

BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) When Lillian divulges to Jay her secret, that she witnessed Tommy murder Gabriel Wilson, Jay rejects her and holds her responsible for the death of his cousin. Twenty years later, he reiterates her responsibility, saying, "The man your brother killed was my family. You let it happen. You let him die." In your view, can Lillian be held accountable in any sense? Is there any basis to Jay's charge?
- 2) Several characters in the novel—Annie, Claudia, Lorita—are, literally speaking, slaves. Several scenes are set on the Idyllic Grove Rice Plantation in the 1850s and 1860s. However, slavery can also be metaphorical; people can be trapped by their circumstances and their choices. Are any characters in *Ghost Swamp Blues* enslaved in a metaphorical sense? Are Lillian's mother, father, Lillian and Tommy enslaved in any way? Although Roberta is the plantation mistress, how is she not free? After she becomes a ghost, is she still metaphorically enslaved? At the novel's climax, do Lillian and Gabriel free themselves, Lillian through suicide and Gabriel through revenge? Do their actions liberate any other characters?
- 3) In literature, a symbol functions on a literal level, serving the needs of a scene or plot, while also suggesting deeper meanings. Discuss what is suggested by the family quilt that Roberta discusses with Hannah following Lillian's death. What is suggested by Tommy and Lillian removing batting from the quilt in earlier scenes?
- 4) What are some of the parallels between the two sets of characters from the 19th and 20th centuries? For example, how are Jonathan DuBois and Lillian's father similar? How are Roberta and Lillian similar? What are some of the similarities between the 19th and 20th century, between the "old" and "new" Souths?
- 5) What is suggested in the name of Faith, Hannah's ancestor, and the person who is the literal, ancestral link between the two sets of characters?
- 6) Throughout the novel there is a theme of silencing. Roberta is silenced by her mother when she objects to marrying Jonathan. Annie and Claudia are silenced by their enslavement and by Roberta's actions (for example, when Roberta places Claudia's hand in the scalding water). Roberta attempts to silence herself by walking into Snaky Swamp. Lillian silences herself after witnessing Tommy's actions. She then silences her daughter, Hannah, when she hears Hannah sing in church. Hannah tries to communicate with her mother, using the non-verbal medium of letters, but receives no response from Lillian. What or who is still left silenced at the end of the novel? What or who is liberated? Why do you think Lillian was so compelled to silence Hannah? What is the significance of Hannah's voice?
- 7) *Ghost Swamp Blues* is a magical realism novel. The magical elements in the story are treated as normal occurrences. Throughout the book, the supernatural and the ordinary walk side by side. Within the novel, where do the supernatural and the ordinary intersect?

Which characters are the primary links between the two worlds? What elements exist in both worlds?

8) What role do the Swamp Sirens play in the book? Are they part of the supernatural world, the natural world, or both?

9) The novel takes place in a mythical North Carolina coastal town on a piece of property that has undergone many incarnations. The constant on the property is the swamp. What role does Snaky Swamp play in the 19th-century portions of the novel? The 20th-century portions? Why do Gabriel and Roberta return to the swamp at the end of the novel?

10) As Roberta enters Snaky Swamp, she is bitten by water moccasins. What do you think the snakes represent for Roberta? For Lillian? For Gabriel?

AN INTERVIEW WITH LARAIN HERRING

Where did the inspiration for *Ghost Swamp Blues* come from?

I began *Ghost Swamp Blues* through the voice of Lillian, loosely modeled on my grandmother, in an attempt to understand her and find some way to connect with her. I invented the situation which became Lillian's inciting incident—witnessing her brother Tommy lynch Gabriel. I followed that thread—what would happen if a young girl saw that? How would she be affected? What secrets would she keep? What detachments would be necessary? From that initial question, that first attempt to reconcile myself with my now deceased family, the novel took form.

Growing up in the south, I witnessed many deeply divisive belief systems. I saw Klan rallies, nice church-going women throwing rocks at the buses that brought the black children into our schools in the 1970s, and watched as our “friendly” neighborhood stopped speaking to us and literally built fences between our home and theirs when we sold our house to an African-American family.

As I became engulfed by the melody of *Ghost Swamp Blues*, I asked deeper questions. What price is paid by the dominant culture in an environment of dominance? In other words, what is the soul price for an individual who owns another? What songs and shadows still cling to the land? This novel is my journey to understand the shadow of my family, my homeland, and the shadow within myself.

Can you tell us something about your writing process?

I usually begin with a place and a voice. So far, I've never begun with a story or plot. It's always been a place and a sound. Someone will speak to me or make some sort of noise, whether it's dragging a shoe across a wooden pier, or an actual line of dialogue. For *Ghost Swamp Blues*, the first thing I got was a woman in a pink feathered hat walking into a swamp. The rest of the book unfolded from that image and that place. From there, I got Lillian's voice. “I stopped speaking when....” I was curious. I wanted to know why she stopped speaking. What happened? And the desire to answer those questions brought me the story. I am one of those writers who has no idea where she's going until she gets there. I'm not an outliner or plot constructor. I listen and follow, and then later have to shape the elements I discover into a workable narrative.

This novel went through many different incarnations before finding its current form. Please talk to us about the revision process.

I actually began this novel in 1998 when I started my MFA program. My grandmother had recently died and family history was on my mind. I workshopped the novel to death in grad school; a section of the book won the Barbara Deming Award for Women, and I successfully landed an agent with this book. However, it has taken a decade to find the perfect home for it. Along the way, I rewrote it as a young adult novel, then I rewrote it with an omniscient narrator, and then ended up cutting what I had thought was an integral plot point, only to discover that the absence of it made the book stronger.

I love the revision process. It's every bit as exciting to me as the early drafts. I am a scratch rewriter, meaning I start over without the earlier version in front of me. That way, I don't have the earlier words getting in the way of the words that could come. Each full revision honed me in tighter on the focus of the book. Each version taught me something new about the characters and brought into deeper clarity my driving questions and my character arcs.

You write and teach a lot about using writing as a healing tool. Many people may associate that type of writing only with personal journaling. How do you think fiction writing can serve as a healing tool?

I think all of our stories spring from unresolved questions within ourselves. It takes a lot of discipline and stamina to write a book. If you as the author are not curious or compelled by the questions the book is posing, you'll find something better to do with your time. We don't always know, or need to know, the questions we're pursuing in our work. Sometimes I think it's better if we don't know at all and just step back and listen to the work. If we think we know too much, there's a tendency to also think we know the answers. That can be deadly in the writing process. Trust the work. It will reveal to you far more than you could have directed it to.

The questions each of us carry through our lives come from some level of life's experience. Prior to teaching creative writing, I would not have felt that fiction writing was as healing for the author as journaling or other more therapeutic types of writing. But once I started to read my students' stories and listen to what they were examining through their characters, I could see the deeper questions at play in their own lives. In some ways, because people think they're "making it up", they're able to be more authentic and honest because they don't see the personal connection yet. It's there. It's always there.

People can write themselves free. Writing writes us free. Once we get out of our own way, the stories, the unresolved questions, the trauma we store, wants to move and be liberated. This is only one of the many ways the pen is mightier than the sword. Writing and reading in any genre teach us empathy for ourselves and the world around us. Empathy leads to compassion. Compassion leads to a softening. When we soften, we can let go of what we no longer need. It sounds out there, I know, but I see it semester after semester in my students, and I see it project after project with my own work. Writing opens us.

The supernatural figures prominently in this book. Do you believe in ghosts?

I believe places and people can attract and hold onto energies that aren't of the present moment. I have had quite a few encounters in my life that I cannot explain. Were they ghosts? I have no idea. I just know I experienced things I couldn't understand based on how we think the world works. I believe in hauntings. I think we are often the ones who haunt ourselves, rather than something otherworldly, but the effect is the same. Places hold energy, and the South is a living museum to the whole range of what it means to be a human being. I have always been able to feel and hear places. I don't see things as much as hear them. The Southern landscape shouts to me.

Do you consider yourself a Southern writer?

I do. I haven't lived in the South since 1981, and I'm not sure I could live there anymore, but it will always be home. I have tried to write fiction that takes place in Arizona, where I currently live, and I come up empty. I know there are many people who love this desert landscape, but to me, it is too unsafe, too large. The sky is too big. I need the canopy of trees and the softness of grass. I love Southern Gothic stories. I love big crazy family stories, and I love all the contradictions that play out every day in the South. As Southern author Lee Smith says, "In the South, a sense of place implies who you are and what your family did. It's not just literally the physical surroundings, what stuff looks like. It's a whole sense of the past." That's how I feel about the South. The West doesn't give me that. It's not my past. It's someone else's. I believe time wraps around itself rather than moves in a straight line, so it is comforting to me to be in the South, where I can see many layers of different lives in one spot.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Of course the great Southern writers – Flannery O'Connor, Edith Wharton, William Faulkner and Truman Capote. I also adore Carole Maso, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende and Barbara Kingsolver. I think James Agee's novel, *A Death in the Family*, is quite possibly the most perfect book ever written.