

Accidental Birds of the Carolinas

By Marjorie Hudson

Readers Group Guide

“A field guide to the human species in transition ... beautifully written.”

—Doris Betts, author of Souls Raised from the Dead



Accidental Birds of the Carolinas stories explore the lives of newcomers encountering the South, like birds blown off course on their migrations by a great storm. From retirees to runaway brides to early English explorers, these characters need a place to find shelter from life’s slings and arrows. The collection was an honorable mention for the PEN/Hemingway Award, a Finalist for the Novello Literary Award, Perpetual Folly Best Story Collection of the Year, and a SIBA Nominee for Best Fiction. The final story in the collection is a novella giving the backstory for the character Jolene Blake, who shows up in *Indigo Field* ten years later.

Discussion Topics

The Stories

Ask group members to each pick a story to discuss. Read the first page of the story aloud, to get the group oriented. Below are some questions for discussion.

The Clearing

1. Liz Enfield falls in love with the web of life on her new farm, detailing the natural phenomena that amaze and charm her. Find four phenomena and read the passages that describe them. Invite your group to add natural phenomena they have noticed from their own lives.
2. How is the theme of betrayal played out in this story? How does Elizabeth betray her own heart and feelings?
3. How does the land's rebirth teach Elizabeth about her own life? How does Sarton Lee? Whiskey?
4. There is a kind of baptism in "special water" in the story, and a "Judas kiss." How are themes of betrayal and forgiveness played out here?
5. How is the title of the story related to the themes: for example, there is a clearing in a woods, the distilling of clear liquor, seeking and finding clear water, a sense of clarity in a life?

Rapture

1. Sarton Lee, a minor character in **The Clearing**, re-emerges in this story, telling of a time ten years previous to Elizabeth's arrival. Did you notice a connection between the stories? Look for Irma's apron, and a bible verse found in the pocket, in **The Clearing**.
2. Sarton believes his dog may be a visitor from another planet, to help him become a better person. Does his dog accomplish that? Have you ever felt that a pet or a visitor in your life did that for you? Have you ever felt a spiritual connection to an animal?
3. Sarton faces the truth about his own complicity in the loss of his daughter, and he seems to see the loss of little Nancy as cruel punishment from a judging God. How does the loss begin to shape him? What do you think his life will be like after this? (If you read **The Clearing**, you already know some of the answer.)

The High Life

1. Royal is Dip's father figure and mentor for a life as a carnie. What are some things Royal did when they first met that Dip found "cool"? What makes Dip begin to reject Royal's life as a model for his own?
2. Dip is looking for "something good" to give him hope of a life beyond the carnival. How does the tough young mother serve that purpose? Why do you think the author created a character like this for Dip's attention, rather than a sweet and innocent young girl?
3. Dip is caught in a dilemma between who he is and who he wants to be. What do you think will become of him? Is there hope for a better life?

Providence

1. Nina hears the voice of God telling her to get away from her violent Iraq War veteran husband. Do you think it's really God speaking to her?
2. How does Nina face her own fears and prejudices against the South?
3. What do you think of Roger the three-legged dog?
4. The Voice calls Nina to the river. What does she find there?
5. What does Nina begin to find in her new home that she didn't have before?

New World Testament

1. How do the lives of John Lawson and Eno Will fit the theme of "Accidental Birds of the Carolinas"? What scenes can you find that include birds?
2. Though this is a fiction story, Lawson and Will are historical figures whose lives intersect much as described. Do you know the Native American history of the area where you live? Are there any rivers or other places named for Native people? Does your family have any connection to early settlers? Native people?
3. The story includes a bird sacrifice. How is John Lawson also like a sacrifice?
4. References to Native people show up in two other stories in the collection: **Providence** and **The Outside World**. How is Native American history still alive in the South? In the land?

Home

1. The only character in this story who has a name is Carter. The rest are identified by their place in the family—the boy, his mother, my mother—and the narrator, whose identity and physical presence seem impressionable, like clay. Why did the author make these decisions? How do they serve the story?
2. The story outlines a new stepmother’s discovery of her place in her new family. What is uncomfortable about that for her?
3. Encounters with deer are symbolic of the mysterious intersections between the memory and life of a previous marriage and the newly emerging second marriage and family. How do deer show up to express this theme? Find and read aloud the sections where deer show up.
4. What do you make of the ending? Is there hope for this new family?

Accidental Birds of the Carolinas

1. Rand does not like his new retirement village, but his wife Anne adores it. How does this reflect their characters?
2. What encounters between “Yankees” and Southerners make the Rand and his family uncomfortable? Find them and read a few out loud. What prejudices to the newcomers have for the people they encounter? Do you think this kind of thing happens where you live?
3. What issues do people have to deal with after the death of a spouse? How do they “hold on” to a spouse? How do they let go?
4. How does Rand change during the course of the story?
5. What part do birds play in the story? Find a few places, read them aloud.

The Outside World

1. Jolene falls for John partly because of his dumb clothes. Why else does she fall for him?
2. The sensuality of the rural countryside and Jolene and John's love life seem connected. How does the author connect them? Read several love scenes.
3. The "angel unawares" shows up in scripture and a childhood wish. Where else does it show up?
4. How does the arrival of Bobo create a new world for John and Jolene?
5. How does John betray Jolene? How does Jolene betray John?
6. How does Jolene rely on Emily Dickinson to support her satisfaction with life? Does Emily let her down?
7. What role does Reba play in the story?
8. This story contains connections to Rand's story. How are the two stories connected? Did you notice that Bobo shows up in Rand's tale?
9. What is the "Outside World"? What several meanings does that phrase have for Jolene?



An Invitation to Share Your Stories

These stories explore the following themes: people running away from their former lives; people making a new life in the South; people falling in love with communities and rural areas; people facing their own prejudices and passions about the South.

Here are some ways to discuss these themes in your own lives.

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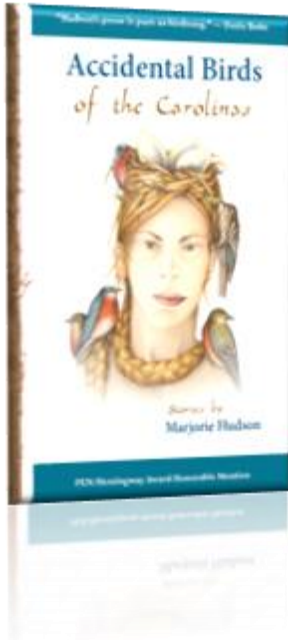
1. Take an informal poll: How many in your group were born and raised where they live now? How many moved to the area recently? Within 10 years? 20 years?
2. Go around the group and share your stories, each answering this question—what made you love to the area? Or, conversely, what makes you stay? What makes it a great place to live?
3. Some people move to a new place following love or work or family. Some move to find a whole new life. Some move to retire. Some fall in love with a new place. Some find the transition difficult. Where do you and your group members fall in this spectrum? Go around the room and share.
4. Fiction stories reveal the difficult moments in life and the deep complex motives and questions people must face during those moments. How are the characters in these stories “blown off course” by life, and how do they find a safe place to live? Have you ever felt like a bird blown off course by a storm?
5. The author was delighted to realize that the cover illustration contained five birds and three eggs, adding up to eight living things. The collection contains eight stories and main characters. Which characters are more like birds, which are more like eggs?
6. Birders love to make lists. Can you find all the places where birds are described or named in this collection? How do birds figure into the characters’ lives? Do you keep a Life List? What’s your favorite bird on the list.

Church group Discussion Questions

Flannery O'Connor called the South "a Christ-haunted landscape." In many of Hudson's stories there are Biblical references, either named verses or themes. The author has enjoyed leading church groups in discussion of the scriptural references in this book.

Read one of the questions out loud, have a silent meditation for three minutes, then write or share your thoughts.

1. In "The Clearing," there's a kind of baptism by skinny-dipping. How is Liz transformed in the final scene?
2. In "Rapture," Sarton gets taken up with the idea of being taken up into the sky, the idea of being saved by his golden retriever. Why does he need to be saved? From what? Have you ever had a dog that made you a better person?
3. In "Providence," grace provides for a wandering stranger. Has that ever happened to you? Did you know it at the time?
4. "New World Testament" describes a friendship of devotion and sacrifice, the giving of a son to a stranger to raise, and the loss of a beloved friend in war. Is John Lawson a Christ figure? Have you ever lost a beloved friend to war? Would you ever give a child to someone in order to help the child survive?
5. In "The Outside World," references to church schisms, angels unawares, a coat of many colors for a missing brother. What is the author up to with these connections? Have you ever encountered an "angel unawares" in your own life?



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“The characters in Marjorie Hudson’s story collection, *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas*, have strayed — like vagrant birds — from familiar territory to reach a transfiguring moment in their lives—**Kathryn Savage**, *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star-Tribune*

“Magical scenes, magical effects, vivid dreams, mysterious events . . . Each lost soul connects to the natural world for healing and solace.” —**Deirdre Parker Smith**, *Salisbury Post*

“This woman writes like a dream!” —**Andre Dubus III**, author of *The House of Sand and Fog*

“A fiction writer of considerable craft—her interplay of personality, nature and fate brings Thomas Hardy to mind.” —**Ben Steelman**, *Wilmington Star-News*

Read Marjorie Hudson’s other books ...

Searching for Virginia Dare

“An absorbing, intelligent consideration of national and personal identity, beautifully written.” — **Lee Smith**, author of *The Devil’s Dream*

***Indigo Field*, a novel of Ambler County
forthcoming from Regal House Publishing, March 2023**

“Mesmerizing . . . redemptive.” —**Sue Monk Kidd**, author of *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Invention of Flight*

