

Living Stories of the Cherokee

edited by
Barbara R. Duncan

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 1

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
Columbia

Trudier Harris
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Discussion questions

Native American cultures value tradition and strive to keep the past, the “old ways,” alive in the present. What are your attitudes toward tradition versus progress and change? What connections with the past do you make in your family life? At work? In your spiritual practices? In rearing your children?

Mythologies around the globe use varying stories to explain the sun and moon or to account for animal behaviors and markings. Can biology, physics, and astronomy be considered forms of myth making? Why or why not? What do you have to “take on faith” to believe in creationism? What do you have to “take on faith” to believe in evolution?

Additional readings

John H. Finger. *Cherokee Americans: The Eastern Band of the Cherokees in the Twentieth Century*, 1991.

Diane Glancy. *Pushing the Bear: A Novel of the Trail of Tears*, 1996.

Thomas E. Mails. *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times*, 1996.

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edited by Barbara R. Duncan

"Cherokee culture is alive in the hearts of the Cherokee people," writes Barbara Duncan in her introduction to *Living Stories of the Cherokee*. "It is stronger, richer, bigger, and more enduring than any book that can be written about it. Storytelling is part of Cherokee culture, and it, too, is alive and strong." In compiling this collection of tales, Duncan interviewed Cherokee storytellers and recorded their tales as evidence of the lasting vitality of storytelling traditions among the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

Cultures all over the earth tell stories. The stories are as old as humanity and have been passed from generation to generation during long nights around winter fires. They exist in our modern-day living rooms during holidays and other gatherings, when we participate in family traditions and share family stories in much the same way that the Cherokee storytellers in this book learned their stories from listening to the lore of their tribe.

Even though the stories of the Cherokee may be printed in books, they cannot be attributed to a particular author, nor can they be fixed in time, place, form, or content. They are not the work of an individual imagination; they are folklore, anonymous, always changing, circulating through the hearts, minds, and mouths of countless tellers. In *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, Duncan has included three versions of "How the Possum Lost His Tail" and two versions of "The Origin of Strawberries." Readers might study the similarities and differences between these versions to gain an appreciation for the way in which the tales have evolved and are still evolving.

It is also interesting to note the broad range of tales in this collection. A myth, such as "How the World Was Made," is a creation story, essentially religious in its content, explaining the origin of the earth and its creatures in a manner similar to the book of Genesis. Legends, such as "The Origin of the Pileated Woodpecker" or "The Legend of the Corn Beads," recount deeds or events, often sensational in nature, comparable to "The Legend of Rip Van Winkle" or "The Legend of Johnny Appleseed." With enough embellishment, stories become "tall tales," similar to accounts of Paul Bunyan's superhuman size and strength. In this collection, Davey Arch's story, "Big Snakes," in which Arch's grandfather recounts seeing rattlesnakes the size of fallen logs, might be considered a tall tale.

Tales specific to individuals and families, such as "Jeannie and the Booger" or "The First Time I Saw a White Man," are also included in the collection. These tales become family folklore when they are told in differing versions over a long period of time. "Stories about healing, about supernatural experiences, about grandfathers and grandmothers, about particular places in the mountains," Duncan states in her introduction, "these are all traditional stories just as much as is 'How the Possum Lost His Tail.'"

Sometimes these stories may seem silly or childish. Indeed, they are often told to children. But scholars remind us that folklore can be a powerful influence on the way we see ourselves and interpret the world around us. Robert Bly, for instance, in his best-seller, *Iron John*, examined the wisdom embodied in certain European tales and the value of those tales in guiding the social and psychological maturation of men. Joseph Campbell, the noted folklorist, researched religious mythologies around the globe. His books reveal the commonality of seemingly disparate beliefs, all of them showing the human being aspiring toward spirituality.

Many Native American tales are of religious origin and fulfill a spiritual purpose. It may be difficult for non-Native readers to see religion in Cherokee tales such as "Corn Woman Spirit," in which ravens free Corn Woman from evil spirits who have hidden her in a cave. Cherokee religious tales are vastly different from the narratives told in the Bible and other teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Or are they so different? Readers might discover a deeper appreciation of Cherokee stories by comparing and contrasting them with stories from their own religious training.

Stories are important in teaching moral values and tribal history, Freeman Owle reminds the reader. "Each and every story had a real reason for it. The Cherokees did not have schools, so they had to tell stories to teach their children." Stories like "How the Possum Lost His Tail" or "The Brave, the Mighty Warrior" warn the listener against boastfulness and arrogance. In "The Old Man and the Birds," the thief suffers and dies of starvation as a consequence of stealing food, and the listener learns a Cherokee version of the Hindu concept of karma—what goes around, comes back around.

History lessons are embodied in tales which recount the "Trail of Tears," the forced removal of Cherokees from North Carolina to "Indian Territory" (which later became the state of Oklahoma). "In learning these lessons," says Duncan, "we also learn the place of a Cherokee person in relation to the rest of the world. If you are a Cherokee child hearing these stories, you learn all these things, and above all you learn what it means to be Cherokee."

During the 1838 Trail of Tears, 13,000 Cherokee Indians were forced to walk three to five months, journeying from North Carolina to Oklahoma on foot. More than four thousand died enroute. Some Cherokees, however, managed to remain in North Carolina, so that today there are two bands of Cherokee: Eastern and Western. The history of the splitting of the Cherokee is accounted for in the legend of Tsali, a Cherokee man who was taken with his family at gunpoint to join the march west. Early in the journey, an incident occurred between soldiers and Tsali's wife; a struggle ensued, during which Tsali and his sons killed two soldiers and fled into the mountains.

Eventually the government struck a deal in which Tsali and his sons surrendered and were executed; in exchange, other Cherokees hiding in the mountains were allowed to remain. These became the Eastern Band, who now live in 57,000 acres of mountainous western North Carolina called the Qualla Boundary area. An outdoor reenactment of the legend of Tsali, "Unto These Hills," is produced every summer by the Cherokee and attended by thousands of tourists. Tsali's story exemplifies the Cherokee tribal value of putting the good of the whole ahead of one's individual concerns.

About the author

Barbara R. Duncan is an independent scholar who lives in western North Carolina. *Living Stories of the Cherokee* is the first comprehensive collection of Cherokee stories since James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*, originally published in 1900 (new edition, 1996).

Tales of the South

by
William Gilmore Simms

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 2

by
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Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

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About the author

The South was the principal subject of William Gilmore Simms's writing, and he was especially interested in the role the region had played in the Revolutionary War. His eight novels about the Revolutionary War constitute his greatest sustained literary achievement. He died in Charleston in 1870.

Discussion questions

What do you learn in these tales of life in the South? What are the prevailing attitudes and concerns of the characters?

Of what significance are dreams, visions, ghosts, and superstitions in these tales? How do these things characterize the teller of these tales? (See especially "Sharp Snaffles" or "Greyling")

Additional readings

William Gilmore Simms. *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, 1985.

Mary Ann Wimsatt. *The Major Fiction of William Gilmore Simms*, 1989.

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Tales of the South

by
William Gilmore Simms

During the 45 years of his life he devoted to writing, William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870) produced an astonishing 80 volumes of work, including novels, plays, poetry, essays, short stories, and literary criticism. Simms also edited newspapers, served in the South Carolina legislature, and in general became a leading literary figure of the antebellum South, his renown and popularity greater for a time than other noted nineteenth century southern writers such as Edgar Allan Poe. "So influential was [Simms] in his numerous pursuits," states southern literature scholar Mary Ann Wimsatt in her introduction to *Tales of the South*, "that by mid-century he had become the acknowledged spokesperson for the cultural and literary concerns of his region." After the Civil War, Simms's books fell into relative obscurity, and to this day his work remains unpublicized, except for a growing number of twentieth-century scholars, like Wimsatt, who feel he should be restored to his rightful place in the pantheon of noted southern writers.

Prior to the Civil War, most prominent publishing houses were located in the North, and publishing was dominated by the economic, cultural, and literary climate of that region. After the Civil War, northern publishing houses became even more influential in determining the course of certain writers' reputations. Books by Simms were largely looked upon unfavorably, says Wimsatt, because Simms was "... a tireless proponent of slavery and secession whose attitudes toward race offended readers in a somewhat less prejudiced age."

Simms had largely been a romantic writer, in the same tradition as other early to mid-century British and American writers, employing similar literary conventions, themes and attitudes. After the Civil War, popular tastes turned away from the romantic traditions and favored more realistic fiction. Simms's family home was destroyed during the war, thrusting him and his family into difficult economic straits, and forcing Simms to fill his days with writing contracts he may have otherwise refused in favor of other, higher literary pursuits. All of these factors added to the decline of his career.

Wimsatt also points out that since the Civil War, the South has largely been defined in the eyes of the public by stereotypic notions perpetuated by writers and other persons outside the

South. Since the Civil War, in other words, the South has been more talked about than listened to; therefore, restoring Simms to the prominence he may deserve serves as counterbalance to historical inaccuracies widely accepted about the South. The "moonlight-and-magnolias" or "great plantation" image of the South, for example, is a romanticized and sentimentalized version of southern agrarian culture.

Simms—as an insider—portrays the region more accurately, at least from the point of view of his particular social status and ethnic identity. According to Wimsatt, the economic, social, and literary changes brought about by the Civil War have drastically affected the way in which both the culture of the antebellum South and the writing of Simms and other authors who were part of that culture have been viewed:

The prevailing interpretation of the South, which still operates in the late twentieth century, has distorted the national understanding of Southern culture and literature . . . The unfortunate result for our century has been that, until recently, a major man of letters who happened to be Southern has been nearly lost from sight, whereas Northern writers whom he, rightly in the main, considered his inferiors—such as Washington Irving and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow—remain fairly widely known.

William Gilmore Simms was born in Charleston in 1806. His mother died two years later and his grief-stricken father left South Carolina, striking out for a new life in frontier Mississippi. Simms was raised in poverty by his maternal grandmother, excluded from the aristocratic social and intellectual life of Charleston. As a young child he was poorly educated, though he was profoundly influenced by tales of local Indians, histories and legends of pirates along the coast, and Revolutionary War stories, all told to him by his grandmother.

By age 12, Simms was already clearly aimed at literary pursuits, composing poetry about the Battle of New Orleans and writing a play about Native Americans. At age 18, he journeyed to Mississippi to be with his father. Simms and his father traveled by horseback on various adventures in the

frontier Gulf South, coming into close contact with the Creek, Choctaw and Cherokee Nations. These trips, his later travels around the Appalachian mountain region, and the tales told to him by his grandmother, would provide material for Simms's writing for the rest of his life.

Until recently, Simms had been most noted for his historical fiction, such as *The Yemassee* (1835), depicting a tragic conflict between Carolina colonists and Indians in 1715. Sanutee, chief of the Yemassee, is portrayed as a tragic hero, dying in defense of his people and their lands, and in general, the book views Native Americans sympathetically. Nonetheless, the modern reader will note that Simms's attitudes towards both race relations and women reflect the prevailing views of his time. However well-meaning he may be, to the modern reader Simms may at times seem short-sighted. But choosing to hear such historically significant points of view, rather than censoring them, may give greater insight into the character of our country as it has evolved over time.

Of late, scholars are underscoring the accomplishment and literary value of Simms's shorter works, such as the stories in *Tales of the South*. These tales, humorous or serious, lighthearted or macabre, are a lively patchwork of legends, ghost-lore, folk beliefs, superstitions and the author's own imagination. Here, in "The Fisherman," the reader meets an indolent Southern planter who, rather than work for a living, vainly fishes for sunken treasure. In "Juan Ponce de Leon," the reader will find a fanciful portrayal—a parody—of the history of this famous Spanish explorer and his discovery of Florida and the Fountain of Youth. "Logochie" is based on an Indian legend and the widespread folk belief that spirits inhabit trees and deal mischief on passers-by. In sum, Mary Ann Wimsatt writes that Simms's short fiction is "... memorable for its varied subjects, characters, and settings, its comprehensive portrait of antebellum Southern civilization, and its persistent use of legends and folk tales as a means of bringing that multiracial, multicultural civilization alive."

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

by Frederick Douglass

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No.3

by
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Flathead Valley Community College
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Consulting Scholars:

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Discussion questions

"You have seen how a man was made a slave;" wrote Frederick Douglass, "you shall see how a slave was made a man." How are men made slaves? How are slaves made men?

Douglass said he saw clearly "the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder." How did ownership of slaves brutalize the owner? Beyond physical punishment, how were slaves brutalized?

Additional readings

Henry Louis Gates. *The Classic Slave Narratives*, 1987.
Harriet A. Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861.
William McFeely. *Frederick Douglass*, 1991.
Eric L. McKittrick, ed. *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, 1963.

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Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

by Frederick Douglass

Prefacing this autobiography of escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, is an impassioned message of support from abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison. "Fortunate, most fortunate occurrence!" exhorts Garrison, "fortunate for millions of his manacled brethren, yet panting from their awful thraldom!—fortunate for the cause of Negro emancipation . . . fortunate for the multitudes, in various parts of our republic, whose minds he has enlightened on the subject of slavery, and who have been melted to tears by his pathos, or roused to virtuous indignation by his stirring eloquence against the enslavers of men!"

Fortunate, indeed, for the abolitionist movement was the sudden appearance of an American-born slave, a literate, articulate, and determined black man, who had emancipated himself from slavery and would soon gain recognition as one of the most influential voices in a rising chorus of anti-slavery sentiment. Fortunate, too, for American history. "We have been left long enough to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters," writes Wendell Phillips in a letter of support for Douglass's book. "You remember the old fable of 'The Man and the Lion,'" Phillips continues, "where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented 'when the lions wrote history.'" With the publication of the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, the lions found a spokesperson. A rare, primary-source documentation of a slave's life, this book is considered both a landmark in American biography and a classic of American literature.

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Tuckahoe, Maryland, on the estate of Captain Aaron Anthony. No record of his birth date is known, though scholars guess it to be sometime in 1817. He wrote his autobiography in 1845, at the young age of 28, in response to a number of critics who questioned his authenticity; it seemed doubtful that a true slave might behave so boldly, speak so eloquently.

"The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father," writes Douglass. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was sent 12 miles away to another plantation upon his birth—babies of slaves were commonly separated from their mothers—and Douglass was raised by his maternal grandmother. Harriet Bailey nonetheless managed to visit her son, walking the 12 miles in

the dark after a full day's work in the fields, risking a whipping if she failed to return by sunrise. "I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone."

Shortly after his mother's death, the eight-year-old boy was sent to work in Baltimore as a domestic servant for Hugh and Sophie Auld. Mrs. Auld began teaching Frederick to read, but these lessons were soon halted. "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world," chided Master Auld. ". . . If you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him." His master's words were a revelation to Douglass; at a young age he understood that learning was the key to unlocking his chains. He resolved to persevere with his studies surreptitiously, befriending white children on the streets and pressing them for whatever schooling they might provide. Later he taught other slaves to read. Douglass writes:

That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

Upon the death of his master, Douglass was hired out as a field hand to Edward Covey, a farmer skilled in breaking stubborn slaves. With little experience with farming, he stumbled in his chores and Covey whipped him regularly. "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man," he wrote. He resolved to stand against his master's aggression, and with fists and kicks he eventually subdued him. This act rekindled Douglass's desire for freedom, restored some measure of his dignity, and propelled him to the conclusion that ". . . however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."

Douglass returned once again to Baltimore where he was forced to be a ship caulker. After one failed attempt at escape, he carefully plotted a second effort, and in 1838 he succeeded in making his way northward to New York City, then to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Soon after his arrival in the north, Douglass sent for and married freed slave, Anna Murray, whom he had met earlier in Baltimore.

In 1841, at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Douglass rose reluctantly to speak, but was so eloquent in his presentation that he earned fast acclaim. Soon he was traveling and lecturing as an agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, led by William Lloyd Garrison, and thus began his career as an influential force in the battle against slavery. He would champion this cause passionately and tirelessly for the rest of his life, editing his own anti-slavery newspaper and writing powerful editorials advocating emancipation for all slaves. He did not argue for non-violence, but he did counsel against John Brown's ill-fated raid on the U.S. Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October, 1859.

During the Civil War, Douglass served as a consultant to Abraham Lincoln, advocating that former slaves be armed to serve the North and pressing to make emancipation the central issue of the war. During Reconstruction (1865-1877) he fought for full civil rights for all freed slaves and vigorously campaigned for women's suffrage. Douglass later served as Assistant Secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission, and Recorder of Deeds for Washington, D.C., becoming the first black citizen to hold high rank in the United States government. From 1889-1891, he was U.S. Minister and Consul General to Haiti. Frederick Douglass died in 1895.

About the author

Frederick Douglass wrote two other autobiographical works, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1855 and 1881, respectively. After Anna Murray died, Douglass toward the end of his life married Helen Pitts, a white woman who was also committed to humanitarian causes.

Slaves in the Family

by Edward Ball

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 4

by
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Discussion questions

"I think we have two opposing myths," writes Edward Ball. "One is the myth of the gentle master. The other is the story of the rivers of blood that flowed from slavery. Where is the truth?" To what extent are we accountable for the actions of our ancestors?

C. Carr (*The Village Voice*, March 3, 1998) wrote: "Slavery in Africa was rooted in tribalism. I'd call it a war crime; terrible, but it had nothing to do with racism. Slavery in America had everything to do with racism. Ball never contemplates such nuances." What reasons did slave owners and traders use to justify slavery?

Time, December 15, 1997, quotes Edward Ball: "You have to cut the wound open to get the poison out. I believe in the power of truth telling. I've seen it suture that wound." Do you agree or disagree?

Additional readings

Charles W. Chesnut. *The House Behind the Cedars*, 1900.
Julia Peterkin. *Scarlet Sister Mary*, 1928.

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Slaves In The Family

by
Edward Ball

Genealogy has become a popular pursuit, especially in the last decade. Many people are interested in knowing something about their ancestors and in tracing their lineage to discover family names and the character of their bloodline, thus linking themselves with history, and with the flow of humanity from place to place over time. In digging into the stories of our ancestors, history itself—at least our particular version of it—often undergoes revision.

We are familiar with biographies of the powerful and the influential indexed on the library shelves, and from these lives we assemble the larger story of historical events. But what about the common people whose stories haven't been widely told? For instance, can we have a truly accurate history of slavery in America if lives of both masters and slaves are not scrutinized equally? Until Frederick Douglass told his first-hand account of atrocities committed upon slaves, slavery was often romanticized with images of contented slaves singing as they labored for their beneficent owners.

Similarly, in order to draw an accurate picture of a family's history, we cannot assume a widely accepted story is indeed the whole story until each and every family member has had his or her say. In *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball is troubled by these same concerns as he explores his family's past—a long and complicated saga of six generations owning 25 South Carolina plantations and as many as 4,000 slaves.

Edward Ball's great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Elias ("Red Cap") Ball, arrived in South Carolina in 1698. He was the 22-year-old son of peasant farmers from Devon, England, and he crossed the Atlantic to claim his inheritance—740 acres of South Carolina wetlands along the Cooper River north of Charleston, and 25 slaves. Through hard work, good business sense, and the sweat of an accumulating number of slaves, Elias Ball prospered in America. In two marriages, he fathered 10 children, only three of whom survived to inherit the family lands, business, and slaves.

These three, and all their many descendants, developed the Ball family plantations into a veritable empire of several thousands of acres. Over six generations the family grew rich on the planting and harvesting of rice, most of which was exported, primarily to England. Wealth also accumulated from the purchase and sale of slaves. George Austin, husband of Elias Ball's daughter Eleanor, was perhaps the largest slave trader in all the British colonies, and by age 35 he was also one of the wealthiest men in North America.

The history of Elias Ball and his descendants was complicated, but not terribly confusing in itself, until Edward Ball discovered that the original family patriarch probably also fathered two children by one of his slaves. This meant that the Ball family history rightfully included these mixed-race children and their mother and all of their descendants. In addition, Ball uncovers other instances of Ball family males fathering children with slaves, thus expanding a very complicated lineage that includes two races. The notion of sexual relations between master and slave is of course controversial, and until recently the topic was taboo, almost unspeakable. *Slaves in the Family* blows the lid off this taboo.

Edward Ball researched his family history for three years, first moving back to Charleston and living in one of the family mansions now moldering and waiting to be sold. He carefully studied old family records; as wealthy plantation owners, the Balls kept detailed accounts of their holdings, including slave ledgers. He studied newspaper ads in which his forebears advertised for the return of fugitive slaves; court records which document inheritances, family disputes, births and deaths; letters and diaries; and he interviewed as many living relatives as he could locate, both white and black. In the final chapter, he travels to Bunce Island, a former slave fort in Sierra Leone in which captured African natives were held for shipment to the colonies. In Africa he interviews descendants of tribal chiefs and others whose ancestors captured and sold slaves.

Slaves in the Family won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1997, and was also a national best seller, reflecting perhaps the willingness of a great number of people to examine these difficult issues more closely. But at the outset of Edward Ball's quest for a broader understanding of his family's relationship to their slaves, doors were slammed in his face. From his white relatives, Ball received resistance: "To do this you will condemn your ancestors. You're going to dig up my grandfather and hang him!" or "This will court anger and it will divide people." At the outset, when he approached his black relatives, he was met with caution, sometimes anger. But on the whole, relatives eventually cooperated, sharing stories and adding an ever increasing sense of realism to the Ball family history.

Edward Ball says his motive in undertaking this arduous and controversial research was not guilt, but a sense of accountability. He felt he must be responsible to the truth, for perpetuating a family cover-up would add to the moral error of slave ownership in the first place. To face the truth, no matter how unpopular, would be a first step toward healing old wounds. "The feeling I get," says Ball, "is that people now welcome the permission to talk about . . . the purchase and sale of children, black and white sex, the slave ships. It means that people want to find a way to talk about this inheritance and the story I tell seems to help. There's too much silence about it."

About the author

Edward Ball was educated at Brown University, and is a former columnist for *The Village Voice*. *Slaves in the Family* is his first book.

Look Homeward, Angel
by
Thomas Wolfe

**StoryLines Southeast
Discussion Guide No. 5**

by
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About the author

Thomas Wolfe attended the University of North Carolina and Harvard University. He died of tuberculosis in 1938 and is buried in his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina.

Discussion questions

Wolfe writes, “. . . Eugene’s brooding spirit was nettled in the complexity of truth and seeming.” What does this mean? How does it characterize many of Eugene’s difficulties?

At the close of *Look Homeward, Angel*, are you left with a feeling of optimism or pessimism? Are we forever strangers in a strange land, separated from one another, unequipped with the language to open ourselves to others or have them open to us? Is life a “groping accident”? How can wonder and glory arise from pain?

Additional readings

Thomas Wolfe. *Of Time and the River*, 1935.
Thomas Wolfe. *The Web and the Rock*, 1939.
Thomas Wolfe. *You Can’t Go Home Again*, 1940.

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Look Homeward, Angel

by
Thomas Wolfe

In the brief but richly-lived 37 years of his life, Thomas Wolfe wrote four sprawling novels: *Look Homeward, Angel*; *Of Time and the River*; *The Web and the Rock*; and *You Can't Go Home Again*. Together these novels tell one story, the story of Wolfe's life from childhood through early adulthood, but they should not be mistaken as purely autobiographical. They are instead, the mixing of fact with Wolfe's insistent, potent—and very poetic—imagination.

Thomas Wolfe is important in American literary history for his lyrical prose style and his unabashed youthful enthusiasm, a zest for life so intense it transforms ordinary experience into an almost sacred quest for noble and romantic ideals. At the heart of his novels is an age-old theme, says his editor Maxwell Perkins, “. . . the theme that has run through so many great books, such as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*, where a man, young or old, goes hopefully out into the world slap into the face of outrageous reality.”

In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the facts of Wolfe's biography are only thinly disguised. The setting is a small town, “Altamont,” nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, unmistakably similar to Asheville, North Carolina, where Wolfe was born and raised. Wolfe's father, Oliver, becomes Oliver Gant in the novel; his mother, Julia Elizabeth Westall, becomes Eliza Pentland. Wolfe's alter ego, Eugene Gant, like Wolfe himself, is the youngest of six children who eventually attends the state university at “Pulpit Hill,” which stands for Chapel Hill.

Although his novels were popular successes, Wolfe's portrayal of his hometown and its residents angered some who saw themselves in his writing, thus raising the question of how freely an author may appropriate the lives of real people in a work of fiction. Wolfe insisted, “A man must use the material and experience of his own life if he is to create anything that has substantial value.” Perhaps the most substantial value of Wolfe's novels is in the myth-making of his life into a distinctly recognizable American experience. “Though he used his life and art interchangeably,” wrote critic Alfred Kazin, “they were, taken together, a reflection of Wolfe's conviction that he himself was a prime symbol of American experience and of a perpetual American ambition.”

Look Homeward, Angel (the title is taken from John Milton's elegiac poem “Lycidas,” implying a theme of loss and grief through time) is a coming-of-age novel in which the central character, young Eugene Gant, undergoes a number of challenges and transformations. They culminate in the sense of manhood he gains by separating from his family and his birthplace and striking out for “distant soaring ranges” of both geography and spirit in a quest for opportunity and a better life—a particularly American ambition. Though the American search for a better life often involves chiefly economic goals, this is not the case with Eugene Gant. He is an idealist, a dreamer, a man of poetic spirit longing for an earthly paradise where he might truly feel at home.

In Altamont, Eugene feels an acute sense of alienation and gnawing dissatisfaction. His family is split between his parents' separate households and contrasting values and dispositions. His father, Oliver, is a self-employed tombstone carver who is pessimistic, angry, violent, and often drunk. Oliver wants his son to become a lawyer and pursue a career in politics. Eugene's mother, Eliza, owns and runs a boarding-house. Eliza is obsessed with money and pinches pennies to invest in a never-ending series of real estate schemes. She fancies Eugene will become a professor, a scholar.

Neither his father's nor his mother's plans for his future suit Eugene. He is “devoured by a vast and strange hunger for life.” Through his childhood and college years, Eugene struggles intensely to clarify for his parents and himself an unarticulated longing in his soul for “voyages” that are unattainable in a home filled with bickering family members who seem at times little more than strangers. The book is subtitled “A Story of the Buried Life” because in Altamont, Eugene feels his soul is buried alive, longing to burst forth to define itself:

[Eugene] knew he would always be the sad one: caged in that little round of skull, imprisoned in that beating and most secret heart, his life must always walk down lonely passages. Lost. He understood that men were forever strangers to one another, that no one ever comes really to know any one, that imprisoned in the dark womb of our mother, we come to life without having seen her face, that we are given

to her arms a stranger, and that, caught in that insoluble prison of being, we escape it never, no matter what arms may clasp us, what mouth may kiss us, what heart may warm us. Never, never, never, never, never.

Eugene undergoes painful disillusionment when his life unfolds less brightly than his wild imaginings. At 16, he falls in love with a woman five years older. She marries another, revealing by letter that even in the midst of her passionate affair with Eugene, she had been engaged elsewhere all along. Eugene's family deteriorates as his mother becomes more distracted by her real estate schemes, his father becomes progressively more addicted to drink, and his favorite brother dies of pneumonia. Bitterness ensues; Eugene walks with a sneer on his lips, masking the hurt of a broken heart.

Out of his pain is born a new “groping within him of wonder, of glory,” rising like an angel out of the body after death. Eugene's true manhood is achieved not just by physical separation from his family, but by the hard-earned love for his family that endures in him despite all his and their failings. With new wisdom, he searches for his soul's quest, not in the world outside him nor in the people beside him, but within himself. “An enormous organ-music sounded in his heart” when Eugene gazed upon the sad wreck of his family and understood “. . . he was part of their loveliness, his life soared magnificently out of the slough of pain and ugliness.”

This is a transcendent vision of the angel—the secret, even sacred being within us all—breaking through the shell of our mortal mask to reveal herself at last. Eugene finds that the ideals he seeks are real, even if unattainable on earth, because he holds them in his heart and feels them deeply. He vows:

And no leaf hangs for me in the forest; I shall lift no stone upon the hills; I shall find no door in any city. But in the city of myself, upon the continent of my soul, I shall find the forgotten language, the lost world, a door where I may enter, and music strange as any ever sounded.

Cold Mountain

by
Charles Frazier

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 6

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
Columbia

Trudier Harris
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill

John Shelton Reed
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill



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Discussion questions

During Inman's journey, how do the characters he meets show the disintegration of a society crippled by war?

Although Ruby is an extremely practical and earthy woman, what does she teach Ada philosophically? What ideas, attitudes, or philosophies does Inman learn from his Cherokee friend, Swimmer? How do these ideas aid Inman and Ada in constructing a new life for themselves?

Additional readings

Margaret Mitchell. *Gone With the Wind*, 1936.
C. Vann Woodward, ed. *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 1981.
Stark Young. *So Red the Rose*, 1934.

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Charles Frazier's best-selling debut novel, *Cold Mountain*, winner of the prestigious National Book Award (1997), is a historical fiction set in North Carolina near the close of the Civil War. In some regards, comparisons between this novel and *Gone With The Wind* are inevitable. Margaret Mitchell's first published novel was also an historical fiction set in the Civil War era, an instant popular success, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1936). Both novels are structured around the courtship of two lovers, though the respective couples differ greatly in character and in the outcome of their romantic designs.

Opinions will differ as to which of the two novels is a more realistic portrayal of life in the South during the Civil War. Some would say that the "Southern belle" character of Scarlett O'Hara and the "moonlight and magnolias" opulence of the plantation setting of *Gone With The Wind* perpetuate Southern stereotypes. Similarly, in *Cold Mountain*, the portrayals of Inman as the noble woodsman and Stobrod as the moonshining hillbilly may perpetuate other stereotypes. Perhaps Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler represent a fairly accurate picture of one class of Southern society of mid-nineteenth century America, whereas Inman and Ada represent lifestyles that were much more common.

Do these books glorify or denigrate the antebellum South, glamorize or disparage the lost cause of the Confederate warriors? In learning the history of the Civil War, or any war, we often focus on political and economic statistics and lose sight of the varied human costs and the particular sagas, successes, and sufferings of individuals. If anything, *Cold Mountain* will encourage readers to consider the way in which warfare not only shapes politics but also profoundly alters the course of many lives caught in the fray.

The plot of this novel is roughly based on the Civil War experience of W.P. Inman, a relative of the author. *Cold Mountain* opens in a military hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina, where injured Confederate soldier Inman lies recuperating from neck wounds received in bloody hand-to-hand combat under General Lee in the battle of Petersburg, Virginia. Inman is hurt in both body and in spirit; he is weary of war and

lies in the hospital pondering how "a man's spirit could be torn apart and cease and yet his body keep moving." Inman's task, and the author's focus in constructing the plot, is to heal his body and revive his soul.

Two things keep Inman from collapse and despair: the memory of Ada Monroe—a beautiful but somewhat unapproachable young woman he had fallen in love with before the war—and his memory of Cold Mountain, a certain peak amidst the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, near where he was raised and where Ada now resides. For Inman, Cold Mountain represents an earlier and better time than the war-ravaged present, and Ada represents the only remaining glimmer of the life he was aiming for before the war began. He knows he will be sent back to the fighting as soon as he is physically able, and he contemplates desertion, knowing that deserters are often hunted down and imprisoned, or worse. Still, Cold Mountain, "a place where all his scattered forces might gather," and Ada beckon to him as his last chance for survival. One morning he simply crawls out a hospital window and sets out on foot towards home.

Inman's and Ada's stories are told in alternating chapters; as Inman makes his way back, Ada must overcome various trials of her own. Ada had been raised as a city girl in Charleston, "educated beyond the point considered wise for females," under the watchful eye of her father, a preacher. Ada moved with her father to Cold Mountain, where he planned to begin a mission to the locals, and hoped also to heal himself of consumption. Eventually he purchased a sizeable farm, using it only as residence for him and his daughter, and leaving the fields and outbuildings unattended. Near the beginning of the war, he dies, leaving Ada alone and unprepared to fend for herself. This is where the reader finds Ada in her first chapter, overcome by grief and depression, unable to formulate a day-by-day strategy for her future.

Meanwhile, on the way home, Inman encounters an array of characters, some of whom are nightmarish and evil while others offer whatever meager sustenance and kindness they can. Inman must above all stay clear of the Home Guard,

military police who prowl the countryside, capturing and sometimes killing deserters. He must also fear Federal troops who, after four years of fighting, have spread into various and surprising locations all over the South. At one juncture, Inman is captured by the Home Guard, chained to other captives, starved, and marched many precious miles back toward the battlefields. Rather than returning the deserters to the war, the Guard forms a firing squad and murders their charges, burying them—still chained—in a shallow grave. Inman is wounded in the head and buried with his comrades, but digs himself out, frees himself of his shackles and resumes his trek homeward.

Ada's return to some prospect of survival comes in the form of the young woman, Ruby, a born survivor, who strikes a deal with Ada to resurrect the neglected farm. In spite of all of Ada's education, Ruby must instruct her in a vast array of survival skills. Together the two women make a modest success of the farm, raising food enough for themselves and bartering for other necessities. Ruby toughens Ada to the harsh realities of a war-torn existence, while Ada manages to somewhat soften and civilize Ruby along the way.

Eventually Inman and Ada are joined, though the reader should be cautioned not to assume this novel will end predictably. In his long trek, Inman has eluded violence, but malevolent forces eventually track him down. In the end, he is both triumphant and defeated, but proves in a single instinctive act of conscience that his humanity is still intact.

About the author

Charles Frazier raises horses on a 12-acre farm outside Raleigh, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife, an accounting professor, and his teenage daughter. *Cold Mountain* is his first novel.

A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories

by
Flannery O'Connor

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 7

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
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Trudier Harris
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John Shelton Reed
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Discussion questions

How does the title "A Good Man is Hard to Find" bring several levels of meaning to the story? How does the title bring meaning to the entire collection?

In the story "The Artificial Nigger," what significance does the plaster figure of a black man hold for Nelson and his grandfather? In the story "Good Country People," what is the significance of the wooden leg?

Additional readings

Flannery O'Connor. *The Complete Stories*, 1983.

Flannery O'Connor. *Wise Blood*, 1952.

Margaret Earley Whitt. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*, 1995.

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A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories

by Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor is one of America's foremost short-story writers. During her brief life (1925-1964), she authored two novels and 31 short stories. Critical and popular response to her work, however, has bloomed far out of proportion to her slim output. Readers are haunted by her stories and find her themes and characters puzzling, though memorable and thought-provoking. Scholars and critics have produced entire shelves of studies and commentary concerning her work. Her stories plumb the depths of important philosophical and theological issues, yet her characters are common folk, never preachy or philosophical themselves, living embodiments of all-too-common human frailties.

Simply put, O'Connor's stories are worthwhile reading, though readers may at the outset be put off by the shocking and often violent behavior of characters who are grotesque, less than heroic, and often downright unattractive. Her professed purpose in her writing was to reveal the mystery of God's grace in everyday life. O'Connor spent her childhood in Milledgeville, Georgia, raised a Roman Catholic amidst the Bible Belt Protestant fundamentalism of most her neighbors. Though there is much debate among scholars as to the exact nature of her religious beliefs, she represents neither Catholic nor Protestant views so much as she portrays a theology that is mostly her own.

The stories in *A Good Man is Hard to Find* sound at times as if they are being told by an Old Testament prophet: consciously or not, characters enact the age-old battle between Good and Evil. Main characters suffer from spiritual apathy or blindness; men and women smugly assume themselves secure in their material wealth or intellectual fortresses. Each of these stories reminds the reader of human limitations, and story by story, characters are given wake-up calls concerning their own mortality and helplessness in the face of events beyond their control. In this sense, divine grace is a great leveler, descending in a bizarre or violent manner upon the spiritually deficient in such a manner that distinctions between salvation and damnation begin to blur. No matter if characters appear redeemable or not, always the Apocalypse looms nearby. O'Connor at one time said:

I write the way I do because I am a Catholic . . . I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and I have reported on the progress of a few of them.

As to the violent and sometimes surreal events in O'Connor's work, readers may question whether or not the author is focusing on the world through a distorted lens, and if so, why? Today there is much debate over violence portrayed in films. Opponents argue that there is too much violence, too much criminality, too many dark themes, and claim these films perpetuate social ills by making crime seem common and ordinary, thus desensitizing the public. Proponents claim such films are simply mirroring the world as it really is. Certainly both sides of this issue have their merits, and the reader might consider similar concerns while reading *A Good Man is Hard to Find*.

O'Connor justifies the content of her stories as a deliberate effort to awaken people by shocking them. She distorts the ordinary into the grotesque and bizarre to highlight the mysterious manner in which our everyday lives are touched by purposes beyond our own. "I am interested in making a good case for distortion," she wrote, "as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see."

In the title story, a grandmother lives in a Georgia suburb with her son, Bailey, his wife and their three children. The family is planning a trip to Florida, but the grandmother doesn't want to go because a criminal called "The Misfit" has escaped from prison and is on the loose. The family bickers back and forth, calling each other names, demonstrating clearly that none of the clan is terribly likable, although the grandmother, while annoying, is less malicious than the others. Grandmother decides to smuggle her cat, Pitty Sing, along on the trip to Florida. The family stops enroute for lunch at Red Sammy's Famous Barbecue. There is much talk at the restaurant about how evil the world and everyone in it has become, present company excluded, of course. Red Sammy moans:

A good man is hard to find. Everything is getting terrible. I remember the day you could go off and leave your screen door unlatched. Not no more.

A few miles further down the highway the grandmother sees a road she remembers as leading to an abandoned plantation. She implores her son to show the children the plantation, proclaiming it educational, and after much arguing, Bailey reluctantly agrees to the detour. Soon the road narrows to little more than a dirt path, and just as grandmother realizes the plantation she is thinking of was in Tennessee, Pitty Sing jumps out of his basket and clings desperately to Bailey's head. The car rolls and crashes in the ditch.

Bailey waves down the first passing car, an ominous black sedan with three men carrying guns and wearing prison clothes. "You're The Misfit," blabs the grandmother, and now the real story unfolds as the grandmother tries to cajole The Misfit by attempting to convince him he's a good man at heart. Readers are advised to listen carefully to the dialogue between the grandmother and The Misfit, a perfect example of O'Connor's apocalyptic theology at work during violent and grotesque events. "I found out the crime don't matter," says The Misfit . . .

You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take the tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.

At the close of the story, The Misfit says about the grandmother, "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." O'Connor reminds the reader that a gun to the head might be redemption in disguise.

About the author

Flannery O'Connor was awarded the prestigious O'Henry Award for Short Fiction three times. She attended Georgia State College for Women and the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa. She, like her father, died of lupus, a degenerative disease.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

by
Zora Neale Hurston

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 8

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
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About the author

While studying at Columbia University under famed anthropologist Franz Boaz, Zora Neale Hurston researched African-American folklore; later she published a collection of folk tales, *Mules and Men*. In 1973, Alice Walker marked Hurston's grave with a tombstone inscribed, "A Genius of the South. Novelist. Folklorist. Anthropologist."

Discussion questions

Were Janie's expectations of marriage impossibly romantic? Although in many ways she was less well-off with Tea Cake, why did Janie find that relationship so pleasing?

Does Janie need a man in order to find permission to be who she is? What events and characters stifle Janie's growth? Why, at her trial, were Tea Cake's friends against her?

Additional readings

Zora Neale Hurston. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942 (autobiography).
Zora Neale Hurston. *Mules and Men*, 1935.
Robert Hemenway. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 1977.
Alice Walker, ed. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...*
A Zora Neale Hurston Reader, 1979.

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Their Eyes Were Watching God

by Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, an unprecedented era of achievement and fame for African-American writers, among them Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer. Between the Harlem Renaissance and the end of the Korean War, Hurston—author of four novels, two collections of folklore, an autobiography, plays, and numerous essays and short stories—was the dominant black woman writer in America. In spite of her success, Hurston died in poverty and obscurity in the St. Lucie County Welfare Home in Fort Pierce, Florida. She was buried in an unmarked grave in 1960, her books out of print, her passing almost unnoticed, until in 1975 another black woman writer, Alice Walker, published an article (“In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”) in *Ms.* magazine that launched a Hurston revival. Walker wrote:

Condemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's: Mules and Men, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and Their Eyes Were Watching God, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. There is no book more important to me than this one. . . .

Thanks to Walker and others, Zora Neale Hurston is more widely read today than during her lifetime; her status as a great writer is firmly established. How could the works of such an important writer go almost unread for nearly 30 years? This is a difficult question, but some scholars think that Hurston is appreciated today because the social and political climate in America has evolved to a point where she is more understandable and less threatening, even among African Americans.

Unlike other members of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston had no overt political objectives; she did not write protests or campaign for reform. Her works focused on black characters almost exclusively, and she paid less attention to racial conflicts than she did to an unshakeable sense of racial pride. Walker has written that Hurston's easy self-acceptance of her blackness

was an uncommon attitude in earlier decades, and that in this regard she was “. . . more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them.”

Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-black township in America (the setting of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), a community, says Walker, “of black people who had enormous respect for themselves and for their ability to govern themselves.” Walker refutes critics of Hurston's political detachment, claiming that her self-acceptance and her celebration of black culture were political statements in themselves, ahead of their time. “During the early and middle years of her career,” writes Walker, “Zora was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself.”

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with the ladies of Eatonville gossiping about Janie Crawford, the book's heroine. Now 40 years old, Janie has returned alone to Eatonville; the ladies suspect that her husband has done her wrong, a fate she perhaps deserves for marrying and running off with a spirited gambler 15 years her junior. But she is far from ruined; she has endured hardships and returned older, wiser, triumphant in love. The ladies appoint Phoebe, Janie's old friend, to investigate her return, and the novel unfolds as Janie tells her tale.

This is a story about love, and a story of Janie's blossoming spirit. One day while lying under a pear tree, Janie, in her teens, feels the “panting breath of the breeze” and hears an “inaudible voice” while watching a bee pollinate a blossom. As a witness to this simple act of nature Janie feels deep longings in her soul:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. . . . Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her.

Her grandmother, intending to protect Janie from harm, arranges a marriage to a middle-aged farmer, Logan Killicks. (Grandmother had borne her master's child, Janie's mother, who was raped by a white school teacher.) Janie acquiesces, believing she will learn to love Mr. Killicks, but soon finds the marriage stifling. Killicks wants to buy another mule so he can put Janie behind a plow. She confides to Grandmother, “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think, Ah . . .”

Symbolically tossing her apron in the bushes, Janie runs off one morning with Joe Starks, a smooth-talking man from Georgia who comes to Eatonville because he's heard “all about ‘em makin’ a town all outa colored folks.” Eventually Janie and Joe are married and Joe becomes the self-appointed mayor and most prosperous businessman of Eatonville. Janie had vowed “from now until death to have flower dust sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom.” Joe, more interested in business than in love, allows Janie to work in his store, but forbids her to join in camaraderie with the patrons. He regards Janie as his personal adornment, a mark of his wealth and importance. Nevertheless, the marriage lasts 20 years, until Joe's death. Janie burns the head rags Joe had insisted she wear in the store and sets out once again on a quest for romantic love.

Her third marriage, to Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, a handsome and charismatic younger man, ends tragically, but in the few years they are together, Janie finds what she has long desired, a relationship filled with passion and intensity—and she finds herself. In various adventures with Tea Cake, Janie learns to live as her husband's equal, to trust and love and expect the same in exchange. Upon her return to Eatonville, wearing overalls, Janie explains the hard-won lessons she has learned in love:

. . . love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It's a movin' thing, but still and all, it takes shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore.

Rich In Love
by
Josephine Humphreys

**StoryLines Southeast
Discussion Guide No. 9**

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
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Chapel Hill

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Discussion questions

What is it in Lucille's character that makes change difficult? What sort of people have difficulty dealing with change? What traits enable a person to handle change more easily? Is change more readily accepted in some regions of this country than others?

What is the significance of Warren being in the demolition business? How much of the old must be destroyed before something new can grow in its place? How much of the old should be preserved?

Additional readings

Josephine Humphreys. *Dreams of Sleep*, 1984.
Josephine Humphreys. *The Fireman's Fair*, 1991.

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Rich In Love by

Josephine Humphreys

Josephine Humphreys' widely acclaimed novel, *Rich in Love*, examines themes of marriage and the difficulties of modern family life. Set in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, near Charleston, (where Humphreys was born and raised and still resides today), the book has been praised for accurately capturing the landscape and the culture of the region, and similarly lauded for its memorable and vivid characters. One of those characters is the novel's narrator, Lucille Odom. Lucille, a high school senior, postpones graduation in order to sort through her childhood memories of the countryside around Charleston, now bulldozed by urban sprawl, and the wreckage of her disintegrating family. She struggles with many issues, all of them centering around the difficulty of finding a personal equilibrium in a world of constant change and uncertainty.

One day Lucille rides her bike home from school and finds that her mother, Helen, has run off to start a new life, leaving Lucille and her father, Warren, to fend for themselves. Lucille had witnessed "the American family blowing apart" among her neighbors and acquaintances, but she had felt personally immune from such disintegration; her parents had been married for 27 years and there seemed little possibility things would change. Helen contacts the family by phone but will not say where she is staying, only that she wants to begin creating a more adventurous lifestyle than Warren, a retired demolition contractor, had provided.

Lucille immediately assumes management of her family, washing dishes and doing laundry, consoling her father, aiding him in the search for his runaway spouse, and worrying for him that he eats and sleeps too much. It is Lucille's nature to control and to want all things orderly and where they belong, but her mother's disappearance has come without warning, and has confronted her with emotions she cannot control. She is overwhelmed by change and an uncertain future, such as her boyfriend, Wayne, pressuring her for sex, or thoughts of her entire community being flooded should the polar ice melt and the ocean rise. She neglects her graduation exams and at the end of the school year summons her older sister, Rae, for help.

Rae is also in the midst of profound changes in her life; she arrives home married and pregnant and soon becomes yet another burden for Lucille. In many ways, Lucille is like her father; she wants stability and a traditional family life. But Rae is more like her mother, wanting adventure, willing to forsake security for the freedom to explore. She's not well-suited for the confines of marriage and parenthood, and her depression and moodiness overshadow even her father's troubles.

Billy McQueen, Rae's husband, is an aspiring family man, and relatively conservative in issues of family life, like her father. At a local club one evening, Rae climbs on stage to sing with a group of black musicians; she's well known at the club, having sung there often before she was married. Billy is completely unaware of this aspect of Rae's past, and is unnerved to find out how little he really knows his bride. He takes a job teaching history at Lucille's old high school, and as the novel progresses he becomes Lucille's tutor, helping her pass her graduation exams.

Perhaps the most consternating problem in Lucille's life occurs as she progressively falls in love with Billy McQueen. Lucille is vulnerable, hungry for emotional attachment, hurt by her mother's abandonment and her father's lack of insight into her life. Lucille learns her conception and birth were accidents. Helen had an abortion, but she hadn't realized she was pregnant with twins and only one fetus was removed. Warren confesses to Lucille, "I think I only just recently began to think of [Rae], and you, as a true person." "What did you think of us before?" Lucille asks. "Oh, I don't know. Well, pets, to tell the truth. Your mother's pets."

Despite her family's shortcomings, Lucille loves them all, loves her community, feels committed and responsible toward every person, place, and thing in her life. Love, she explains, is her defining characteristic:

I knew what love was without the aid of empirical evidence, and furthermore, I believed that I did have it. It was in me. It had been accumulating silently over the years like equity in a house. I was rich in love, even though no one could see it.

Billy McQueen can see it; he's more attuned to Lucille than any of her family. She is so thrilled to be seen and understood that she immediately falls for Billy, obsessively shadows and serves him, uncertain the attraction is mutual, perplexed by the potential danger of her desire.

By the close of the novel, Lucille has accepted her parents' divorce and become more flexible about change. "Our family's not what it was," she says, "but we are all gravitating back into family lives of one sort or another." All along, the difficulties in the Odom family have mirrored difficulties in the culture around them. The Charleston area has undergone a long history of change and reconfiguration, racial and political tensions. Lucille is nostalgic for the Charleston of her childhood, as many southerners have been nostalgic for better times in the past. Still, she learns to love her town as it is, and once she reaches this acceptance, she sees the benefits of change as well as its trials.

The reader will be charmed by Lucille's precocity. Her wisdom will startle you: "The sorrow of a big man is worse than that of a small man, rocks him deeper, lasts a longer time." Or, "Maybe that is how it is meant to be, that sooner or later a child will realize love is more wisely invested elsewhere than in a parent." Her wit will make you smile: "I understood why old men sit on park benches. It is because they have finally tired of chasing women." Or, "You can't really be surprised when everything suddenly goes bad; the tendency toward disaster is speedy. But can things go good overnight? I thought goodness progressed only slowly, uphill all the way."

About the author

Josephine Humphreys studied creative writing at Duke University with well-known author Reynolds Price. She has written three novels: *Dreams of Sleep*, *Rich in Love*, and *The Fireman's Fair*. She has two sons and lives in Charleston, South Carolina.

Fair and Tender Ladies

by
Lee Smith

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 10

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
Columbia

Trudier Harris
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill

John Shelton Reed
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About the author

Lee Smith is author of three collections of short stories and nine novels. She is a professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh and the recipient of numerous awards for her writing, among them the prestigious John Dos Passos Award for Literature, in 1987. She lives with her husband and two children in Chapel Hill.

Discussion questions

As Ivy ages, how does she change? In what ways does she stay the same?

Why was Ivy's mother unwilling to sell the farm even though the family had moved to town and needed money badly? Why does Ivy refuse to leave the house in Sugar Creek even when she is dying?

Why is Ivy closest of all to Silvaney? Ivy wonders, "... if you treat somebody as simple, does it make them simple? ... And if you love somebody ... does that bring them out?" What do you think? Why is Ivy still trapped inside herself in some ways, even though Oakley loved her so much?

Additional readings

Lee Smith. *Oral History*, 1983.

Shelby Lee Adams and Lee Smith. *Appalachian Portraits*, 1993.

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Fair and Tender Ladies

by
Lee Smith

Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* spans its heroine's lifetime. From her early youth at the opening of the twentieth century through her death at 74, feisty Ivy Rowe, an Appalachian mountain woman, is a "fool for letters." Smith has created this joyous, inspiring, and heartbreaking novel in the form of Ivy's prolific correspondences with family members, friends, and imaginary pen pals. Beginning and ending in a rustic cabin nestled in a remote "holler" of Ivy's beloved Virginia mountains, the reader travels via her letters through the years before automobiles, the Depression, two world wars, other military conflicts, and mining disasters, continues past the novelty of electricity in Appalachia, the crooning of Elvis, and tabloid intrigues about Jacqueline Kennedy, and arrives in the world of Orange Julius and birth control pills ("They are the greatest thing since drip-dry."). *Fair and Tender Ladies* is a history of twentieth century America and how it shapes the lives of three generations of the Rowe family as they marry, have children, move away, divorce, remarry, adventure, disappear, reappear, and die—with Ivy and her husband Oakley Fox at the center.

In her first letters, Ivy displays many of the attitudes that will color her entire life, for as she later asserts, "We have all got a true nature and we can't hide it, it will pop out when you least expect it." Her letters are filled with enthusiasm and a zest for living. With limited schooling and a mother who scolds her against reading too much lest books fill her head with "notions," the young Ivy invents her own spelling and writes in the dialect of her region. Her letters are pages long, and intimate even with strangers. In writing to a pen pal in Holland (whom she never manages to contact), she tells the details of her parents' meeting, how they ran off together to get married, how her father is ill and her mother run down. She tells also of her teacher's love life:

Mister Brown is a forren preacher from the North but does not preach he . . . says to her, what is your substance whereof are you made? and other poems. He carries bunches of flowers up from the creek for her and one time it was about a month ago he brung them rigt into the schoolhouse and give them to her with a funny little bow like a Prince you ougt to of seed him, we was all rigt ther when he done it. Her cheeks turned as red as a apple, I wuld of had a fit if it was me.

Ivy is an aspiring writer in love with family histories, cherishing the customs and tales of mountain folk. She is engaged in all she encounters, compelled to put into words the details of her world, to "hold on to what is passing," and in the telling she discovers truths about herself and others that she might not have otherwise known. Toward the end of the novel, Ivy's daughter Joli, a writer, wants to collect her mother's letters. Ivy cautions her against it, saying, "The letters didn't mean anything. . . It was the writing of them, that signified."

The discovery and expression of her true nature is Ivy's greatest challenge and triumph. Still, as much as her character is often transparent to others, she remains mysterious to herself, a knot of conflicting desires. She is lonely and craves communication. Buried in the noise of so many siblings, she writes letters to people who will never read them, continuing to address her pen pal in Holland with no hope of a response.

I can not talk to my Family they is so many of us here in the house in the snow we have to keep the younguns in you can not bath yourself nor nothing and little Danny crys. They is no place here you can go to get away from him crying, it is only when I am writing you this letter late in the night that I dont hear.

Later she addresses her most intimate thoughts to her sister, Silvaney, brain damaged since birth and an unlikely audience for someone who is longing to express her innermost self. Even after Silvaney is institutionalized, Ivy continues to compose her longest, most insightful letters to her sister. Ivy persists in penning these letters even after she learns of Silvaney's death.

Similarly, Ivy is surprised at times by what she refuses to tell to others, and by her own actions which thrust her into situations she had not foreseen. She never tells the father of her first child about his daughter's birth. Later, he dies in the war, and when Ivy is contacted by his relatives, she confesses only, "Do not worry about me . . . I still have something else to remember Lonnie by." While she is living in a mining camp on Diamond Mountain, Virginia, she allows herself to be seduced by a wealthy young womanizer, despite having been warned against his advances. Then she suddenly rejects him in favor of Oakley Fox, a childhood acquaintance whom she'd refused to consider

a serious suitor until she saw him, injured and blackened with soot, emerging from a collapsed mine shaft. After years of marriage to him, she runs off with a vagabond beekeeper to live in a cave for several days of sensuousness and daring. She is baffled by her own actions, other than knowing she is filled with mysterious longings.

Ivy loves her husband, her brothers and sisters, and her children, but most of all she loves the freedom to follow her heart. This is evident when she sorrowfully watches as a young man whom she had almost married marches off to war. She says, unabashedly:

Then he was gone. I blinked. Well, I thought, thats that, and with him gone it was like my whole self came rushing back to me again and I looked at the water and thought, Oh I do want to go to Boston, I do want to go after all.

After Oakley, her beloved husband of many years, dies, only a month later Ivy is savoring her returned freedom:

I can make my own life now which ever way I want to, it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul. I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do. I can get up in the morning and eat a hotdog, which I did yesterday. I don't know what I might do tomorrow!

Like her father, Ivy refuses to be beholden to any man or god. This, too, is an expression of her fierce determination to be master of her own fate. Although Oakley pressures her to believe and her brother tries to convert her, she staunchly refuses to relinquish ownership of her soul. Near the end of her life she reads Ecclesiastes and gains a greater understanding of the oppositions embodied in the events of her life:

It makes sense to me Silvaney. Lord knows I have had my time to dance and my time to mourn. Now I think it is time for me to cast away, and get about my business, if only I could tell what that is (Ha).

The Floatplane Notebooks

by
Clyde Edgerton

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 11

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
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Trudier Harris
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Discussion questions

How does the vine-as-narrator enhance the story of the Copelands? What is the significance of having to trim the vine yearly to keep it from covering up the graveyard?

The floatplane notebooks become family scrapbooks—what does this say about the manner in which Albert leads the family?

What keeps the Copeland family together? Why is Rhonda an unlikely member of the family, and why does Bliss fit so well?

Additional readings

Clyde Edgerton. *Raney*, 1985.

Clyde Edgerton. *Walking Across Egypt*, 1987.

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The Floatplane Notebooks

by
Clyde Edgerton

"If I can get a handle on a good character," says novelist Clyde Edgerton, "then everything else follows, including the plot." Edgerton's novels are set in small towns of North Carolina, his home state, and they have been lauded for their vivid portrayal of ordinary, middle-class characters who become endearing through his humorous and compassionate stories about them. Many of his characters are based on people or situations he has encountered in everyday life.

Edgerton's first novel, *Raney*, is narrated by a strong-willed and somewhat narrow-minded young woman who unapologetically tells of the tumultuous first two years of her mismatched marriage to a more liberal-minded librarian. *Raney's* determined character, says Edgerton, is a composite of personalities from his childhood: "Because in my family women talked a lot, and because I was an only child . . . I had to have a woman tell the story." His second novel, *Walking Across Egypt*, began to take shape one day when his mother recounted how she had sat down on an old seatless rocker and been stuck there for 15 minutes. "Well, we thought that was the funniest thing we ever heard," says Edgerton, "and I wondered how I could use it in a story . . . So I went home and wrote about 20 pages in no time." The woman in the rocking chair became Mattie Rigsbee, a lively, warmhearted widow who assumes the challenge of caring for a hapless juvenile delinquent.

The Floatplane Notebooks had its origin in the author's kitchen; one day he noticed a soft spot in the floor, crawled under the house to investigate, and discovered an abandoned well. This sequence of events inspired a short story and, when joined to Edgerton's chance encounter with an eccentric inventor of a floatplane, became the novel *Publishers Weekly* named one of the best books of 1988. "When I saw that floatplane," Edgerton later said, "—the primal ambition that had to be part of it, the man in his blue football helmet and orange life vest—what it symbolized for me I could not express . . . a certain kind of courage, a certain kind of obsession."

This novel is the story of the Copeland family of Listre, North Carolina, from the 1950s through the early 1970s. Written in voices of various relatives, both living and dead (and including several segments narrated by the wisteria vine growing in

the family graveyard), it is also the story of how the family has persisted through many generations, going back as far as the antebellum South. The father, Albert Copeland—in his own bumbling manner—leads the family in two traditions: the yearly cleaning of the family graveyard and the annual hunting trip to Florida. Both events provide the family with identity and unity and an excuse to rehash generations of family history and gossip.

A third thread that knits the Copeland family together is Albert's floatplane, a homemade aircraft cobbled from tubular aluminum and powered by a lawn mower engine on each of the collapsible wings. The instructions for building the plane have been lost, but Albert proceeds undaunted, restructuring the plane guided by his instincts, repeatedly testing it by floating it in the lake—all of this across decades in which his children mature and the plane never actually flies. Albert keeps a record of the plane's progress in notebooks referred to by family members as "the floatplane notebooks," but they contain more fiction than fact about the plane, and they eventually evolve into family scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, letters, announcements and family lore.

The story opens with Bliss, eldest son Thatcher's bride-to-be, describing her first journey with the Copelands to Florida for their annual hunting trip. She is fascinated by their quirky vitality, a liveliness which is absent in her own more conventional family. Bliss fits well with the Copeland clan, but her family has reservations about the marriage, thinking the Copelands' eccentricities will diminish their daughter's social status. The wedding rehearsal dinner is a good example of Edgerton's insightful, compassionate humor. Bliss's father, a securities executive, asks Uncle Hawk, a chain-gang escapee in his youth, what sort of work he does. Uncle Hawk replies:

Transportation. Transportation and digestion is what I call it. I got a combination gas station, cafe, hardware-grocery store, and fruit stand. That's what I call it. Transportation and digestion. "That's right," said Father, "Bliss told me that—" "Most people think that's right funny," said Uncle Hawk. He was leaning over his plate a little. "It is funny," said Mother. But she didn't laugh.

Bliss fast becomes an admiring and protective big sister to Thatcher's youngest brother, Meredith, and much of the novel centers around the boyish mayhem created by Meredith and his cousin Mark. The boys drown kittens in the well, drown Albert's truck in the lake, and carry out various other misadventures for which Meredith often manages to blame Mark. However, a dark cloud begins to hover above these two pranksters as the novel moves into the Vietnam War era and they enlist. Cousin Mark, having a college degree, becomes an Air Force pilot as he has long dreamed, and flies missions at a relatively safe distance above the battlefields. Meredith, a college drop-out, enlists in the Marines and faces the war at closer range. The tragedy of war jolts the reader when the novel takes a sharp turn toward scenes—simultaneously heartbreaking and heartwarming—that reveal the Copelands adjusting to serious changes in the family.

In some ways Bliss becomes the female center of the clan, loving deeply its spirit and its flesh. She is firm evidence that the Copelands will persevere for generations to come. But Albert's reaction to tragic changes also proves him a worthy patriarch. He continues to build the floatplane much as he continues to build his family, without the certainty of instructions to guide him, but with the gumption to proceed as best he knows how. Love shows itself in many disguises.

About the author

Clyde Edgerton is a native of Durham, North Carolina, where he lives today with his wife and daughter. Edgerton piloted reconnaissance and forward air control missions during the Vietnam War and received a Distinguished Flying Cross. He visits the old Edgerton family graveyard regularly.

Clear Pictures

by
Reynolds Price

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 12

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
Columbia

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About the author

Reynolds Price has taught at Duke University since 1958. After surgery on his spinal cord, he is confined to a wheelchair but continues to write and teach. Price explains his prolific out-pouring of writing by saying, "I don't write with a conscious sense of the hangman at my door, of my own mortality. But I am a tremendously driven person, and I have gotten more so since sitting down. Words just come out of me the way my beard comes out. Who could stop it?"

Discussion questions

What makes the story of someone else's life important to others? What particular events or passages in *Clear Pictures* are most memorable for you? Why?

How was Reynolds Price's childhood different from children the same age growing up in other regions? How was his childhood shaped by southern culture?

Additional readings

Reynolds Price. *A Long and Happy Life*, 1962.

Reynolds Price. *Kate Vaiden*, 1986.

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Reynolds Price, a life-long resident of North Carolina, is one of the South's most noted contemporary authors. As a novelist, short story writer, poet, playwright, and essayist, he has often focused on the back roads and small towns of his native region. He resists being labeled a regional writer and enjoys world-wide renown; still, his work is rooted almost entirely in the South. Stories and memoirs arise from the minute and particular details of his own experience, and he is acclaimed for being able to conjure a vivid "sense of place." Only someone who has a life-long relationship with the South could know the region so intimately and portray it so acutely.

As a professor of English at Duke University for the past 40 years, Reynolds Price has influenced many other southern writers, among them Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys, and Fred Chappell. He has said:

... as long as there remains anything that's recognizably Southern—this strange society with a tremendously powerful black presence in it, its very strong connections to some sort of Christianity, a major heritage as an agrarian society, a slave-owning past, a tragic war fought and lost on the premises—as long as there is any kind of continuing memory of that, then I think literature will continue to arise from it.

Clear Pictures, Price's memoirs of the first 21 years of his life (1933-1954), is a fine example of literature based on the continuing memory of southern culture. Price was born in Macon, N.C., a rural community surrounded by fields of cotton and tobacco. His father, Will, and mother, Elizabeth, had courted for six years and been married for another six before Reynolds' birth. Will was a salesman who drove the rural Carolina countryside, knocking on doors, lodging at inexpensive small town hotels, drinking excessively. Toward the end of the Depression, Will moved his young family through a long succession of residences, searching for work.

When Reynolds, as an infant, suffered life-threatening fevers and convulsions, Will bargained with God, promising to give up drink if his son's life was spared. Reynolds, of course, lives on, and Will "never again drank so much as a spoonful of

alcohol." Elizabeth was an intelligent, strong, patient woman whose strengths, Price acknowledges, were the model he used to fashion many of the female characters in his books, most notably Kate Vaiden in his acclaimed novel of that name. The family's frequent moves were announced by Elizabeth, who said simply and heroically, "Pack your toys, son. We're moving tomorrow to a lot nicer place."

Reynolds began grade school in Asheboro, N.C., a few days after the opening of World War II, at once discovering a love for books and his life's avocation—drawing and painting. During his second year in school, Reynolds welcomed the birth of his only sibling, his brother Bill. In 1944 the family returned to Warren County, where Reynolds became attached to the farm children and families who would later become the characters of his early novels and stories. Finally in 1947 the family moved to Raleigh—their 13th home in 14 years—where Reynolds completed high school and entered Duke University, blossoming under a succession of fine teachers and mentors who encouraged him to pursue a writing career in earnest.

So the first 21 years of Reynolds Price's life were relatively happy and comprised of events that were mostly ordinary. It is the evocative details of his early memories and his candid meditations on the meaning of those memories that make *Clear Pictures* the engaging and remarkable memoir it is. In the Foreword of the book, Price describes how the creation of his memoir began under hypnosis at Duke Hospital, where he underwent therapy to manage the chronic pain of paraplegia after the removal of a tumor on his spinal cord. Hypnosis flooded him with vivid memories of his earliest years and the people who most influenced his world. Price wisely set out to highlight the lives of the people who, in one way or another, affected him most dramatically, rather than focusing on his own experiences exclusively. These are his "First Loves, First Guides," the subtitle of *Clear Pictures*:

I'd see my early life, not as a road or a knotted cord but as a kind of archipelago—a ring of islands connected, intricately but invisibly, underwater. And I'd study each of the islands in separate chapters that examined one or more of the few adults who proved crucial to my early tries at trusting myself and others.

Who are these first loves and guides? In "Three Useful Lessons" Price traces his parents' earliest years of marriage, their struggles with finances, and their victory over private demons. "An Open Heart" portrays an older sister of his mother, Ida, with whom Reynolds spent portions of his summers. Aunt Ida becomes for the young boy a model of love and loyalty. Additional chapters discuss younger brother Bill, bachelor-uncle Macon Thornton, childhood enemies and friends, teachers who encouraged his drawing and writing, and others who shaped his uncommon sense of a shared spiritual origin for all things. Perhaps the bravest of these chapters are the ones in which Price stares hard into the realities of racial injustices:

There's no denying that, at this tangled crux, a white Southerner born before 1970 encounters his most painful challenge. He's at least lived on into an open-eyed world, one in which he has frequent chances to amend his old complicity. But what's he to think of his older kin and friends who reared and loved him but who also, however passively, supported a vicious racism? The upper South . . . [was] by no means Nazi Germany; it's a travesty of moral distinction to say so. But the evil committed, sustained and concealed in calm lovely towns and farming hamlets was slow and enormous; and the mystery is insoluble like all the mysteries of evil—forget the ignorant or vicious; they're always available for dirty work. Answer the larger, harder question—how were so many otherwise intelligent, morally sensitive, watchful and generous people trapped in the running of a brute and tragic machine? The only hope for a sane unraveling of those blood-crusted knots of devotion and cruelty lies in a case-by-case weighing of the evidence.

Each of the chapters in the book is an attempt to draw with words a clear picture, a portrait, a tribute to people of great value in Price's early years. Price had almost completed his memoir when:

... I saw I was trying one more time to make the thing I've tried since childhood—at least a room of tall clear pictures that look like the world and are mainly worth watching.

The Color Purple
by
Alice Walker

**StoryLines Southeast
Discussion Guide No. 13**

by
Lowell Jaeger
Flathead Valley Community College
Kalispell, Montana

Consulting Scholars:

Mary Ann Wimsatt
University of South Carolina,
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Trudier Harris
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Discussion questions

How do many of the characters, female and male, undergo reformations of the heart? What does Sophia learn? Harpo? Albert? Celie? Shug? How does the behavior of these characters change as the novel progresses?

What does the color purple have to do with Shug's notion of spirituality? How do Shug's lessons about God help heal Celie?

Additional readings

Alice Walker. *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, 1973.

Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937.

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The Color Purple
by
Alice Walker

"The black woman," says Alice Walker, "is one of America's greatest heroes. . . . Not enough credit has been given to the black woman who has been oppressed beyond recognition." Alice Walker was an activist in the 1960s while attending Spellman College in her home state of Georgia, and later at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. After college, she moved to Mississippi to teach and in 1967, married Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer. They became the first legally married interracial couple in Jackson, Mississippi.

Almost all of Walker's novels, short stories, essays, and poems focus on issues of civil rights, emphasizing especially the plight of black women, who suffer the dual oppression of racism and sexism. Walker's writings are motivated by her conviction that literature, while it may not effect swift political and social change, can announce the truths of human suffering and help set the world straight. An admirer of the work of black women authors of earlier generations, especially Zora Neale Hurston, Walker campaigned to bring Hurston's work, which was out of print and neglected by literary scholars, back to popular and critical recognition. She launched a Hurston revival with "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," an influential article in *Ms.*, and the editing of a collection of Hurston's works.

Like Zora Neale Hurston, Walker has desired most of all in her writing to depict the inner strengths of black women, who—in spite of the great odds against them—manage to survive and blossom spiritually. Her third novel, *The Color Purple*, is the quintessential story of a black woman rising from racist and sexist oppression to locate and articulate a sense of self and to formulate a life that is under her own direction. It won both great critical acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize, and great popular acclaim, especially after being transformed into a film directed by Steven Spielberg.

Some critics have argued that Walker's novels and stories are biased against males. "Men in 'The Color Purple' are generally pathetic, weak and stupid, when they are not heartlessly cruel, and the white race is universally bumbling and inept," said one critic. Others point out that although Walker may treat her

female characters with more sympathy, both males and females in her works undergo character reformations—often ironic and triumphant outcomes of great suffering and injustice. Her male oppressors suffer the consequences of their own evil, becoming isolated, dehumanized, and fearful as their injustices towards others inevitably turn back upon them.

Such is the case in *The Color Purple* when Celie finally says to Albert, "The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot Anything you do to me, already done to you." Albert and others like him are humbled by the end of the book. In this light, *The Color Purple* may be seen as a story of transformation—not the kind of change pressed on society by political movements, legislation, and law enforcement—but something more difficult and vital: the transformation of individual hearts away from brutality and meanness and toward strength and self-direction.

The book is composed as a series of letters written primarily by the central character, Celie, and addressed to God. It opens with Celie as a young girl and spans 30 years, taking her into a hard-earned womanhood. When Celie is just a child, her mother dies, and she is left with only her younger sister, Nettie, and their abusive stepfather, who rapes and brutalizes her repeatedly. He impregnates her twice, steals the babies from her, and gives them up for adoption. Eventually the stepfather remarries and forces Celie to marry Albert, a local widower with children, who would have preferred to marry Nettie. When the stepfather makes advances toward Nettie, she escapes to live with her sister. She sees Albert beat and mistreat Celie, and he tries to force himself on her as well. Nettie and Celie are firmly bonded sisters, supportive and loving of one another, so it is a heartbreaking day when Nettie must leave to escape Albert.

For the balance of the novel, Celie writes her letters to Nettie. Although Albert cruelly withholds Nettie's letters from Celie, she continues to write, having no address to post the letters to and no knowledge of whether her sister is living or dead. The tragic separation of the sisters and their eventual reunion is the single most powerful emotional thread running through all the events of this novel. The triumph of Celie and Nettie represents the victory of love and the durability of blood connections.

There are several surprising twists in the plot of this story. Perhaps the most important is the arrival of Shug Avery, Albert's mistress, who lives for long months in Albert's and Celie's home. Shug, a renowned blues singer, is everything Celie is not—beautiful, willful and self-possessed. Albert openly displays an obsessive love interest in Shug, calls her the "Queen Bee," and berates Celie in front of her. Shug is ill, and Celie, although she might be expected to resent Shug's presence, warmly and willingly assumes the task of nursing her back to health. The two women learn to love each other deeply as Celie restores Shug's physical health. Shug builds Celie's self-esteem, teaching her she is lovable, attractive, and deserving of sexual pleasure. She protects Celie from Albert, threatening to withhold her affections from him unless he treats Celie more humanely. Shug is also instrumental in reuniting Celie and Nettie. Nettie, too, brings a number of surprises to the story, but to say more would spoil the dramatic and heartwarming final few episodes of this deservedly acclaimed work.

About the author

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, the daughter of a sharecropper. In the essay "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," Walker writes about how her eye was permanently disfigured during early childhood when she was wounded by a pellet from one of her brother's guns. She credits the blindness in this eye for nudging her toward becoming a writer. The wound set her apart, drove her to meditative solitude, taught her to become a keen observer of the world should she go completely blind. In another now famous essay about her childhood, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker praises her mother for managing a well-kept garden amidst extreme poverty and other disadvantages. Her mother's character became a model for the strong women in her work. Alice Walker now lives in northern California.