

# Feather Crowns Short Guide

## Feather Crowns by Bobbie Ann Mason

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# Characters

The independent and imaginative Christianna (Christie) Wheeler provides the focus for Mason's novel.

Although she unquestioningly loves her husband, Christie finds herself out of place in the large Wheeler family of tobacco farmers. She resists their loud brash demeanor and their unswerving acceptance of farm life as their total existence. Christie's curiosity leads her to question things others take for granted. Her inquisitiveness at times taxes even her husband's patience.

While she finds a soul mate in Amanda, the young wife of the older Wheeler patriarch, Wad Wheeler, Christie still battles a sense of isolation. Amanda shares Christie's spirit, and her longing to know things about the world beyond the farm, but she lacks Christie's control and sensibility.

Amanda participates in much of the superstitious belief of the other Wheelers, while Christie desires to probe beyond the wives' tales which seem to satisfy others. The birth of her quintuplets, however, does lead her to doubt the order she had always observed in nature. She wonders if her rarely satiated desire for her husband, or a dream she had regarding a preacher who led a revival which Amanda and Christie attended while Christie was pregnant, might have brought on these multiple births. As she considers possible causes, she thinks, "so many people she knew believed babies could be influenced in the womb by outside happenings."

Following the births, Christie must adjust to instant celebrity. Her shy ways make difficult her acceptance of the thoughtless curiosity seekers who arrive at her home all hours of the day and night, reaching for her babies.

Suddenly even her family seems to exult in their relation to her, not as the person she is, but to her celebrity status. Even the train which had charged by the farm everyday for years stops for Christie's babies, disgorging passengers who flock to view the miracle.

When James's Uncle Wad decides to charge admission, Christie controls her feelings of animosity, trying to agree with the logic that the money collected will help pay off James's \$1,000.00 debt to Wad. She alienates the Wheelers by treating the black wet nurse, Mittens, who helps her feed her babies, like family. Christie's struggle to understand the phenomenon in which she has been caught up, at times exhausts her: "Christie had never imagined that she would do anything truly out of the ordinary, or that she would be chosen as a vessel for something so much larger than herself, of significance to people far away, people she didn't know."

Just as she had to cope with the overwhelming effects of celebrity, Christie must attempt to deal with the deaths of her five babies. Looking to her other three children and her husband for comfort doesn't yield the satisfaction for which she had hoped.



Her anger over the babies' deaths settles upon the public as its object as she becomes convinced their over attention brought on her tragedy. Her vulnerability allows her to be convinced by a showman named Greenberry McCain to travel around the South with the babies whose bodies have been preserved by the newest methods in embalming. She seeks to vent her rage upon those who will come to peer at their lifeless forms in a bid to find some relief from her pain. The results of the bizarre journey prove ultimately positive, although not what Christie might have predicted.

On the surface a practical and simple country wife, Christie reveals the hidden complexity to her personality through her thoughts and her dreams.

Prone to be introspective, she must keep much of her musing to herself for fear it would be thought improper. A spiritual and loving woman, Christie remains a very compelling character with whom all readers will empathize.

Christie's husband James joins his extended family in the tobacco farming business. His relationship with Christie is one based upon love and trust.

While understanding of her differences with his family, he insists that she try to get along with everyone. James lacks comprehension of that part of Christie that wants to embrace the outside world and experiences beyond the border of their farm community. His gentle and loving personality causes him to be deeply wounded by the deaths of his babies. Suspicious of the idea of a tour with the bodies of his quintuplets, he nevertheless allows Christie to make the final decision as to whether they should go. James shares his uncle Wad's practical approach to life, understanding that the \$100 per week promised him by the showman who wants to organize the tour will go a long way toward feeding the extended family and canceling his debt to Wad. Hurt by the alienation from his wife brought on by the infants' deaths, James remains strong for Christie, always a reliable husband. When at last they reunite as lovers, James accepts his wife's differences from the rest of the Wheelers and returns home to make as fine a life as possible for his family.

Amanda, Wad's second wife, remains a tragic figure in the novel.

Unlike Christie, she is never able to accept her fate of living in the Wheeler family. Wad's sister, Alma, attempts to restrain Amanda's high spirits by burdening her with work and responsibility. Amanda finds relief when Christie moves to property adjacent to the family farms, for Christie's creativity and imagination seems to mirror her own.

But while hardships strengthen Christie's resolve and her relationship with her husband, they break through Amanda's weak defenses. The death of one of her children, for which she assumes guilt, and a forbidden relationship with a brother-in-law combine to push Amanda beyond her endurance. Unable to depend upon her cold practical husband for love and the extended Wheeler family for understanding, Amanda finds release only through death.



Uncle Wad and Alma remain important characters among the many Wheelers featured in the book. As the man who owns the mortgage to their farm, Wad is a voice which Christie and James must respect and obey.

While he has the strength to be a fine dictator, Wad lacks the compassion of a true leader. The unbending pragmatism he practices touches and bruises many members of his family. His words smart as badly as the sting of the cruel winter wind across the tobacco fields of Kentucky. In a later remembrance of Wad and his clan, Christie says that she eventually realized that, "the Wheelers were always too busy putting food on the table to take care of each other. They would take care of the sick and dying, and they would carry food to neighbors in trouble, but nobody took time to look down deep at what was bothering a person." Alma gains a bit more reader respect due to her actions toward Christie at the time of the birth. Also practical and a no-frills person, Alma still understands the bond between a mother and her child. Her indefatigable efforts on Christie's behalf help endear her to Christie and to the reader. Her ironic commentary to her brother and others also provides a bit of comic relief. Many years after the birth of the quintuplets, when Christie tells Alma, "I can never fill your shoes," the old lady astonishes her by replying, "Christie, you're the only woman in this whole family that ever had a head on her."

Mittens, the black nurse maid who assists Christie with her babies, allows Mason to emphasize her underlying theme of prejudice. Christie rebels against the local views regarding blacks, arguing with James that "nigger milk" did not lead to the death of the babies. Mittens also supports the running commentary regarding various superstitions of the farm folk. Her songs bring a type of mythology to Christie that the young woman later clings to. Mittens' music is echoed in that of the black singer in the woods which later leads Christie to an allimportant epiphany. The black woman also provides one of the few scenes in which Alma becomes flustered, by announcing that her slave grandfather was an illegitimate Wheeler son.

Greenberry McCain best exemplifies the attitudes of several minor characters, as well as the crowds of onlookers, who use the birth of the quintuplets to take advantage of the Wheelers. The worst type of snake-oil salesman, Greenberry talks Christie and James into touring with him in order to "educate" the public regarding the babies. The Wheelers discover their own naivete as the "educational tour" quickly dissolves into, literally, a side show in a carnival. McCain becomes useful to the Wheelers as an object of their scorn. They triumph over all of the sensation-seeking public when they at last tell McCain exactly what they think of his charade. He does serve the purpose of spurring Christie to at last decide what to do with the infants' bodies, as she leaves them for noninvasive scientific study at Institute of Man in Washington D.C.

Christie's other three children, Nannie, Jewel and Clint form a thread weaving in and out of the protagonist's story. Cared for by the extended family in Christie's absence, they become part of the gap in her life which can never be filled. Christie's children are like the many other children of the Wheeler clan; some mature to take over the farms, riding out the crisis over tobacco sales, while others face different fates. Clint's death in the war in France allows Christie to once more show her spirit in the face of adversity. While



others around her declare it an honor to have sacrificed their children to the cause, she revolts against such an idea, thinking, "Any mother would rather have her boy than any country in the world, for the earth would always be here and it did not seem to matter in the long run how the wars turned out."



## Social Concerns

As in her previous fiction, *Mason's Feather Crowns* is a novel preoccupied with questions of fate, as her main character struggles to make sense of her destiny as the mother of America's first known set of quintuplets. The plot focuses upon quirks of fate, and how Christianna Wheeler, the novel's protagonist, handles hers. While the quintuplets act at first as a catalyst to strengthen the love Christie feels for her farmer husband, James, public reaction soon transforms the normality of their family into a freak show. Mason faces issues of public reaction which can convert a normal, every-day citizen into a celebrity over night.

Christie tries to make sense not only of the town's and nation's often rude and insensitive reactions, but also those of her family, which reflect that of the public. She grapples with the question of how the family unit will resist decomposure beneath the onslaught of fame and its accompanying oppression.

Despite the proximity of an extended farm family, ruled over by James's Aunt Alma and her brother Wad, Christie is lonely much of the time. She finds a soul mate in Wad's young wife Amanda, although Amanda has as little power as Christie in the family. The two discuss subjects beyond the normal family farm life detail and are sometimes viewed with suspicion by the unimaginative Wheelers.

While not told in first person, the narrative emerges from Christie's consciousness, and it is her vision of the chaos and wonder brought on by her babies that the reader sees.

Readers may strongly react to Mason's depiction of the American public's callous disregard for the privacy of the Wheelers and their babies. Although the time frame of the novel begins in 1900, the sensation-seeking American public, as characterized by Mason, seems all too contemporary.

When total strangers force their way into the Wheelers' home (one even climbs over the window sill in the middle of the night), assuming the right to view and handle the tiny quintuplets, the reader shares the characters' humiliation and contained fury at behavior which far exceeds the boundaries of common courtesy and decency.

The final chapter, presented in first person with Christie as narrator, emphasizes the perspective upon life events which every individual gains following the passage of time. The fact that Christie later finds answers to some of her early questions, and learns to simply accept the fact that a few will never be answered, remains comforting, both to the character and to the reader. Mason reflects upon the human condition as, for the most part, beyond our control. Still, she ends her novel positively, stressing the adaptive aspect of human nature which allows us to bend, yet not break, before life's emotional onslaught. Christie's trip to visit the Dionne quintuplets permits the character to finally release some heartache she's borne over the years due to her fantasizing about what might have been her own babies' fates, had they survived. The reference to the Dionne quintuplets, and the reader's knowledge of the heartbreaking conclusion to most of their

lives, allows reader affirmation of the fact that science must sometimes be ignored, and emotion permitted to guide our actions and decisions.





## Techniques

Mason's talent for the use of detail makes this novel a masterpiece of description. The third person narrative allows her an intimate knowledge of Christie's mental existence as well as the liberty to exert tremendous energy in rendering understandable her protagonists' physical reactions to her constantly evolving world. The author misses no opportunity to familiarize the reader with every aspect of the farm life which Christie inhabits. Detail regarding the quintuplets helps mirror Christie's own method of identifying each. She names and knows the infants when no one else can even distinguish between them. Mason inculcates each of her characters with a distinctive personality allowing the reader to question the stereotypical pigeon-holing of stock farm characters. Her characterizations are shaped with unwavering attention over many pages; the reader knows each of the main players, and the ways in which they relate to Christie Wheeler, well by the novel's conclusion. As with any strong descriptive, Mason's novel permits readers to compare and contrast people, communities, and ideologies effortlessly, armed by her expert rendering of each.

The concluding chapter, related in first person by Christie Wheeler, forms a pinnacle of the self-affirming spirit which supported Christie through her earlier experiences. By allowing Christie to reminisce upon her life and its meanings, Mason brings her novel of life and death full circle. Christie's first-person voice remains at once familiar, yet new and original. Christie's look back at her life at age ninety allows perspective for the character and permits the reader to learn what has happened to the novel's other personalities. This allows closure for reader and protagonist.



# Themes

In *Feather Crowns*, themes of family, motherhood, identity, religion, imagination, superstition, public reaction and sheer survival weave in and out of the story. A sensitive woman among common farm folk, Christie finds herself teetering on the brink of insanity more than once during this epic-long story of one woman's coping mechanism with life. Living among people who consider the birth of her quintuplets comparable to that of a pig's litter, Christie struggles to find her own meaning in an outrageous event from which, at times, she feels completely divorced. Having dealt with growing misapprehension about what type of creature was forming in her body over her nine month pregnancy, Christie alternates between feeling cursed and blessed after the appearance of the five babies. Mason ties the pregnancy and birth, and the mystical feelings it arouses in Christie, to an outdoor camp religious meeting which Christie and her best friend Amanda attend while Christie is pregnant. A sensual woman, Christie has what she considers evil dreams regarding the young preacher who leads the revival.

As her babies begin to die, one by one, her sorrow leads her to try to place the guilt for their deaths upon her sin of unclean thought. She also wonders whether she and James might not have sinned in having sex as often as they did. Her musings are complemented by a discussion of the meaning of various signs by those around her. Mason takes advantage of the situation to present a startling and amusing array of superstitions of the time. One of those is connected with the feather crowns, swirls of feathers found within the babies' coverlet after they die. In the opinion of Amanda, the crowns represent a type of halo, indicating the babies were holy creatures whose spirits have ascended to heaven. Others believe the crowns represent death.

Mason presents an apt study of the macabre through the public's reaction to the birth and death of the quintuplets, using the setting of a carnival to frame her study. A local mortician offers to embalm the babies at no charge, so they may remain on display at his mortuary. Hundreds of curiosity seekers file through the mortuary to gaze upon the babies, not caring whether they see the famed quintuplets alive or dead. The unfeeling relentless pursuit of sensationalism by the public remains as unabashed following the deaths of the quints as it did following their births. Contrasting with such insolent attitudes are those of the grieving strangers who have lost children, or never had any. They seek contact with the newborn quints, as if the babies are an affirmation of their hopes to have children of their own.

After the quintuplets' deaths, when Christie and James accompany their bodies on a tour about the country, Christie justifies the tour by saying she's going to let the public know that they were responsible for the infants' fates. However, she begins to change her mind as, "every day, amid the curious stares, she met someone who told her of losing a baby, or pressed upon her a photograph of some dead child . . . she didn't know what solace the sight of the five lifeless babies could give. Could her babies' deaths really have been a greater gift to the world than their lives might have been?"



The ever-present racism of the South is accented through the character of Mittens, a black wet nurse who helps feed the babies day and night with unceasing loyalty. James wonders aloud following the death of his babies whether it was not due to "nigger milk." Unendingly grateful to Mittens for her dedication to and love of the babies, Christie shocks the local community by pulling Mittens into the whites-only mourning room where the infants remain on display. When she and James travel across the deep South, a portion of the first letter she sends back to the local newspaper contains comments regarding the situation of the blacks: "And the Negroes are still living in the same quarters accorded to the slaves in pre-War times, but now their families have multiplied and there is sure to be less space for all ...

the old slave cabins small as corncribs." Her husband, James, tells her the newspaper might not "print that part about the niggers" because "they won't be interested."

Country and city attitudes clash, as do the characters from both, throughout the novel. Mason affectionately displays the home spun wisdom of Christie's country family without belittling the characters. At the same time, she pokes gentle fun at the city people who assess themselves as sophisticated in comparison to the Kentucky tobacco farmers. Humor abounds in the novel, particularly through the words and actions of Alma, the sharp-tongued older woman Christie both abhors and admires.

Christie's emotions following the babies' deaths leads her to shape a new self-concept. Her changes in the wake of their existence and subsequent demise; of her having been a subject of public display; of her relationship to her other three children and to her husband James, remain beautifully captured through Mason's penchant for external detail as well as through the minutiae of the mental landscape. Toward the end of the public tour with the babies, Christie hears a black man singing in the woods. She hides close by to listen to his passionate verses filled with longing for a woman he has loved and lost. The music awakens a desire in her she thought she might never feel again: "Her heart beat fast.

Something was moving in her, like the desire she felt when she first journeyed to Hopewell — a longing for something new and surprising . . . now she felt as though her mind were gathering its scattered, aimless longings and rolling them together into one." In the closing chapter, Christie says of herself after returning from the tour, "I was so changed I fit in even less than I did before. I felt like I could endure anything after what I'd been through. I felt like I could do anything and that I never had to explain myself." Her imagination and vision pull Christie through her suffering to emerge a new person. In the final lines of the novel, she affirms she doesn't want to spend all her time buried in memories, but would rather enjoy dawns, kitten purrs and a hen's delight over new-laid eggs.

She states, "Things like that are absolutely new ever time they happen."



## Key Questions

This novel suffers no lack of topics worthy of discussion. In its study of faith and resistance, signs and racism and the many facets of the human character, readers will recognize themselves again and again. A worthy subject for discussion is the detail Mason uses, which at times almost overwhelms the reader. Certainly in the face of the growing tide of media sensationalism found in the everyday American's life, the attitudes of the public, whipped into a frenzy of curiosity over the Wheelers' babies by the press, will cause immediate reader reaction. The reactions of the various family members to the deaths of the quintuplets offer focus for contrast and comparison, as does the attitudes toward life and death at the turn of the century as compared to today.

1. What exactly is it about Christianna Wheeler which sets her apart from the members of her husband's extended family?
2. Discuss the symbolism of the train, the feather crowns, and Christie's many dreams.
3. Christie continually wonders about the relationship between the revival which she and Amanda attended at Reelfoot and the birth of her babies. Why did Mason stress this question throughout the novel?
4. Characterize James Wheeler and his relationship to his wife.
5. Why did the music sung by the solitary black man in the woods have the effect of an epiphany upon Christie?
6. Compare and contrast the characters of Christie and Amanda. Describe the difference between the two which made Christie a survivor and Amanda a casualty.
7. Discuss your reactions to public behavior, both at the Wheeler home, and while the Wheelers were on tour.
8. How does Mason's use of the carnival atmosphere where the Wheeler's must display their babies parallel Christie's other experiences? What relationships can you see between the carnival, the revival, the birth of Christie's babies, and the public viewing of the Dionne quintuplets?
9. Discuss the theme of human lack of control over fate in Feather Crowns.
10. What is the function in the story of lesser, yet important, characters such as Alma, Wad, Mittens, Greenberry McCain, and the Wiggins sisters?

# Literary Precedents

In dealing with a particular Southern family's development over a long time period, Mason's novel relates to works by her contemporaries, Anne Tyler and Anne Rivers Siddons.

## Related Titles

While the plot of this novel greatly differs from that of Mason's other works, the strength and optimistic curiosity of Christie Wheeler parallels that of Mason's protagonist in *In Country* (1985). Both novels encompass a spiritual journey in which the female main characters search for answers to the past which will not allow them peace in the present.



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