on the web, generously helped me update what was known at the time of our trip to what was known now—and incorporating “then and now” in a graceful way was challenging.

The book was nearly in galleys when randomly surfing the web one day, I came upon two letters by Tamsen I hadn’t known about. Yikes! Mark McLaughlin, the Storm King, generously let me have them for my book.

I’m an incredibly lucky woman. More than one person has said, Cream always rises to the top, and it makes me wince. A lot of people are talented but for a variety of reasons they don’t or can’t persevere in their art. Or maybe they do persevere and luck doesn’t come their way. Cream does not always rise to the top, and it’s arrogant and ungrateful to think so. A lot of cream curdles.
Tell your luck. Try to hold on. Help each other hold on. That’s true for writing and it’s true for life.

I love that line about cream curdling.
Westward Expansion

The Donner Party

Period: 1820-1860

Early in April, 1846, 87 pioneers led by George Donner, a well-to-do 62-year-old farmer, set out from Springfield, Illinois, for California. Like many emigrants, they were ill-prepared for the dangerous trek. The pioneers' 27 wagons were loaded with fancy foods, liquor, and built-in beds and stoves.

On July 20, at Fort Bridger, Wyoming, the party decided to take a shortcut. Lansford W. Hastings, a California booster, had suggested in a guidebook that pioneers could save 400 miles by cutting south of the Great Salt Lake. Hastings himself had never taken his own shortcut. He was trying to overthrow California's weak Mexican government and hoped to bring in enough emigrants to start a revolution.

Soon huge boulders, arid desert, and dangerous mountain passes slowed the expedition to a crawl. During one stretch, the party traveled only 36 miles in 21 days. A desert crossing that Hastings said would take two days actually took six days and nights.

Twelve weeks after leaving Fort Bridger, the Donner Party reached the eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains and prepared to cross Truckee Pass, the last remaining barrier before they arrived in California's Sacramento Valley. On October 31, they climbed the high Sierra ridges in an attempt to cross the pass, but five-foot high snow drifts blocked their path.

Trapped, the party built crude tents and tepees, covered with clothing, blankets, and animal hides. To survive, the Donner party was forced to eat mice, their rugs, and even their shoes. In the end, surviving members of the party escaped starvation only by eating the flesh of those who died.

In mid-December, a group of 12 men and 5 women made a last-ditch effort to cross the pass to find help. They took only a 6-day supply of rations, consisting of finger-sized pieces of dried beef--two pieces a person per day. During a severe storm, two of the group died. The surviving members of the party "stripped the flesh from their bones, roasted and ate it, avert[ing] their eyes from each other, and weeping." More than a month passed before seven frost-bitten survivors reached an American settlement. By then, the rest had died and two Indian guides had been shot and eaten.

Relief teams immediately sought to rescue the pioneers still trapped near Truckee Pass. During the winter, four successive rescue parties broke through and brought out the survivors. The situation that the rescuers found was unspeakably gruesome. Thirteen were dead. Surviving members of the Donner party were delirious from hunger and overexposure. One survivor was found in a small cabin next to a cannibalized body of a young boy. Of the original 87 members of
the party, only 47 survived.

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Donner Party Ate Family Dog, Maybe Not People
Did ethnic prejudice spur the now infamous legend of the Donner Party's cannibalism?
By Jennifer Vegas | Thu Apr 15, 2010 12:01 PM ET

THE GIST:

- Analysis of bones discovered at the Donner Party campsite found no evidence for cannibalism.
- The members did resort to consuming the family dog, cattle, deer and horses.
- Slate pieces and china shards reveal the members tried to live with dignity.

The Donner Party, a group of 19th century American pioneers who became snowbound in the Sierra Nevada and supposedly resorted to cannibalism, may not have eaten each other after all, suggests a new study on bones found at the Donner's Alder Creek campsite hearth in California.

Detailed analysis of the bones instead found that the 84 Donner Party members consumed a family dog, "Uno," along with cattle, deer and horses. Cattle, likely eaten after the animals themselves died of starvation, appear to have been their mainstay.

The study is the first to show that the Donner members successfully hunted deer, despite the approximately 30 feet of snow on the ground during the winter of 1846-1847. The horses are thought to have come from relief parties that arrived in February and could have left a few of their animals behind.

Related Links:
- Settlement Site Hints at Mass Cannibalism
- Cannibalism May Have Wiped Out Neanderthals
- Bust Myths From History and More
- HowStuffWorks.com: Donner Party
- Planet Green: Quiz: Would You Fall For an Eco Myth?

The paper, which will be published in the July issue of the journal American Antiquity, is also the first to prove the theory that the stranded individuals ate their pet dog.

"They were boiling hides, chewing on leather and trying desperately to survive," project leader Gwen Robbins told Discovery News. "We can see that the bones were processed so heavily -- boiled and crushed down in order to extract any kind of nutrients from them."

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Robbins, an assistant professor of biological anthropology at Appalachian State University, and her team produced thin sections from the hearth bones and examined them under high magnification in order to measure each basic structural unit and link the bones to particular animals.

"What we have demonstrated is that there is no evidence for cannibalism," said Robbins. "If the Donner Party did resort to cannibalism, the bones were treated in a different way (such as buried), or they were placed on the hearth last and could have since eroded."

Victorian Era journalists, who embellished the accounts provided by the 47 survivors, largely fueled the legend of the Donner Party cannibalism. The survivors, 11 men and 36 women and children, fiercely denied the allegations. Although one man, Louis Keseberg, filed and won a defamation suit, he was still forever known as Keseberg the Cannibal.

"Racism might have played a part," Robbins said. "Keseberg was an immigrant, and negative sentiment existed toward some recent immigrants then."

The trash and debris left around the Donner Party hearth in the spring of 1847 show that, in spite of their very difficult circumstances, the members tried to maintain a sense of decorum and normalcy.

"Slates suggest they had the children sitting and doing their lessons, while shards of china indicate they were eating off of plates, retaining some dignity and hoping for the future," Robbins explained.

University of Montana anthropologist Kelly Dixon worked on the initial study that first documented the hearth and bones.

"The tale of the Donner Party has focused on the tragedy of survival cannibalism," said Dixon, "yet the archaeological remains inspire us to consider more significant implications, such as what it was like to be human, doing whatever possible to survive in one of the snowbound camps."

Robbins and her colleagues are currently writing a book about the Donner Party for the University of Oklahoma Press. It is scheduled for release next year.

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BOOK REVIEW: ‘Impatient with Desire’

By Gabrielle Burton

Hyperion/Voice Books, $22.99, 256 pages

REVIEWED BY CLAIRE HOPLEY

"Impatient With Desire" is definitely not a quick read, though it is not a long book, nor is Gabrielle Burton's style dense or difficult. It's the subject matter that slows the reader down. The history of the Donner party daunts everyone. All the 19th-century emigrants who made their way along the Oregon Trail to California faced enormous hardships, but the Donner party took what they believed was a shortcut and found themselves stranded for four winter months in the Sierra Nevada. Of the 87 people in the party, only 47 survived, and it is clear both from survivors' accounts and historians' studies that the survivors lived only because they ate those who had died.

The Donner party thus elicits the full a spectrum of emotions that thrill: the hope and endurance that inspires, the heroism that awes, and the determination to defeat death by cannibalism that horrifies.

Many writers who fictionalize such grim histories produce turgid books whose ersatz allure comes from painting horror in neon colors. Ms. Burton avoids this by trimming the Donners' story to its essentials, pinpointing her characters' motivations and feelings and therefore explaining their actions at every step of their fateful way.

Tamsen Donner tells how the tragedy happens through letters and journal entries she writes en route to the Sierra Nevada and flashbacks to her early life. The daughter of a sea captain of Newburyport, Mass., she supported herself as a schoolteacher before marrying George Donner. They had five daughters when they left their prosperous Illinois farm for California, the enticing state that seemed to offer an earthly paradise to those who could get there.

"My whole life my heart was big with hope and impatient with desire. When anyone ever went any place, I always wondered: What will they see? What is there that is not here? What waits for them that I am missing?" she writes. The Donners left with several more families, all with children. Indeed, there were at least as many children in the party as adults. The mistake the Donner party made was to leave the established trail to follow a cutoff that promised to shave 300 miles off the journey.

But the route was unproved. In any case, success in getting over the Rockies depended on beating the snow. By early November 1846, they reached Truckee Lake in the Sierra Nevada, already exhausted after crossing the Wasatch desert. They could go no farther so some of them snow-shoe out for help. Rescuers tried to reach them, but relief did not arrive until mid-February 1847, when many had already died of starvation and illness.
"All that grief and confusion and chicanery and betrayal and carelessness and death just to get us here to these dull, thudding, stuporous, barely noticeable deaths," reflects Tamsen. She has spent weeks boiling hides to feed her daughters; bathing her husband's injured hand while watching the infection creep up his arm; seeing her brother-in-law die and his wife and many others lose hope.

"Our teamsters lay in their shelter deathlike, and when life left there was hardly a difference," she writes. The dead had to be buried in the snow. As starvation stalked the camp, many - probably everyone - turned to them as the only source of food.

In her journal and letters, Tamsen lists the dead, describes her fading children, praises her patient husband, and recalls her girlhood, when the arrival of ships with gifts from afar stirred her hunger to see the world for herself. She knows if she hadn't had the gypsy feet of the born wanderer George wouldn't have left Illinois. She also realizes that paradoxically, instead of making a better life for her children, she has brought tragedy and death into their world. As their father lies dying, he says that as Americans they had no alternative but to take up the challenge of exploring westward, but Tamsen has a deeper understanding of what was at work:

"We will carve out a new country,' we shouted, not realizing that the new country will be no more and no less that the worst and best of us." Gabrielle Burton is much more interested in exploring this theme than the traditional manifest destiny notion. In her hands, Tamsen Donner becomes a 19th-century American heroine: an educated woman with many skills, wide interests and deep love of her family.

As Ms. Burton reflects, she lived at the same time as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and she shares her conviction that women are as competent as men. When the Donner party votes about whether to take the established route to California or head for the newly discovered cutoff, the women, who do as much work as the men and understand as much about the problems they face, are disenfranchised - and Tamsen would not have chosen the cutoff route.

The portrayal of Tamsen and the investigation of motivation is one of the triumphs of "Impatient With Desire." The other is Ms. Burton's narrative skill. By switching between Tamsen's memories of her early life and her record of the travails on the journey, she downloads information at a rate readers can absorb and in a way that entices them into her tale eager to unravel the mystery of why people cast their all on such perilous ventures. Her novel is therefore not just a gripping tale of the Donner party, but a model of how to write compelling and enlightening historical fiction. Physically, too, the book is a pleasure: It is a convenient size - perfect for reading on a journey or in bed - its cover is beautiful, and it even has illustrations.

Claire Hopley is a writer and editor in Amherst, Mass.
Gabrielle Burton

In the preface to *Searching For Tamsen Donner*, her memoir from University of Nebraska Press (2009), Gabrielle Burton writes, "In 1972 Tamsen Donner came unexpectedly to our family and took up permanent residence. In the decades since first discovering Tamsen Donner, I’ve written about numerous other subjects in non-fiction, fiction, and screenplay form. Yet, after every major project, I kept returning to Tamsen Donner."

*Searching for Tamsen Donner* includes all of Tamsen Donner’s known letters collected and published in one place for the first time.

Her just published novel, *Impatient With Desire* (Hyperion/Voice 2010, is written from Tamsen Donner's point of view.

Burton's books share a commitment to exploring women's lives. Her first novel, *Heartbreak Hotel*, published by Charles Scribner's Sons, was reviewed by novelist Fay Weldon as "a wild, manic, committed, exhilarating, wonderful work." For *Heartbreak Hotel*, Burton received the Maxwell Perkins Prize, the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writer's Award, and in 1999, the novel was selected by prestigious Dalkey Archive Press for republication. Burton's non-fiction book, *I'm Running Away From Home But I'm Not Allowed To Cross The Street*, a comedic primer on the Women's Movement, was the first book published by KNOW, and was subsequently picked up by Avon. It launched her into the national discussion as a mother of five girls struggling with the typical problems of balancing parenting with other pursuits, or, as Burton put it: "keeping seven lives afloat at the expense of none."

The desire to live a life fully while being a writer, wife, and mother drove Burton and her husband to create new ways of parenting and sharing household chores, as well as sharing adventure as a family. The pioneer spirit not only informs Burton’s work on the Donner Party, but all of her writing, as well as her life. Burton and her husband (jazz musician, psychology professor, and actor Roger Burton) took extraordinary trips with their five children on shoestring budgets -- hitch-hiking through Alaska, camping while painstakingly researching the exact Donner Party route from Independence to California, backpacking through southeast Asia for months, and living in Europe and Malaysia. Recently, she traveled to Africa and to Tahiti, where she climbed the mast of a sailing ship.

Burton decided to move into screenwriting, and was accepted at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. She won AFI's Mary Pickford Prize for screenwriting en route to her MFA. The same weekend Burton was attending the Equinoxe Screenwriters Lab in Bordeaux, France (one of eleven international writers selected), she won the Austin Film Festival's top prize for screenwriting. She has received grants from the Arts Council, and was selected to participate in the Independent Feature Project (IFP, now FINDE) Screenwriting Lab. For her magic-realist screenplay about the Russian revolution and the illusory nature of history and story-telling, she was named a Nicholl Screenwriting Fellow by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, one of the most coveted prizes in screenwriting competitions. Her screenplay *Manna From Heaven* was produced by Five Sisters Productions, and was...
chosen as a critics pick by the Washington Post and called "Capra-esque. Charming, charming, charming" by NPR. After national theatrical distribution, Manna From Heaven is currently on DVD from MGM/SONY.

She has been a Member of the Ossabaw Island Project, a Yaddo fellow, a MacDowell Colony fellow, and the Bernard De Voto Fellow in Non Fiction at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. She has worked as a public speaker, as well as judge for literary prizes, and is a member of The American Heritage Dictionary Usage Panel.

Burton is a member of peace and equal rights groups, campaigned as a delegate for Shirley Chisholm's run for President, worked on several commercials with Five Sisters Productions for Barack Obama's presidential campaign, and, most recently, worked with Five Sisters on PSAs against human trafficking in the U.S. Last year, Burton went with members of Tunahski (a charitable group, now Go Campaign), to an orphanage in Tanzania (read more about this group under LINKS).

Burton's articles, essays, and reviews have appeared in national publications including the Washington Post, The New York Times, Family Circle, and Ms. Magazine. Online, she is a blogger on The Huffington Post.

photo by Maria Burton
LEGENDS OF AMERICA
A Travel Site for the Nostalgic & Historic Minded

OLD WEST LEGENDS
The Donner Party Tragedy

On April 16, 1846, nine covered wagons left Springfield, Illinois on the 2500 mile journey to California, in what would become one of the greatest tragedies in the history of westward migration. The originator of this group was a man named James Fraser Reed, an Illinois business man, eager to build a greater fortune in the rich land of California.

Reed also hoped that his wife, Margaret, who suffered from terrible headaches, might improve in the coastal climate. Reed had recently read the book The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California, by Landsford W. Hastings, who advertised a new shortcut across the Great Basin. This new route enticed travelers by advertising that it would save the pioneers 350-400 miles on easy terrain. However, what was not known was that Reed was the Hastings Route had never been tested, written by Hastings who had visions of building an empire at Sutter's Fort (now Sacramento). It was this falsified information that would lead to the doom of the Donner Party.

Reed soon found others seeking adventure and fortune in the vast including the Donner family, Graves, Broes, Murphys, Eddys, McCutcheons, Keebergs, and the Wollingers, as well as seven teamsters and a number of bachelors. The initial group included 32 men, women and children.

With James and Margaret Reed were their four children, Virginia, Patty, James and Thomas, as well as Margaret's 70-year-old mother, Sarah Keyes, and two hired servants. Though Sarah Keyes was so sick with consumption that she could barely walk, she was unwilling to be separated from her only daughter. However, the successful Reed was determined his family would not suffer on long journey as his wagon was an extravagant two-story affair with a built-in iron stove, spring-cushioned seats and bunks for sleeping. Taking eight oxen to pull the luxurious wagon, Reed's 12-year-old daughter Virginia dubbed it "The Pioneer Palace Car."

In nine brand new wagons, the group estimated the trip would take four months to cross the plains, deserts, mountains ranges and rivers in their quest for California. Their first destination was Independence, Missouri, the main jumping-off point for the Oregon and California Trails.

Also in the group were the families of George and Jacob Donner. George Donner was a successful 62-year-old farmer who had migrated five times before settling in Springfield, Illinois along with his brother Jacob. Obviously adventurous, the brothers decided to make one last trip to California, which unfortunately would be their last.

With George were his third wife, Tamzen, their three children, Frances, Georgia, and Etta, and George's two daughters from a previous marriage, Eliza and Leanna. Jacob Donner, and his wife Elizabeth, brought their five children, George, Mary, Isaac, Samuel and Lewis, as well as Mrs. Donner's two children from a previous marriage, Sobrison and William Hook.

Also along with them were two teamsters, Noah James and Samuel Shoemaker, as well as friend named John Denton. In the bottom of Jacob Donner's saddletag was a copy of Landsford Hastings's Emigrant's Guide, with its tantalizing talk of a faster route to the garden of the earth.

Ironically, on the very day that the Illinois party headed west from Springfield, Landsford Hastings prepared to head east from California, to see what the shortcut he had written about was really like.

The wagon train reached Independence, Missouri about three weeks later, where they were resupplied. The next day, on May 12, 1846, they headed west again in the middle of a thunderstorm. A week later they joined a large wagon train captained by Colonel William H. Russell that was camped on Indian Creek about 100 miles west of Independence. Along the entire
journey, others would join the group until its size numbered 87.

On May 26th the train was held for several days by high water at the Big Blue River near present-day Marysville, Kansas. It was here that the train would experience its first death, when Sarah Keyes died and was buried next to the river. After building ferries to cross the water, the party was on their way again, following the Platte River for the next month.

Along the way, William Russell resigned as the captain of the wagon train and the position was assumed by a man named William M. Boggs. Encountering few problems along the trail, the pioneers reached Fort Laramie just one week behind schedule on June 27, 1846.
From September 10th through the 25th, the party followed the trail into Nevada around the Ruby Mountains, finally reaching the Humboldt River on September 26th. It was here that the "new" trail met up with Hastings' original path. Having traveled an extra 125 miles through strenuous mountain terrain and dry desert, the disillusioned party's resentment of Hastings, and ultimately, Reed, was increased tremendously.

The Donner Party soon reached the junction with the California Trail, about seven miles west of present-day Elko, Nevada and spent the next two weeks traveling along the Humboldt River. As the disillusionment of the party increased, tempers began to flare in the group.

On October 5th at Iron Point, two wagons became entangled and John Snyder, a teamster of one of the wagons began to whip his oxen. Infuriated by the teamster's treatment of the oxen, James Reed ordered the man to stop and when he wouldn't, Reed grabbed his knife and stabbed the teamster in the stomach, killing him. The Donner Party wasted no time in administering their own justice. Though member, Lewis Keseberg, favored hanging for James Reed, the group, instead, voted to banish him. Leaving his family, Reed was last seen riding off to the west with a man named Walter Herron.

The Donner Party continued to travel along the Humboldt River with their remaining draft animals exhausted. To spare the animals, everyone who could, walked. Two days after the Snyder killing, on October 7th, Lewis Keseberg turned out a Belgian man named Hardcoop, who had been travelling with him. The old man, who could not keep up with the rest of the party with his severely swollen feet, began to knock on other wagon doors, but no one would let him in. He was last seen sitting under a large sage brush, completely exhausted, unable to walk, worn out, and was left there to die.

The terrible ordeals of the caravan continued to mount, when on October 12th, their oxen were attacked by Plute Indians, killing 21 one of them with poison tipped arrows, further depleting their draft animals.

Continuing to encounter multiple obstacles, on October 16th they reached the gateway to the Sierra Nevada on the Truckee River (present day Reno) almost completely depleted of food supplies. Miraculously, just three days later on October 19th, one of the men the party had sent on to Fort Sutter -- Charles Stanton, returned laden with seven mules loaded with beef and flour, two Indian guides, and news of a clear, but difficult path through the Sierra Nevada. Stanton's partner, William McCutchen had fallen ill and remained at the fort. The caravan camped for five days 50 miles from the summit, resting their oxen for the final push. This decision to delay their departure was yet one more of many that would lead to their tragedy.

October 28th, an exhausted James Reed arrived at Sutter's Fort, where he met William McCutchen, now recovered, and the two men began preparations to go back for their families.

In the meantime, while the wagon train continued to the base of summit, George Donner's wagon axle broke and he fell
behind the rest of the party. Twenty two people, consisting of the Donner family and their hired men, stayed behind while the wagon was repaired. Unfortunately, while cutting timber for a new axle, a chisel slipped and Donner cut his hand badly, causing the group to fall further behind.

As the rest of the party continued to what is now known as Donner's Lake, snow began to fall. Stanton and the two Indians who were travelling ahead made it as far as the summit, but could go no further. Hopeless, they retraced their steps where five feet of new snow had already fallen.

With the Sierra pass just 12 miles beyond, the wagon train, after attempting to make the pass through the heavy snow, finally retreated to the eastern end of the lake, where level ground and timber was abundant. At the lake stood one existing cabin and realizing they were stranded, the group built two more cabins, sheltering 59 people in hopes that the early snow would melt, allowing them to continue their travels.

The 22 people with the Donners were about six miles behind at Alder Creek. Hastily, as the snow continued, the party built three shelters from tents, quilts, buffalo robes and brush to protect themselves from the harsh conditions.

At Donner Lake, two more attempts were made to get over the pass in twenty feet of snow, until they finally realized they were snowbound for the winter. More small cabins were constructed, many of which were shared by more than one family. The weather and their hopes were not to improve. Over the next four months, the remaining men, women, and children would huddle together in cabins, make shift lean-tos, and tents.

Meanwhile, Reed and McCutchen had headed back up into the mountains attempting to rescue their stranded companions. Two days after they started out it began to rain. As the elevation increased, the rain turned to snow and twelve miles from the summit the pair could go no further. Caching their provisions in Bear Valley, they returned to Sutter's fort hoping to recruit more men and supplies for the rescue. However, the Mexican War has had drawn away the able-bodied men, forcing any further rescue attempts to wait. Not knowing how many cattle the emigrants had lost, the men believed the party would have enough meat to last them several months.

On Thanksgiving, it began to snow again, and the pioneers at Donner Lake killed the last of their oxen for food on November 29th.

The very next day, five more feet of snow fell, and they knew that any plans for a departure were dashed. Many of their animals, including Sutter's mules, had wandered off into the storms and their bodies were lost under the snow. A few days later their last few cattle were slaughtered for food and party began eating boiled hides, twigs, bones and bark. Some of the men tried to hunt with little success.

On December 15, Ballis Williams died of malnutrition and the group realized that something had to be done before they all died. The next day five men, nine women and
one child departed on snow shoes for the summit, determined to travel the 100 miles to Sutter’s Fort. However, with only meager rations and already weak from hunger the group faced a challenging ordeal. On the sixth day, their food ran out and for the next three days no one ate while they traveled through grueling high winds and freezing weather. One member of the party, Charles Stanton, snow-blind and exhausted was unable to keep up with the rest of the party and told them to go on. He never rejoined the group. A few days later, the party was caught in a blizzard and had great difficulty getting and keeping a fire lit. Antonio, Patrick Dolan, Franklin Graves, and Lemuel Murphy soon died and in desperation, the others resorted to cannibalism.

Living off the bodies of those that died along the path to Sutter’s Fort, the snowshoeing survivors were reduced to seven by the time they reached safety on the western side of the mountains on January 19, 1847. Only two of the ten men survived, including William Eddy and William Foster, but all five women lived through the journey. Of the eight dead, seven had been cannibalized. Immediately messages were dispatched to neighboring settlements as area residents rallied to save the rest of the Donner Party.
On February 5, the first relief party of seven men left Johnson’s ranch, and the second, headed by James Reed, left two days later. On February 19th, the first party reached the lake finding what appeared to be a deserted camp until the ghastly figure of a woman appeared. Twelve of the emigrants were dead and of the forty-eight remaining, many had gone crazy or were barely clinging to life. However, the nightmare was by no means over. Not everyone could be taken out at one time and since no pack animals could be brought in, few food supplies were brought in.

The first relief party soon left with 23 refugees, but during the party’s travels back to Sutter’s Fort, two more children died. En route down the mountains the first relief party met the second relief party coming the opposite way and the Reed family was reunited after five months.

On March 1st the second relief party finally arrived at the lake, finding grisly evidence of cannibalism. The next day, they arrive at Alder Creek to find that the Donners had also resorted to cannibalism. On March 3rd, Reed left the camp with 17 of the starving emigrants but just two days later they are caught in another blizzard. When it cleared, Isaac Donner had died and most of the refugees were too weak to travel. Reed and another rescuer, Hiram Miller, took three of the refugees with them hoping to find food they had stored on the way up. The rest of the pioneers stayed at what would become known as “Starved Camp.”

On March 12th the third relief led by William Eddy and William Foster reached Starved Camp where Mrs. Graves and her son Franklin had also died. The three bodies, including that of Isaac Donner, had been cannibalized. The next day, they arrived at the lake camp to find that both of their sons had died. On March 14th they arrived at the Alder Creek camp to find George Donner was dying from an infection in the hand that he had injured months before. His wife Tamzene, though in comparatively good health, refused to leave him; sending her three little girls on without her. The relief party soon departed with four more members of the party, leaving those who are too weak to travel. Two rescuers, Jean-Baptiste Trudeau and Nicholas Clark, are left behind to care for the Donners, but soon abandon them to catch up with the relief party.

A fourth rescue party set out in late March but were soon stranded in a blinding snow storm for several days. On April 17th, the relief party reached the camps to find only Louis Keseberg alive among the mutilated remains of his former companions. Keseberg was the last member of the Donner Party to arrive at Sutter’s Fort on April 29th. It took two months and four relief parties to rescue the entire surviving Donner Party.

In the Donner Party tragedy, two-thirds of the men in the party perished, while two-thirds of the women and children lived. Forty-one individuals died, and forty-six survived. In the end, five had died before reaching the mountains, thirty-five perished either at the mountain camps or trying to cross the mountains, and one died just after reaching the valley. Many of those who survived lost toes to frostbite.

The story of the Donner tragedy quickly spread across the country. Newspapers printed letters and diaries, and accused
the travelers of bad conduct, cannibalism, and even murder. The surviving members had differing viewpoints, biases and recollections so what actually happened was never extremely clear. Some blamed the power hungry Lansford W. Hastings for the tragedy, while others blamed James Reed for not heeding Clyman's warning about the deadly route.

After the publicity, emigration to California fell off sharply and Hastings' cutoff was all but abandoned. Then, in January 1848, gold was discovered in at John Sutter's Mill in Coloma and gold hungry travelers began to rush out West once again. By late 1849 more than 100,000 people had come to California in search of gold near the streams and canyons where the Donner Party had suffered.

Donner Lake, named for the party, is today a popular mountain resort near Truckee, California and the Donner Camp has been designated as a National Historic Landmark. The Donner Camp has been the site of recent archeological excavations.