

# The Floatplane Notebooks

by  
Clyde Edgerton

## StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 11

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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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BOOKSELLERS





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"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.