

The Schooling of Claybird Catts

By Janis Owens
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Introduction

When his father dies of pancreatic cancer, 11-year-old Clayton Catts learns more than any child should ever have to about death and loss. But, as we witness in this wonderfully evocative, bittersweet and often hilarious novel, his education is only beginning. When we first meet Claybird (as he is known by his family), he is coming to terms with his father's death, struggling in school because of his dyslexia, and trying to understand his mother's erratic behavior. On top of these challenges, he must deal with tensions inherent in the life of an adolescent boy in the New South -- between redneck and hip-hop, evangelism and sexual curiosity, rich and poor, black and white. Clayton often berates himself for being a little slow on the uptake (his precocious older sister isn't any help in that regard). What makes Clayton, and this novel, so endearing is the unblinking determination with which he sorts out all of the mixed signals he's receiving from those around him.

Claybird's life takes another remarkable turn when his father's estranged brother, Gabe, returns home and eventually marries his mother. Clay knows that there's something different about Gabe, and suspecting that he is homosexual, attributes his uncle's eccentric ways to that predilection. Gabe is a lightning rod for judgmental Southerners: he swears, he drinks, and he freely espouses his liberal views on everything from racism to religion. But he is also the first person to take Clayton's education seriously. By encouraging Clayton to explore his own history, Gabe shows his nephew and the rest of the "dummy" class that their personal stories are proof of their importance and self-worth. Clayton takes this valuable lesson so much to heart that he uses what he has learned about storytelling to help him cope with the devastating truth about Gabe's relationship to him and his mother.

When he discovers that Gabe is his biological father, Clayton takes the news -- and its implications about his mother's relationship with Gabe -- harder than anyone could have imagined. What's worse? Being a homosexual, or cuckolding your brother? As far as Clayton's concerned, life was better when Gabe was merely a radical homosexual tainted by Yankee mores. Feeling betrayed by Gabe and his mother, Clayton leaves home.

The second part of the novel addresses Clay's rejection of and eventual reuniting with his family. Taking the form of a taped journal, it records the almost daily upheaval of Clay's life as he bounces between the homes of various family members. For the next year Clayton is exposed to an eye-opening variety of ways people cope with the events of daily life. A blind date with his brother, Sim, turns into a shocking lesson about love, sex, and personal relationships. The days spent in the tidy home of his hardworking aunt and uncle impress upon Clay the value of responsibility. His wisecracking older sister helps improve his pathetic performance on the baseball field. And the luscious meals his grandmother prepares for him are a lesson in pure nurturing care, Southern style. Each of these people tell him the story of his mother's painful past, and through them he also learns of the enormous gratitude she feels in return.

As is true in most families, it takes a crisis to reunite estranged loved ones. For Clayton, Gabe's sudden hospitalization brings forth a flood of painful memories about his father's death, and leads the now 13-year-old young man to return home. Set against the verdant landscape of Northern Florida with its low-hanging moss and down-home feel, *The Schooling of Claybird Catts* has all the elements of a truly Southern tale: ghosts, family secrets, faded glory and eccentric characters. But its wisdom about growing up will ring true with anyone who, in braving the stormy seas of adolescence, has felt like an outsider at the dinner table. Family, Owens seems to be saying to us, is what you make of it. Wrapped in the colorful, often tattered cloth of other people's love, we may not be sheltered from life's coldest lessons, but we learn them best when we know that the people who love us are doing their best to guide us through the rough spots.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Owens differentiate Southern and Northern values? In your own experience, how deep are the cultural differences?
2. Before she gives us the facts, what sorts of clues does Owens give us about the secrets of Clayton's family?
3. Although a naive and imaginative twelve-year-old could never be considered a reliable narrator, he is a good choice. Why is that? How might the story be different if told through an omniscient narrator, or by another member of the family?
4. Does every family have secrets? Do you recall discovering a family secret as an adolescent? How would learning the facts behind some of your family's oddities educate you about the world?
5. What kinds of schooling does Clayton receive over the course of the novel? In what ways does he grow and mature?
6. Throughout the novel Clayton refers to himself as slow, a label he has assumed because of his dyslexia. Does he seem slow to you? Did your opinion of his intelligence change after the results of his IQ test are made known?
7. What is the role of storytelling in this novel? How might a story "rescue" someone, as it does Aunt Candace when she's trying to explain to Clayton how Michael came to accept the truth about Gabe and Myra?
8. What kind of mother is Myra? Is she a sympathetic character?
9. What do you think of Gabe as a father figure for Clayton?
10. Do you think Clayton would have been better off if he never knew the truth about his relationship to Gabe? If not, when do you think would have been the appropriate time to for him to learn the facts?
11. What lessons does Clayton learn from his family about love and sex? Do you think he will be able to distinguish between responsible and careless behavior as he grows older?
12. The second part of the book takes the form of a tape-recorded journal. What are the effects of the shift in narration from past to present tense?
13. What kind of adult do you think Clayton will evolve into? How does distinctive voice and personality contribute to this impression?