

# By the Light of the Bluff

a novel by Blake Gunnels

★ 2025 INTERNATIONAL FIREBIRD BOOK AWARD WINNER — SOUTHERN FICTION ★

*“I didn’t come here to be found. I came here to stop running.”*

— Jesse Whitmore

## About the Book

Saint Simons Island, 1873. Jesse Whitmore arrives on the Georgia coast with her two children, Daniel and Eliza, and a past she refuses to name. All she wants is sanctuary beneath the sprawling oaks and Spanish moss. But when a new lighthouse begins rising from the eastern bluff, Jesse is drawn into its construction—and into the orbit of Jonas Miller, the principled young man who has returned to finish the tower his late father began. As whispers from her past edge closer, Jesse must choose: keep hiding, or claim her place in the light. A moving story of survival, purpose, and the quiet strength it takes to begin again.

## A Note for Your Gathering

These questions are meant to open conversation, not close it—there are no wrong answers. Pour the sweet tea, settle in, and let the discussion wander wherever your group’s hearts take it. (*A gentle note: the questions below assume everyone has finished the book.*)

## Discussion Questions

1. Jesse arrives carrying a past she refuses to name. Why do you think she chooses silence about where she came from, and how did that silence shape your early impression of her?
2. Jesse insists she came not to be found but to stop running. What’s the difference between hiding and beginning again—and where in the story does she cross from one to the other?
3. Jesse is the lighthouse’s first keeper—not a widow seeking refuge, but a woman who left a living marriage. How did understanding her true circumstances change the way you read her choices?
4. Daniel and Eliza meet upheaval in very different ways—Daniel watchful and protective, Eliza more open to the new world. How do the children reflect or challenge Jesse’s own way of facing things?
5. Jonas Miller returns to complete the lighthouse his late father, Henry, began. How do Jonas and Jesse each carry the weight of someone else’s unfinished work—and what draws them together beyond the tower itself?

6. The lighthouse is both a real structure and a metaphor that runs through the novel. What did the light come to mean to you by the final page?
7. In the church scene, the pastor reads from Matthew 5:16—“Let your light so shine before men”—while looking at the half-finished tower. How does the novel define what it means to let your light shine: being seen, or being of use?
8. The story unfolds in 1873, less than a decade after the Civil War, on a Georgia sea island. How do that time and place—the marsh, the tides, the people Jesse meets, like Solomon—press on the characters’ lives and choices? Whose stories sit at the edges of Jesse’s?
9. Community forms slowly around Jesse—some residents wary, others generous. Who extended grace to her, and who withheld it? What did those responses reveal about the island, and about Jesse?
10. *By the Light of the Bluff* is a story of purpose, not redemption—Jesse has nothing to be forgiven for. Why does that distinction matter? How is a story about a woman claiming purpose different from one about a woman seeking forgiveness?
11. When the storm finally tests Jesse against the wind and the flame, what does she prove—to herself, and to those watching?
12. If your group could ask Blake one question about the book, the setting, or the writing, what would it be? (*See below—he may just answer it.*)

*Eliza’s and Daniel’s stories continue in the BluffLight series.*

## Enhance Your Gathering

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- Set the table Lowcountry-style: shrimp and grits, fresh biscuits, and plenty of sweet tea.
- Look up the real lighthouses of Saint Simons Island and the Georgia coast as you talk.
- Ask each member: if you could “begin again” somewhere, where would it be—and why?

## About the Author

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Blake Gunnels is the 2025 International Firebird Award-winning author of *By the Light of the Bluff*. A landscape architect by trade and a lifelong lover of Southern stories, his fiction explores the coastal communities of the American South—drawing on years spent along the shores of Florida and Georgia, including summers on Saint Simons Island.

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*Invite the author: Blake is glad to join your book club by video—just reach out.*

***Let your light so shine.***

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Blake Gunnels · Author