

# Duck Creek Mysteries: A Discussion Guide for *The Master of the Starlet's Shadow*

## Part 1: Character & Relationships

1. **Finn, the Trail-Ready Sentinel:** Finn is described as "trail-ready as a state-issue ranger" though he holds no official title. How does his meticulous nature—such as walking the trail "like a surgeon" to find hazards—shape his approach to solving the mystery of the film canister?
2. **Chloe, the "Quirky Sidekick":** Chloe views her life in cinematic terms, often imagining it as a series of well-lit movie moments. How does her background in musical theater and her internship at the historical society complement Finn's practical mountain skills?
3. **The Bakery as the Village Heart:** *Ground + Toasted* is portrayed as the "heart to Duck Creek". Discuss the role of Brandi and Randy in fostering this community sanctuary. How does the bakery serve as both a safe haven and a tactical headquarters for the group?
4. **The Antagonist: Marcus Thorne:** Marcus arrives in a "black as a beetle's shell" Range Rover, representing "city money" and a "Plateau Development" concept. Compare his cold, "sterile" approach to the village with the warmth of the locals. Is he a threat to the town's history or just its modern identity?

## Part 2: Themes & Ideas

1. **Preservation vs. Progress:** A major conflict involves Marcus Thorne's desire to turn Duck Creek into "Park City Lite" by developing "boutique" hospitality concepts on historic parcels. Do you feel development is always the "villain" in small-town stories, or can it be balanced with local heritage?
2. **Legacy and "Edible Immortality":** Brandi mentions that their sourdough starter is nearly a century old and that "every baker leaves a little piece of themselves behind". How does this theme of physical legacy tie into the "lost" film reels and the hidden documents of Evelyn St. Claire?

3. **The "Little Hollywood" Era:** The story draws heavily on the real history of film production in the Dixie National Forest. How does the discovery of the 1954 film reel, *The Starlet's Shadow*, bridge the gap between Duck Creek's glamorous past and its present-day struggles?
4. **Justice for Evelyn St. Claire:** The central mystery involves a seventy-year-old cold case where a starlet's land rights were targeted through forgery. Discuss the significance of Finn and Chloe finding the "original deed" and how this late-coming justice changes the village's future.

### Part 3: World-Building & Setting

1. **Duck Creek Village:** The author admits to taking "liberties for the sake of the story," such as adding a Town Hall that doesn't exist in reality. Did these fictional additions make the setting feel more or less authentic to you?
2. **The Natural World:** Descriptions of the "Twisted Forest Trail" and lightning-split ponderosa pines are central to the plot. How does the author use the rugged mountain environment to heighten the sense of mystery and danger?
3. **"Cozy" Mystery Conventions:** The author explicitly avoids blood, "spice," and cursing. Does this "family-friendly" approach enhance the focus on the historical puzzle, or did you miss the grittier elements of traditional mysteries?

### Part 4: Favorite Passages & Style

1. **Favorite Scene:** Which moment was most memorable—the discovery of the film canister in the lightning-struck tree, the archival deep-dive, or the final community toast at the bakery?
2. **Sensory Writing:** The author uses vivid sensory details, such as the smell of "cinnamon and yeast" mixed with "mountain air". Which descriptions most

effectively transported you to Duck Creek?

- 3. Overall Impact:** If you were recommending this book, would you focus on the mystery of the starlet or the "found family" at the bakery? How did the ending, where the "mountain listened on," make you feel [cite\_25\_snippet\_back]?