

**Rich In Love**  
by  
Josephine Humphreys

**StoryLines Southeast  
Discussion Guide No. 9**

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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.