The Keepers of the House Study Guide

The Keepers of the House by Shirley Ann Grau

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House is a multi-generational novel about an American family that transcends time, moving from pre- to post- Civil war eras. The Howland family estate encompasses many acres in the rolling hills of Wade County. At the time that the property was chosen, William Marshall Howland had just been discharged from the American War war of 1812 and wanted little more than a place to call home and a view of the Providence River. He built the home with his own hands. William was murdered by marauding Indians, but both his name and his property were passed on through the generations that followed. Over time, the farm was expanded upon and slaves were employed to help maintain its extensive fields. The family harvested cotton, corn, sorghum, hogs and tobacco, as well as participating in extensive lumbering. Shirley Ann Grau uses the home as a permanent fixture and pivots the characters and events of the time against its durability.

At a time when northerners fought southerners and families were pitted against one another based solely upon the color of their skin, Grau weaves the tale of a widowed, wealthy, and well known man of the community who falls in love with his housekeeper, Margaret. Margaret is black, and comes from an area known as New Church. They sire three children together, all of whom are mulatto by definition. Meanwhile, William Howland's daughter from his first marriage returns home with a child of her own. As a result, all of William's children as well as his granddaughter, Abigail, live together at the same time on the Howland farm. Margaret's children, named Robert, Nina, and Crissy, were sent to boarding schools in the north to receive the education and unbiased future that every parent hopes for their child. Generations pass and the scandal is forgotten until William Howland's granddaughter marries a politician and the story is unfavorably resurrected. Despite Abigail's family history, her husband leans towards segregation and his constituents are unhappy when they learn the details of certain branches of his wife's family tree. Abigail comes to realize that her husband is not as devoted to her as she is to him. Upon examining his behaviors she learns that he is no longer the honorable man she believed him to be. Like her grandfather, although her marriage crumbles and the townspeople talk, Abigail Tolliver is strong and capable of living in the big house by herself. She defends the house, as well as her grandfather's memory, in bold ways that shock the town and damage its economy.

Book of Abigail

Book of Abigail Summary

The Keepers of the House tells the story of a southern family, the Howlands. The story is woven through many generations and is set against a backdrop of the conservative southern states. It is a collection of five "books," each book focusing on a particular character within a generation. It's first section, the Book of Abigail, focuses on Abigail Tolliver, the daughter of Abigail Howland and Gregory Mason. In it, Abigail reminisces about recent events. The month is November and it is a quiet evening in the countryside. Abigail looks out across her family's vast property, from the big house to the Providence River. She is surrounded by picturesque wildlife and reflects on how she came to live there. It is supper time, but the house is relatively quiet because only her two youngest children, Marge and Johnny, live with her now. Her two oldest children were sent to boarding school in New Orleans to escape the small town's rumors. Abigail finds herself alone, seemingly pitted against the town, although at this time she does not say why. Rather, she alludes to having done something crazy, and "destroying as much as she had lost."

Book of Abigail Analysis

The first section, called the Book of Abigail, is only six pages long. The book is set in the present day and provides a glimpse of the Howland estate. Abigail speaks in the first person point of view and seems to be reminiscing about her life. She is nostalgic about the way the farm was when she was a child, and seems sad that it is in some way different now, but she does not define how it has changed. The reader gets the impression that whatever it is that Abigail has in mind, she is determined to see it through. This section of the novel tells the reader very little about the characters with the exception of introducing Abigail. It is her narrative, and lends more of a feeling than anything factual. The Book of Abigail does make the reader wonder why she is so somber, and lends to continued interest in the book. The rest of the book moves forward from the time of her ancestors and circles back around again to Abigail in the last section.

Book of William

Book of William Summary

William Howland is the last generation of Howland males. Like his ancestors, he was raised on the Howland farm. As a young adult he left the Howland farm for two years, during which time he lived in Atlanta. He enjoyed Atlanta's social scene and worked halfheartedly until he met and married Lorena Hale Adams. Lorena was the cousin of his landlord. Their courtship was short and the newly married couple returned to the Howland estate. They lived with William's parents and built an additional wing onto the house to accommodate their growing family. The first of their children was named Abigail. Their second child was named William and Lorena died of an infection following the birth. She was buried at the Methodist cemetery in nearby Madison City. A year later their son, William passed away as well. William's mourning period was shortened because he was called into duty for the war. He left Abigail in his parents' care while he was away. When he returned from the war he took up the tasks of the farm, and eventually became its owner when his parents passed away. Abigail grew to be an intelligent young woman, who was tall and thin with blond hair. She was more bookish than social and attended Mary Baldwin College in Virginia. During her second collegiate year she fell in love with her poetry professor, Gregory Edward Mason. William's sister, Annie, returned to her childhood home to aid in the wedding preparations. Both William and Abigail were happy to have the input of a knowledgeable woman.

Following southern tradition, Abigail's wedding to Gregory was large. William left the social scene behind long ago, aging comfortably into the silence of the farm. After all of the wedding guests left, and his daughter went back to live with her new husband, William decided to explore the woods and swamps of his youth. He had been drinking the liquor of a bootlegger who supposedly had a still hidden out there, and he wanted to locate it. He set off in a skiff, meandered for two days, foraged off the land, and eventually found the production site. He returned to dry land again in the area known as New Church. When he exited the swamp he discovered a black woman scrubbing clothes in the stream. She looked young yet strong and he was impressed by her stature. He approached her and was surprised to find that she was not timid. Instead she exuded comfort in their natural surroundings. He was compelled to offer her work on his farm. She was the granddaughter of Abner Carmichael, but at eighteen years old she did not require his permission to leave his property. Her name was Margaret, and she left her childhood home that evening to work at the Howland estate.

Book of William Analysis

The Book of William is considerably longer in length than the first "book." It provides the Howland family tree as well as introducing two more of the main characters, William Howland and Margaret Carmichael. The perspective of the second book is very different from the first. In the first book the reader feels a sense of loss and a poignant sort of

reminiscing. The second book is much more factual. The characters have feelings, but the function of book two seems more to be a connection between the past and the present. It gives the reader the information critical to understanding everything that comes next. The author is not sentimental about how information is conveyed in this portion. Even the relationship of William and Margaret, which will later prove to be a controversial topic, is reduced to just the final paragraph in the Book of William. William's introduction to Margaret seems to be a bit cool, and the reader wonders what would compel a person to leave their home to work for a person they just met. The answer lies not in her familiarity with William, but in Margaret's belief in fate. William's daughter, the Abigail mentioned in this section, is a very minor character. Little is said about her throughout the novel. Her importance lies in the birth and life of her daughter, also named Abigail, who is a main character.

Book of Margaret

Book of Margaret Summary

Margaret was the child of Abner's black daughter and a passing white surveyor. Margaret's mother stayed at her father's home for seven years following the birth of Margaret. Every day she waited for her beau to return. Eventually, however, she left and headed towards Mobile in the hopes of a reunion. Margaret was left behind and raised beside her cousins. Although her skin was dark, everyone was aware of her heritage and she was held at a distance. There was an unspoken rule that she was different from the rest. Margaret took to sleeping outside, either in the barn or in a hollowed out tree, trying to escape her extended relatives who lived in Abner's house. No one seemed to miss her presence and Margaret did not feel the need to return for any reason other than food. Margaret's connection to her family changed the same winter that her great grandmother became ill and passed away. Following her death, Margaret felt grandmother's spirit and was able to communicate with her. For the first time in her life, Margaret felt a connection to one of her family members.

That spring Margaret turned seventeen years old. She knew deep within her soul that life as she knew it was about to change. She was convinced of its impending shift, though she didn't know in what way it would change. Maybe it could be attributed to her great grandmother's intervention—or maybe not—but that fall she met William Howland at the nearby stream. She had been expecting something significant and greeted her new future calmly. He invited her to work at his farm and she accepted his offer. Upon arrival at his property she was greeted by Ramona, who offered her the room above the kitchen, which was in need of a good cleaning. These conditions were offset by a clean set of bed linens- the first sheet that she had ever slept on. A week later she began house chores and came into contact with William again. She toiled in the yard and attempted needlework. Her body seemed muscular and capable, except when she attempted intricate work like needlepoint. At those times she seemed as small and vulnerable as a child. Time passed and William took Margaret as his mistress. They had a total of five children together, of which two girls and a boy survived.

Book of Margaret Analysis

The Book of Margaret is approximately the same length as the Book of William, but it portrays a deeper level of emotion. In it we learn of Margaret's mixed parentage, and from this information the reader can begin to assemble the complex layers of the novel. The relationships between each of the characters are filled with love and sorrow, and most are at least touched by, if not outright tainted by, racial inequality. Margaret's heritage was vastly different from William's, in terms of race, wealth, and warmth. The influence of race on her upbringing can be evidenced in her use of "yes'm" when referring to William's other housekeeper, who is her equal in station, yet was elevated by the color of her white skin.

Despite their differences, William and Margaret were attracted to one another. The reader learns that Margaret is a woman of few words but excellent intuition, and that she is guided by spirits. The reader is swayed back and forth between her lack of knowledge of the outside world, and her deep understanding of the spiritual world. Her character grows from a young, neglected girl into a woman who seems wise beyond her years. William feigns affront at her vulnerabilities but is charmed by her strength. The two become a couple and create a family. In the pages ahead the reader will reflect upon what was learned of Margaret's heritage within this section. The information stored in the Book of Margaret is instrumental in explaining the parenting style that she would later adopt.

Second Book of Abigail

Second Book of Abigail Summary

Mrs. Abigail Howland Mason (daughter of William and Lorena) returned to her father's home 10 years after Margaret came to live with Howard. Abigail returned to her father's estate along with her own daughter, Miss Abigail Howland Mason. The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Mason was struggling, and Gregory was eager to return to his English home. Abigail simply had nowhere else to go. They did not send word of their return, but upon arrival were treated warmly. Miss Abigail made the transition from city life to farm life. She adored her grandfather and spent increasing time with him as her mother's health failed. On a daily basis William and Margaret cared for Miss Abigail and she began to think of them as surrogate parents. She was close in age to Margaret's own children and played with them often. Robert was a year older than Abigail and Nina was a few months younger than Abigail. Crissy (Christine) was three years younger than Nina. William and Margaret's children were mulatto. Their skin and hair were fair but their African heritage was belied in their facial features and body build.

While the children all played together, locals considered Abigail to be white, and Margaret's children to be black. They were not as dark as the servant's children, and therefore were elevated above them socially, but a cultural divide still existed between Abby and Margaret's children. Although unspoken the divide was tangible, and reinforced every morning as they left the farm in differing directions for their prospective schools. By the time Abigail was old enough to put it properly into words, Margaret's children were moving away from home in the direction of northern boarding schools. Margaret never visited her children once they went north, forgoing motherly visits and giving them the chance to be upwardly mobile.

The Great Depression came, but the Howlands were largely unaffected because they had amassed so much wealth before hand. Then came Pearl Harbor and World War II. Many of the servants went south to find jobs in the shipyards, which were prospering from the war's onset. Without the aid of hired help, William shifted much of his farming to the lumbering of his acreage. He remained profitable in that market. Abigail's health continued to deteriorate, and although no one spoke to Abby about it, she heard them whisper about tuberculosis. Soon after, Abby was sent to live with her Bannister cousins temporarily, and Margaret's children went to live with Oliver, the most loyal worker on the estate. While the children were watched by trusted friends and family, William and Margaret brought William's daughter, Abigial, to a sanitarium near Sante Fe, New Mexico.

Within a year Abigail had died. William and Margaret returned home after she passed away, collecting all of the children upon their return. Abigail was buried in New Mexico and her prompt and quiet burial caused quite a commotion back in Wade County. William broke tradition when he failed to bring his daughter's body home, but he didn't care what the others thought. He hired the creation of a stained glass window at the

traditional Madison City Methodist Church, and dedicated it to Abigail's memory. That Fall, Nina went off to boarding school in Vermont. Like her older brother, Nina was encouraged to go. Again, Margaret did not correspond with her child, believing that she was giving her children a far greater gift by keeping her distance. With just one child left at home, Margaret pampered Crissy. Both she and William spent extensive time with her, much more so than with the older children. When Abby was sixteen years old and Crissy was eleven, Crissy went away to boarding school just as her older siblings had. When Abby gathered the courage to ask how Margaret felt about her children being gone, William corrected her, stating that they were "our kids." This was William's admission of his contribution to their parentage. Although William and Margaret were not outwardly affectionate, Abby did happen upon them cuddling by the fireplace one evening when she was sixteen. She found their display of affection to be both romantic and confusing.

Abby grew to be an intelligent young woman who graduated from the local school and went on to college. She passed her classes easily, partied equally, and lost her virginity. She was expelled for a short time for leaving campus with friends for a classmate's elopement. As it turned out, the parents of Abby's friend didn't approve and consequently all of the girls involved were expelled. Fortunately for Abby, William was an influential man. He made a series of phone calls and ensured Abby's return to college. The other girls were not so lucky and many did not return to school. This resulted in Abby's awareness of the extent of her family's wealth and connections. When William drove Abby back to school in the city, they serendipitously met a second cousin by the name of John Tolliver. John was respectful and accompanied Abby on the remainder of her journey. Abby didn't hear from John for three months, but then he began courting her seriously. John was attending law school by day, working at the school's library at night, and dating Abby as well. John's ambition was politics, and he recognized that Abby came from a good, wealthy family with connections. She was the kind of girl he envisioned himself marrying, so three months later he proposed. Abby accepted and returned home over Easter weekend to share the news with her grandfather and Margaret. He was not surprised and they enlisted Aunt Annie for help preparing for the wedding.

Abby married John in June with festivities that lasted all week. In September they returned to the university so John could finish his final year of law school. Immediately after graduating with honors from the program he was called up to serve in the Korean War. They had just discovered that Abby was pregnant, so she returned to the farm without her husband to have the baby. John was stationed at a desk job throughout the war and evaded all danger. John still desired a life in politics, so he joined the segregationist Citizens Council and Ku Klux Klan. Abby had been predominantly raised by a loving black woman, so she didn't care for the groups he joined. However, Abigail knew that when John was around her family, including Margaret, he didn't act like a prejudiced man. To console herself, Abigail maintained the idea that every southern white man joined the same groups. In fact, socially he was expected to join, and her husband's membership didn't mean anything beyond a loose affiliation. John was kind to blacks when he encountered them, but in most cases he upheld the views of the

white majority. Abigail expected him to rise in rank and leave behind the groups that helped him to be elected, especially the prejudiced or extremist ones.

John and Abigail's first baby was born at the farm in December, and they named her Abigail. The second child came just thirteen months later. She was born at the hospital, and named Mary Lee. As the Tolliver family grew in size, the distance John and Abigail became too great. Abigail and their daughters accompanied John while he finished out his work during the war. At the war's conclusion they all returned to the Howland farm. John then moved his family to Madison City, set up a law practice and began lobbying for a higher office right away. As John's ambitions grew he had to work around the clock to support them. In the city his segregationist comments could be heard, but rarely did they travel out to the countryside where Abigail's family resided. Although her family was largely unaware, Abby was uncomfortable with the disparity.

The years were uneventful and their children were happy so Abigail bided her time and did not complain. One winter her grandfather disappeared. Margaret said he had gone out to oversee the fields and didn't come home. He had driven his truck off of the road and was found still in it, dead, the next morning. With William's death Margaret relocated to New Church, to a home that Wiliam had quietly bought for her some time back. Although the county wouldn't legally acknowledge their union, he had provided for her as a husband should for his wife. Now that the farm was vacant, John, Abby, and their girls sold their fancy house in town. They renovated the Howland farm for their own use. During its renovations, their son, John Howland Tolliver, was born. After its completion, they found that the Howland home suited their needs nicely.

When Johnny was still a baby, Nina returned to the Howland farm for an unannounced visit. She had married a black man, and by doing so had reversed the fortune that Margaret had worked so hard to arrange for her. In bitterness and disappointment Margaret denied her and began to think of Nina as dead. Abigail was angered that Nina had thrown away her mother's deep love, but Abigail soon found herself too busy caring for her own children to contemplate Nina's situation. John was elected to the state senate and life was idyllic. Then Abigail received word that Margaret had died, exactly four years after the death of her grandfather. Margaret had stumbled out into the cold winter day, walked towards the stream where she had first met William over thirty years ago, and drowned. Abigail was pregnant again and they honored Margaret's memory by naming their newborn daughter after her. Keeping true to her convictions, Margaret had not kept the addresses of her grown children. Consequently, Abigail had no way to notify them of their mother's death. Somehow each of her children learned of her passing and contacted Abigail in their own time. Prior to his death, William had set aside a significant sum of money for Margaret's future. In addition he purchased her an automobile and a home. Margaret willed the remainder of William's money to Abigail, effectively returning it to the Howland estate. When Robert contacted Abigial after his mother's death, he expressed concern that her telephone lines may be tapped. Abigail was unconcerned and spoke openly about his relationship to her family, which she thought of as common knowledge anyway.

Two years later John decided to run for governor. He won the primary by a large margin. It seemed that he would be victorious on election day until someone leaked the connection between the Howlands and the Carmichaels to the press. Abigail was not offended, but John was not so calm. His political hopes were dashed within the week. Along with snapshots of Robert's visit, the anonymous investigator had also discovered a legal marriage certificate for William and Margaret. It was issued in Cleveland and dated April 1928. Abigail was confident in her place in life, as well as the values of her grandfather, a man who acted in a way that the country was not yet ready for. It was the townspeople who were in an uproar. All of the hired help, except Oliver, left and Abigail gathered her children. The townsmen began breaking windows and fences in a demonstration against William's marriage (his affair was acceptable, but apparently their marriage was not). That evening they set fire to the barn. Under the cover of night, while the townsmen watched the barn burn, Abigail and Oliver set fire to the cars of the perpetrators, all of which were parked along the edge of the Howland property. Abigail stood on her front porch, rifle in hand, and watched the vandals run away.

Second Book of Abigail Analysis

The second Book of Abigail comes full circle back with the first Book of Abigail. As Abigail's history, it tells what happened following William's coupling with Margaret to produce the events that Abigail vaguely referred to in her first book. This book is the heart of the novel- it merges the generations previously introduced to the reader. The second Book of Abigail is three times the length of each of the previous books, but follows the same undivided format as its predecessors.

Abigail tells how she arrived at her grandfather's farm. She describes her life there as a child. It was idyllic in some ways yet turbulent. She played outside in the warm fresh air everyday, a lifestyle that would seem perfect to an outsider. Despite her liberties she had a vague awareness that her family was different from the others of the county. WhenAbigail's mother passed away, her death wasn't even discussed, and the information came to Abigail after the fact. Her mother's brief presence in Abigail's life seems to have had very little influence on her. The same is true of her father, whom Abigail never saw again after he left. Despite having a dysfunctional nuclear family, Abigail seems largely unaffected by her early losses. Instead she seems to have developed a strong attachment for her later caregiver, Margaret.

Abigail's relationship with Margaret was also complicated and not without pain. As a child Abigail viewed Margaret as a second mother and loved her unconditionally. Abigail never judged her nor did she try to find reasons for her actions- life was just the way it was and Abigail accepted it with the naivete of a child. As Abigail aged she began to observe the world more critically. She did not do so in a caustic way, instead her process was more analytical. She began to formulate words for the uneasiness she had always known. Her mother wasn't gone, she was dead. Margaret wasn't her grandfather's proud wife, she was more akin to his mistress. She also wasn't different; she was black, and to be black in the south was a serious offense. Abigail also realized for the first time that Margaret's children didn't just appear, they were sired by her

grandfather, which in turn made them relatives, although no one seemed to want to make that claim out loud. Even worse was that they were made to attend a different school from her, although they played side by side and all looked alike. Abigail grew up amongst these discrepancies and became increasingly bothered by them over the years. She knew deep inside that despite what the townspeople said, she could never accept that she was innately different, better or worse, than anyone else.

Going away to college and marrying a white man was the socially acceptable thing for Abigail to do. She came from a distinguished line of strong, wealthy, white individuals, and her husband seemed to be a good match. She was able to busy herself as his wife and later as the mother of their children. They seemed to have accomplished the great American dream. However, little by little, cracks began to form in their foundation. John would make casual remarks that seemed regular to others, but struck an unpleasant chord in Abigail. His membership in segregationist societies was widely accepted by other white men of his generation, but she took it as a personal offense. She began to have a great disdain for him and everything that the average white man stood for (excepting her grandfather who proved throughout his life that he was completely without prejudice).

When news of the secret yet legal marriage of William Howland and Margaret Carmichael became public, Abigail's picture perfect life came to an abrupt end. She was disgusted by the reactions of the townspeople, who began to speak of her grandfather as a monster, instead of as the highly respectable man they had always known him to be. She realized that in the south the way something is may not be as important as the title used to describe it. For example, William's affair with Margaret was acceptable, but their marriage was seen as an abhorrence to nature. Also, a fair skinned quadroon may be more white than black, but s/he would be treated as a black just the same. Worst of all, her fears about her husband came to pass. He was as bigoted as she had come to believe. Although he had always known about Margaret, he preferred to break ties when his association to her family was no longer beneficial to him.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Following the burning of the barn, the townspeople talked more than ever before. Abigail sent her oldest two children off to boarding school to escape the painful rumors. The people of the town spoke of her grandfather as if he did something to be ashamed of, when all he did was love a woman and make their marriage and children legitimate. Abigail attempted to protect her family's estate, but her actions against the vandals only added to the local rumor mill. She was thought of as an uncontrollable woman, and, like her grandfather, carried a mark of shame about her. Oliver was her only legitimate friend in all of the county, and he stood by her. Abigail did not press charges against the townspeople, although she did know the identities of some of the men involved in the damage to her property.. Instead she took vengeance in her own way. She began to close up her properties, with the effect of ruining the local economy. She divorced her husband but retained all the wealth she brought to their marriage. By withdrawing her investments from the community, she was also halting her own income. Abigail figured that she had enough cash to live off of for quite some time. She took pleasure in the idea that the people who had persecuted her family would now be hurting. She would remain secure, even if her own standard of living diminished as a consequence.

Epilogue Analysis

In the epilogue Abigail was forced to defend herself against the angry townspeople. When the immediate aftermath of the barn fire had quieted down she began to walk in public again. She held her head high and spoke strongly against those who had persecuted her family, although inside she did not feel as strong as she appeared. She believed that she was fighting for her family's reputation, although she was probably the last of the Howlands to care. She proclaimed loudly that "The Howlands were the first ones here, back when it was Indian country, and you set out your dogs at night, and you barred your doors against them, and went about daytimes with a rifle. It's still Howland country. I'm taking it back. There's precious little around here that didn't belong to Will Howland, one way or the other. Only you forgot. But watch now, and you'll be seeing Madison City go back to what it was thirty years ago... ."

By the time of the epilogue the reader has come to understand the deep strength of Abigail Howland Tolliver. Unlike her contemporaries, Abigail has no patience for the superficiality of upper society, although if one were to use wealth as its criteria, that's where she'd be placed. She is simply a woman, lost, and wanting to come to terms with her family's past. Most importantly, like all people, she wants to do something worthy of another person's pride and love. As she walks away from the stunned gathering of women in downtown, she converses with her late grandfather. The reader should note that this conversation is reminiscent of something Margaret would have done. One is

left pondering, whether Abigail might be more like a Carmichael than a Howland after all.

Characters

William Howland

There are three main characters in Keepers of the House. They are William, Margaret, and Abigail. William descended from a long line of ancestors with each generation bearing the name of William Howland. The first, William Marshall Howland, claimed the land on which the Howland plantation was built. He was originally from Tennessee, but roamed the south after being discharged in 1815 from the American War against the British. He did not have a close relationship with his family and was not inclined to return to the land of his birth. He preferred the forests and the soft sandy soil of the south where plants seemed to thrive. As the first settler he named the nearby river the Providence and proceeded to build his house on the fourth rise from the riverbank, halfway between the river and the ridge. Sometime later he was murdered by raiding Indians while clearing his fields for farming. He left behind a wife and six children, the eldest of which bore his father's name, William Howland Junior. William Holland Junior had a son and named him William Carter Howland. He died fighting in the Civil War and had not produced any children. The family name was passed down to the next generation through the son of William Carter Howland's brother. He was named William Legendre Howland and was independently wealthy because his mother's family was as prosperous as the Howlands. His mother had been born in the city and saw the value of land, so that generation added many acres onto the Howland estate. After William Legendre Howland there was one more William Howland.

The last William Howland grew up on the large Howland estate. He knew how to farm but also saw the practicality in formal education. He studied law in Atlanta where his cousin had opened a law office. He rented living space from a woman and eventually courted her cousin. Bored of studying law, William married Lorena Hale Adams. They returned to the Howland farm and had a daughter named Abigail. A year later they had a son, whom they named William following his family's tradition tradition. Unfortunately, Lorena died from an infection resulting from the birth, and their son died in his first year of life. William spent time mourning his wife and raising their daughter. His parents helped him and he worked the farm.

After his parents passed away he needed extra help so he hired two maids. The first did not live on the property, she only provided cooking services. The second, Margaret, came to him as a housekeeper, but quickly became his mistress. Theirs was an interracial relationship. William and Margaret remained a couple for thirty years. They had three children that survived into adulthood. In addition, they raised William's granddaughter, Abigail Mason Howland, for most of her youth. Abigail recalled her grandfather as being an old, big, and heavy man with blue eyes. When he cared for Abigail, William had a bald head and white beard, but earlier in life he had fair hair and a mustache. In his early adulthood he liked a good party and was handsome enough to attract an assortment of ladies. William enjoyed a good time, but once married he was fiercely loyal. He was kind, quiet, and a hard worker.

Abigail Tolliver

Abigail Tolliver was the only child of Abigail Howland and Gregory Mason. Abigail Howland was swept off of her feet by Mr. Mason. They married but their relationship didn't last. When the marriage fell apart, Abigail Mason brought her daughter home to her parent's estate. Neither woman ever saw Gregory again. The two Abigails were used to living in the city and had to adjust to life in the rural south. As the granddaughter of the last William Howland, Abigail was better off than most children, but she had never experienced racial tension before and it was an awakening for her. Abigail Mason died when Abby was young, and William and his second wife, Margaret, took over the responsibility of raising Abigail. William and Margaret had three children of their own, and Abigail grew up along side them. Abigail was aware that her family was not traditional, but she did not find it objectionable. As she grew and the others were sent away to boarding schools she began to question why. Her grandfather was white, as were her parents, but William's second wife, Margaret was black, and their children were mulatto. Although Abigail didn't understand it as a child, her grandfather's interracial relationship had shaped the course of her life.

When Abigail was ready for college, her grandfather paid her way. While driving her home from a visit during her second year, William introduced Abigail to a second cousin of his, John Tolliver. John was attending law school by day and working at the university's library at night. John's ambition was politics, and he recognized that Abby came from a good, wealthy family with connections. She was the kind of girl he envisioned himself marrying, so six months after their introduction he proposed. Abby accepted and they were married in a June wedding. John finished law school and Abby supported him. They conceived a child together, and shortly after graduation John was drafted into the Korean War. Like her mother before her, Abigail returned to the Howland estate to raise her child, whom they named Abigail. John returned safe from the war and opened his law practice in Madison City. Abigail and Abby accompanied him and three more children followed: Mary Lee, Johnny, and Marge. As John's political ambitions grew he had to work around the clock to support them and Abigail provided the care for their children.

Abigail began to hear rumors that John was associated with, and spreading the rhetoric of, segregationist groups. John assured her that he was only saying what was expected of him and that he did not harbor those feelings towards her mixed family. Still, Abigail remained somewhat uncomfortable with the disparity. Their marriage fell apart when the press learned of her grandfather's secret marriage to Margaret, a black woman. John's political rising halted overnight and he blamed Abigail. They divorced and John returned to his family. Without her husband or her grandfather's protection, Abigail was forced to protect the Howland estate on her own.

Margaret Cramichael Howland

Margaret Carmichael Howland was descended from a family of freejacks in New Church County. "Freejack" was the term given to black men who were granted their freedom upon discharge from the the 1812 War against the British. Their freedom was given as compensation for serving the United States under the command of Andrew Jackson. Large groups of freejacks tended to keep to themselves, resulting in the founding of the area known as New Church. From this historical area arose Margaret's family. Her mother conceived her out of wedlock, with a white surveyor temporarily in the area on business. When the man never returned for her, and she tired of being a single mother, Margaret's mother left town. Margaret never met her father, nor even knew his identity. She was raised by her great grandmother and extended family. Theirs was not a close bond, and Margaret often wondered what set of circumstances would pull her away from Abner's farm. She viewed her meeting with William Howland as fate fulfilling her desire to leave.

Margaret Carmichael was barely a woman when she went to work at the Howland estate. She was hired as William Howland's housekeeper but quickly became his mistress. What began as convenience turned into affection and eventually a deep love. Their relationship was not traditional, and interracial relationships were looked down upon. Despite the barriers to them, William and Margaret conceived five children. Of the five, three lived into adulthood. Their names were Robert, Nina, and Crissy. William and Margaret were secretly married in Cleveland prior to the birth of their children, although this fact was not public knowledge.

Above all else, Margaret strove to be a good mother. She was the product of an interracial coupling and was raised in her mother's black community. She was determined that her children, who were also of mixed races, would not have the same lot in life. Therefore, she sent them all away to private boarding schools up north and ceased communication with them. When examining her character it is essential to understand that her sending them away was the ultimate act of parental love. Her love for William was equally as fierce. After his death she retreated into life as a widow. She couldn't stand the loneliness and committed suicide exactly four years from the day of William's death.

Robert Carmichael

Robert Carmichael is the eldest child of William Howland and Margaret Carmichael Howland. He is one of three siblings and their only son. He has two younger sisters, Nina and Christine. In addition to his sisters, he was raised alongside his father's granddaughter, Abigail. Robert's parents came from very different backgrounds. William was descended from a wealthy family. The Howlands were influential and provided the cornerstone for the local economy. Margaret was from a less fortunate family that hardly missed her when she left. The most important difference was that William was white and Margaret was black. Although her entire family was legally free, people of color were still

looked down upon and interracial marriage was prohibited. Margaret went to the Howland estate to work as a housekeeper but quickly became a mistress, then, just before the birth of Robert, William's secret wife. Due to their pairing, Robert spent his younger years on the Howland estate and was known simply as Margaret's child, and was given her surname, Carmichael.

He had a freckled, fair complexion, blue eyes and red hair. Robert was light enough to pass for white in a northerner's eyes, but he would always be recognized as a black in the south, so his parents sent him away to boarding school. He escaped the southern attitude and label of his parentage, but missed a quality relationship with his parents. William visited him once or twice a year when he was at school, but his mother remained at home. Margaret knew that his way out of the south would be through schooling, and she wanted him to have what she considered to be a great life, so she strongly encouraged academics at the expense of other activities. As a result, Robert became an intelligent but withdrawn young man. He was a solid student and went onto college and later earned his masters degree in engineering. After he graduated Robert lost touch with the Howlands. He married a white woman, Mallory, conceived children with her, and kept his heritage a secret. It wasn't until his mother's death that Robert returned to the Howland estate. When he returned he was a bitter, middle aged man spewing hatred for Abigail, her entire family, and especially her politician husband. He was angry with her husband for his duplicitous remarks, but although he stewed inside, he didn't have the courage to unveil his own racial status.

Nina Carmichael

Nina Carmichael was the middle child of William Howland and Margaret Carmichael Howland. Her older brother was named Robert, and her younger sister was named Christine. Like her siblings, Nina was a mulatto child. She had her mother's African American blood flowing through her body, but she most resembled her father. All three children were fair skinned with red hair. Nina was closest in age to her father's granddaughter, Abigail. The two were emotionally close and were childhood playmates. Eventually, Nina was sent away to a Vermont boarding school in an attempt to introduce her to white society. Nina's mother hoped that she would ascend to life in the north and leave behind the prejudices of life in the south. The two corresponded intermittently until Nina's marriage. Nina choose to marry a black man, and although they seemed happy, Margaret was not pleased. Margaret felt that she had sacrificed a normal relationship with her daughter to ensure her future. Nina's choice to marry within her mother's race, despite her fair appearance, seemed to be an affront to Margaret's long held intentions. Margaret was so disappointed that upon hearing of their marriage, she disowned Nina. When Margaret died shortly thereafter, Nina assumed that she had died of grief and felt personally responsible for her mother's passing. Even Nina's childhood friend, Abigail, found her choice to be surprising. Despite their close childhood bond, Abigail's fierce loyalty to Margaret made her unable to support Nina in adulthood.

Crissy Carmichael

Christine Carmichael was the youngest surviving child of William Howland and Margaret Carmichael Howland. She had two older siblings, but was significantly younger than them due to a lost baby in-between. As the youngest, she had ample attention from her parents. Robert and Nina had gone away to boarding schools in the north, and Crissy monopolized their time. Although she came from an interracial coupling, Crissy resembled her father, and was fair skinned just like her siblings. Crissy had curly red hair, freckles, and green eyes. William and Margaret were affectionate with Crissy, and William's granddaughter, Abigail, observed that she was the most dotted upon. Crissy was generally an agreeable child. She was intelligent like Robert, but much more outgoing. Crissy followed her older siblings into boarding school at the age of eleven. She never returned to the Howland estate and over time her communications with the family became further and further apart until they ceased completely.

John Tolliver

John Tolliver met Abigail Howland when she was away at college. Abigail's grandfather, William, introduced them. Abigail was doing well in college and enjoyed socializing but was not enthusiastic about the prospect of a professional career. John was an ambitious law student with a definite itinerary when they began dating. He hoped to rise in politics and immediately recognized beneficial qualities in Abigail. Not only was she a nice girl to date, but her family was well connected. John and Abigial courted for nearly a year before marrying. John was from Somerset County. Somerset County had been settled by Tolliver ancestors and was jokingly known as Tolliver Nation. It had a bloody history of slave breeding and trading prior to America's reconstruction period. The Howland and Tolliver families were distantly related, but neither cared very much for the other. Like most of the town, John's family was very religious despite their dark history. John and Abigail were married on the Howland plantation in Wade County. They returned to his university for one year while Mason finished school, after which he was drafted into service for the Korean War. Abigail returned to her grandfather's estate while he was away. He maintained a desk position in Washington, and stayed safe for the war's duration.

After the war he immediately set up practice in Madison City. By then he and Abigail had begun to build their family and she was as busy raising the children as he was developing his law practice. John was a clever man and manipulated the system for his benefit. He would say what was required of him in different social circles, even if it was in direct conflict with his own beliefs or lifestyle. This was especially apparent when he would make racial comments to appease white supremacists, yet be amiable with his wife's family, which included an interracial arrangement. In total, John and Abigail had four children named Abby, Mary Lee, Johnny and Marge. John and Abigail's marriage fell apart when her late grandfather's marriage to a black woman was exposed. Abigail was not ashamed, but John's family felt differently and in the hostile atmosphere of the

south his political aspirations were shattered. They divorced and he returned to his family in Somerset County.

Abigail Mason

Abigail Mason's maiden name was Abigail Howland: she was the daughter of William Howland and his first wife, Lorena Hale Adams. Abigail married Gregory Mason and changed her last name to match his. Together they had one child, also named Abigail (she would later become Abigail Tolliver through marriage). When Abigail Mason's marriage ended she returned home to the Howland Farm to raise her daughter. Sadly, her time with her daughter was cut short. Abigail Mason died of tuberculosis in a Sante Fe sanitarium.

Gregory Edward Mason

Gregory Edward Mason was the husband of Abigail (Howland) Mason. He was born in England but immigrated to the United States. He was employed as a college English professor. Abigail was one of his promising poetry students. They fell in love, were married, and had one child together. When war broke out in England, Gregory felt compelled to return to his homeland, sacrificing his marriage and daughter. He never returned to the United States.

Edward Delatte

Mr. Edward Delatte was the lawyer Abigail hired to handle her divorce from John Tolliver. She also asked him to conduct a complete inventory of the Howland estate. She wanted to choose a lawyer that was not local and would not be biased. She recalled that one of her college friends had a younger brother who practiced law. Following the inventory, he helped her manage her finances and carried out her business wishes, including those that essentially collapsed the economy of Wade County.

Oliver Brandon

Oliver Brandon was a handyman for the Howlands. He was black, but was hired help, not a slave. There was mutual respect between William and Oliver. Oliver worked for the Howland family for more than twenty-five years. He drove Abigail to school almost every day when she was a child, and even after William's death he continued to maintain the farm for Abigail's benefit. He was described as short, stocky, and middle-aged.

Abner Carmichael

Abner Carmichael was the patriarch of the Carmichael family. He was an unimportant character except that he was the grandfather of Margaret Carmichael, whose heritage is a pivotal point for the book. Abner was said to own vast lands that were flooded yearly, and to have had enough family and hired help to work all of the land. His family were known as "freejacks" because they descended from black men freed as compensation for their service in the 1812 war against the British. They lived in New Church County, which was located about twenty miles from the Howland plantation.

Objects/Places

The Southern United States

The southern United States is the setting for this novel. County names are used, not specific states, but the racial tensions present in the story make the general area easy to identify.

Freejacks

"Freejack" was the term given to black men who were granted their freedom upon discharge from the the 1812-1815 War against the British. Their freedom was given as compensation for having served the United States under the command of Andrew Jackson. Large groups of freejacks tended to keep to themselves, resulting in the founding of the area known as New Church.

New Church

New Church was the area where Margaret Carmichael was raised.

Wade County

Wade County was the area in which the Howland plantation resided.

Madison City

Madison City was the closest city to the Howland Plantation, and its economy was closely linked to business supplied by the Howland family.

The Slaughterhouse

The slaughterhouse was closely linked to the Howland family. One half of all the cattle sent to the slaughterhouse were from Howland stock. When Abigail Howland Tolliver sold her stock the slaughterhouses took a large financial loss, which likely meant a loss of jobs for the townspeople.

The Lumberyard

The lumberyard was also closely linked to the Howland family. Most of the lumber farmed in the county came from Howland land. When Abigail Howland Tolliver ended

her contract with the lumberyard, it likely took a large financial loss, just like the slaughterhouse.

The Honey Island Swamp

Following the marriage of his daughter, William Howland retreated into the swamp of his childhood on an adventure.

The Baptistry

When William Howland emerged from the swamp he found himself at a retired baptistery in New Church. This was the site of his meeting with Margaret Carmichael.

Mary Baldwin College in Virginia

Abigail Howland attended Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, where she became engaged to Gregory Edward Mason.

Cleveland

Due to its northern location, Cleveland was inclined towards the abolition movement. Margaret went to Cleveland to deliver each of her babies as well as to legally marry William Howland.

Korean War

John Tolliver was drafted into the Korean War but maintained a desk job for its duration.

Somerset County

Somerset County was also known as Tolliver County because so many Tollivers resided there. Somerset County had a bloody history of slave breeding and trading prior to America's reconstruction period.

Sante Fe

Sante Fe was the location of the sanitarium where Abigail Mason lived out the last year of her life while being quarantined for tuberculosis.

Providence River

The Providence River was named by one of the early William Howlands in honor of his mother, Providence.

Themes

Love

Examples of both romantic love and familial love can be found within Grau's Keepers of the House. William first married Lorena. Theirs was a marriage of love but she died young and he spent years without a companion. Later he brought Margaret into his home. First she was simply a housekeeper, but they quickly became romantically involved and had children together. As evidence of his deep love for her, they went to Cleveland and were married secretly at a time when interracial marriage was prohibited in their state. His daughter, Abigail, also married for love. Her husband's name was Gregory Mason, and she claimed to have much in common with him, yet he came from England and ultimately their worlds were too different to reconcile. He returned to England and left her alone to raise their only child, the second Abigail. That Abigail also married for love. Her husband's name was John Tolliver and his intentions were not as pure as hers. He was interested in Abigail but was most concerned with forging connections with her well established family. Eventually their marriage collapsed as well.

The familial love found within the Howland family is highly complicated. Abigail was an only child, raised predominantly by her grandfather and his companion, Margaret. When she moved in with them, William and Margaret were raising three children together. Abigail was born after the oldest two and before their third child, Crissy, was five years younger than Abigail. The four children were raised side by side. Although they cared for each other, cultural factors are often embedded during childhood. Everyday Abigail went to a school for white children while the other three went to an all black primary school. At home they were raised as siblings, but each knew that they could never be equal. Margaret's three children were sent away for their higher education. She purposely sent them north where their fair skin could be passed off as white. The children benefited from their new place in society, but were jaded and learned to resent their Howland relatives. Abigail, who had always been open to interracial relationships, reacted strongly to their disdain, and became angry as well.

Parenting

Parenting plays an important role in the lives of children. William and Margaret were nontraditional in many ways. Their relationship was well known but, due to its interracial nature and the popular beliefs of the time, it was not spoken of. They were discreet when in public and undemonstrative even within their own home. Abigail, William's granddaughter, comments that she only once saw a loving gesture pass between them, and even then it was so modest that it could have passed just as easily between old friends as between lovers. William and Margaret made a statement in other ways. When it came time for Margaret to deliver each of their babies she went to Cleveland and bore

them in a hospital. Cleveland was a more forward thinking city and its city clerks did not utilize the word negro on the birth certificates of babies born there.

Beginning on the day of their births, Margaret and William were determined to help their children escape from the oppressive southern atmosphere and the injustices they would undoubtedly face if they remained. In similar manner, Margaret also insisted that the children attend school everyday. She was deaf to any excuses of illness on their part and insisted upon perfect attendance. Margaret knew that her dark skin and their mixed heritage would be a detriment to her children. She sacrificed the parental joy of watching her children grow when she sent them off to boarding schools in the north. Once they left she never saw any of them again, but she loved them enough to send them away, believing that ultimately she was doing the best thing possible to ensure their futures. William supported Margaret in her beliefs and paid the expensive tuition for all of his children from both of his marriages. He was white and traveled freely to visit their children, although Margaret could not accompany him. There was one notable exception: When William's daughter from his first marriage, Abigail, was too ill to be cared for at home, Margaret did accompany William on the journey to hospitalize her. Abigail was in the sanitarium for nearly a year before her death and they stayed with Abigail throughout her prolonged illness. When she did pass away, William chose to bury her near the hospital in Sante Fe. He reasoned that she had hated to travel, and that because her trip out there had been so uncomfortable, he couldn't bear the thought of making her travel again, even in death. Although he was being sensitive to what she may have wanted, her prompt and quiet burial caused quite a commotion in Wade County. In failing to bring his daughter's body home, William had yet again broken tradition. As evidenced by their life together, William and Margaret made difficult decisions always with the intention of being loving parents, and often in spite of popular beliefs.

Racial Inequality

For the time line found in The Keepers of the House, racial equality did not exist. William Howland's earliest ancestors utilized slave labor to work the fields of their plantation. Another character, John Tolliver, descended from a family who had bred and sold slaves as a sole means of profit. When William and Margaret lived together, their home town was against interracial relationships and their marriage was prohibited by law. Although the abolition movement was gaining momentum in northern states, it had not yet trickled down to the south.

Once abolition did take hold legally, it still did not permeate local culture, which was steeped in the tradition of slavery and took many years to follow the legislation previously passed. It was often the unspoken biases and the general discomfort that held back the characters of this book. For example, Abigail recalls that the relationship between her grandfather and Margaret was never discussed. It was a schoolgirl who finally brought her attention to its nature. Abigail saw nothing wrong with her grandfather's relationship, and she had grown up loving Margaret as a member of her family. Still, she knew that for some intangible reason others would not agree, and she

was angered that her peer had made something so pure sound unnatural. Likewise, Margaret and William sent all three of their mixed race children north to obtain their educations. The children resembled their father and could pass for white in the northern states. However, race was a key factor in the history of the Southern United States. Their children would be successful in the north, but, despite their fair skin, they would have always been labeled as blacks in the south. In Wade County and its surrounding territories, people examined facial structure more closely, and it was the most crucial determinant in the success of a person.

Style

Point of View

Shirley Ann Grau's novel, The Keepers of the House, alternates between the first and third person points of view. The first person point of view is found in the first and second books of Abigail as well as in the epilogue, and the third person point of view can be found in the book of William and the book of Margaret. When the third person point of view is in use, it is of the limited form, meaning that although the focal character may change per section, within each section the author enters the mind of just one character. Within the book of William, for example, the reader listens to William's point of view, while in the book of Margaret s/he listens to Margaret's point of view. The use of a third person limited point of view results in each section belonging to a specific character- the book of William is William's story while the book of Margaret is Margaret's story. When reading through the books of Abigail and the epilogue, the lives of William and Margaret are reinterpreted by Abigail and she examines what effects their actions ultimately had on her own life. Thus the characters lives become intertwined. The author most likely alternated between points of view because it worked so successfully to weave the multiple generations together.

One should also note that the time frames shift often within this book. Much is learned about each of the characters through memories interspersed throughout the telling of the novel. It may be difficult to keep track of the characters due to the shifts in time, an unfortunate fact which is further compounded by the usage of the same name for multiple characters (for example there are three Abigails and five Williams). An important component of this book is heritage, however, and keeping the family names is one way of displaying heritage.

Setting

The Keepers of the House utilizes very few specific dates. Based upon basic United States history, one can deduce that the characters were born as early as 1800 and that the most recent sections of the book are set in the mid-1900s. The reader learns that there were five generations of William Howlands, the first of which was approximately seventeen years old when he was discharged from the the American War of 1812 (which lasted until 1815). From a strictly mathematical perspective, the first William Howland was therefore most likely born in 1798. At that time in history, families were begun young and lifespans were shorter. Assuming a conservative thirty years for each generation, the main character, William Howland, would have lived during the 1900's, as would have his children, Abigail, Robert, Nina and Crissy. These deductions make sense when one factors in the politics of the time.

The reader is informed that the Howland plantation is in Wade County. It sits on "the fourth rise from the riverbank, halfway between the river and the ridge." Approximately

twenty miles away from Wade County is New Church, a predominantly black community settled by people who were known as freejacks. The closest city to both is called Madison City.

The climate of the time is tumultuous. The earliest characters were slaves who were granted their freedom as compensation for having served the United States in its war against Britain. Abolition occurred in 1865, although the abolitionist movement began prior to that and originated in the northern United States. Descendants of the first William Marshall Howland viewed interracial relationships as unnatural, and, at that time, the marriage between two people of different races was illegal. Following abolition, laws were created to improve conditions for blacks and to foster racial equality, but in actuality, strong segregationist tendencies remained, especially in the south. The main characters, William, Margaret, and Abigail, lived within the time of this final description- probably during the early- to middle-1900s era where equality occurred in title alone.

Language and Meaning

The Keepers of the House is fairly basic in its structure and meaning. The vocabulary used is not particularly difficult. Its only complication lies within the naming of its characters. One must be careful to keep track of the generations as they pass and keep the characters orderly within the context of the book. Failure to do so would quickly lend to a jumbling of the generations and confusion when trying to follow the plot.

Specific language of note includes the terms "negro," "black," and "freejack," all of which were used extensively. The reader does not find them to be used in a desultory manner. Rather, the usage of such language seems more to be descriptive of the time period in which the novel was set. Their alternative, African American, was never used. In one specific example, on page 124, Margaret arrives at the Howland farm and is greeted by William Howland's white housekeeper, Ramona. Although they are both functioning as his housekeepers, Margaret slips into the customary "yes'm" and differs to Ramona.

The purpose of this book is to highlight the tension bubbling just below the surface of life in the southern United States in the 1900s. Deep meaning can be found by reading between the lines and examining the characters motives. Grau is careful to portray the meaning that is garnered from a look, or a sigh, or a clicking of the tongue. Such behaviors are greatly responsible for embedding the ideals of appropriate versus inappropriate behavior within a culture. In her youth, Abigail Howland Tolliver was exposed to similar forms of unspoken communication and their power made her feel uneasy, without her ever understanding why.

Structure

The Keepers of the House was published by Alfred A. Knopf for Borzoi Books in 1964. It is three hundred and nine pages long, however this number is generous. The typeface, even in its regular version, is rather large, as are its margins. A full blank page is left before and after each book, adding more empty space. The remaining pages of text are

divided amongst four titled sections, referred to here as books, and an epilogue. The first book, Abigail, is only six pages long. It sets the mood of the book and inspires interest on behalf of the reader, but does little in the way of character building or the provision of information. Next comes the book called William, which is seventy-two pages long. It is essentially a long chapter about the character named William and all of his ancestors. William is followed by the book of Margaret, which is fifty-eight pages long.

By the end of the book of Margret, the reader has begun to compile an understanding of how that characters lives fit together. The final book is called Abigail and is by far the largest and most significant portion of the book. Abigail narrates her own story, weaving in the journeys of William and Margaret before her. The epilogue lasts for eighteen pages. It connects Abigail's final actions in the second book of Abigail with the mood introduced in the first book of Abigail. After reading all four books and the epilogue the reader finally understands her pensive mood and reverie in the initial pages.

Quotes

"The bones of the earth, old people call them." page 1

"He may not have been very happy, but he certainly wasn't unhappy either." page 27

"Colored girls, Willie," Annie said, "they are sinfully careless." page 48

"Suit yourself." he said. page 48

"A big heavy bald man, smeared like an Indian, his blue eyes buried in the black smear of his face." page 70

"She wrapped her arms tight around her middle to keep herself together, and her ribs quivered and shook under her fingers." page 85

"He stopped for a minute and thought about them, the way he hadn't for years." page 131

"All we ever saw was the tangle of moving bodies." page 169

"I look at my children now and think: how long before they slip away, before I am disappointed in them..." page 182

"I was shocked at how hard he worked." page 201

"Love 'em dearly," he said. page 211

"But respect now, that was something else." page 216

"Sometimes he must have felt that he was being smothered in dependents." page 222

"I had done what most people around here did - knew a Negro and dealt with him for years, and never found out his name." page 233

"I might miss him, but I wouldn't die of him." page 238

"It's hell for them, but my saying so won't help them or me." page 253

"Everything ends sometime, I told myself as I drove up to the house, and the hounds came running over to plant their muddy feet on the fenders." page 258

"And when I thought of what would happen now, I felt sick." page 260

"Why'd he do it?" page 271

"I stood on that cold windy grass and saw what I had done." page 290

Topics for Discussion

Describe the Howland farm. What were some of its uses over the generations?

What do you think it meant when William Howland merely expressed that he "wasn't surprised" with the news of Abigail's marriage?

Compare and contrast Margaret, the woman who raised Abigail like a daughter, to Abigail's birth mother (Abigail Howland)?

Do you think Abigail's grandfather would have been proud of her final actions in the book? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast William and Margaret's backgrounds.

Discuss the emotional climate of the southern United States during the time of the novel.

Using examples, describe whether or not you feel Margaret was a good mother to her children.

Why did the Tollivers and Howlands not get along despite their familial bonds?

Oliver was a minor character, yet he was important to the telling of the story. What did he symbolize in the lives of the Howlands?

The marriages of both Abigail Mason and Abigail Tolliver failed. One commonality is that both of their husbands relocated after marriage. Was this a pivotal factor for the demise of their marriages or did they face larger challenges?