



Liberating Paris

By Linda Bloodworth Thomason
ISBN: 9780060596736

Introduction

In the sleepy Southern town of Paris, Arkansas, Woodrow "Wood" McIlmore seems to be leading a charmed life. Together with his beautiful high-school sweetheart, Milan, he occupies the center of an endearingly idiosyncratic and tightly knit group of five lifelong friends: Carl Jeter, paralyzed at seventeen during a football game, quietly composes poetry about a secret love; stylish Earl Brundidge Jr., a single father of two girls, likes to harass big-city editors whenever an article or program disparages the South; and forthright Mavis Pinkerton, an accomplished chef who owns the town's best bakery, longs for a child.

Wood's life begins to unravel, however, when his strong-willed daughter Elizabeth announces her engagement to one Luke Childs, none other than the son of Wood's old flame, Milan's rival, and the lost sixth member of the circle -- Kathleen "Duff" Duffer. Now a divorced IHOP waitress, Duff sweeps into town to participate in the upcoming nuptials and to reclaim her place not just among the friends, but also in Wood's heart. Over the course of one tumultuous year the six middle-aged friends and lovers confront past decisions and mistakes and wonder if it's not yet too late to change in this poignant and irresistible debut novel.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the maxim -- "a new incarnation of whatever has once been is sometimes more pitiful than nothing at all." In what manner does Wood's renewed relationship with Duff succinctly prove this true? Would you describe Wood's declining interest in his wife, and his renewed interest in a "soul-mate," a mid-life crisis, despite his protestations to the contrary?
2. How does Milan spin the trash-turned-socialite stereotype on its head? What are her deepest fears? Is Duff's free-spirited form of femininity ultimately weaker and more calculating than Milan's? Do you think either Milan or Duff represent true feminism? Do both?
3. In the context of slavery, and the schism between North and South, how is it significant that "New Yorkers love southerners who write about their mummies. Hell, they would even throw a party for you"? What uncomfortable social undercurrents does this address?
4. Why did Jeter originally have misgivings about allowing Mavis to be artificially inseminated with his sperm? Do you think those qualms were justified? Does the novel present an argument for the creation of life in any way possible?
5. Consider Slim McIlmore's audacity in taking the boys to the municipal pool on "Colored Day," and Mavis Pinkerton's stand against Lonnie Rhinehart's taunts and jeers. How does the novel depict the small acts of great courage that can change societies for the better? How do Sidney Garfinkle's walks with Slim coax her to regain an interest in life? Discuss the manner in which values are presented in *Liberating Paris* — are people who praise 'traditional values' really holding on to biases?
6. Why do you think Wood assumed that Milan became pregnant on purpose? How does this assumption speak to his class-consciousness? Why do you think the author waited to reveal the truth?
7. How does the novel portray the decline in values such as respecting the elderly and appreciating craftsmanship?
8. Do you agree with the depiction of large, big-box chain stores in *Liberating Paris*? How is the Fed-Mart an anathema to everything Main Street stands for? What do you think the novel's last line -- "there is nowhere left to put the town but inside children like these" -- means?
9. What does the phrase "liberating Paris" usually refer to? Is the title used ironically since the novel is about the emancipation of the individual? At the end of the novel, how are the main characters transformed? Of all the couples that are formed, whom do you find most touching? Why?
10. As the plot involves a lesbian, several religious conservatives, a New York sophisticate and an elderly inter-racial couple, amongst other relationships seemingly outside of "proper society," how does *Liberating Paris* function as a social commentary for our times? In what way does the author reveal her own social vision?

About the author

Linda Bloodworth Thomason, the acclaimed creator of *Designing Women* and *Evening Shade*, has written more than two hundred episodes for network television. She has been nominated for numerous Emmys and is the recipient of the Lucille Ball Award from Women in Film and the Eleanor Roosevelt Freedom of Speech Award. She is currently writing and directing her first feature film and lives in Los Angeles with her husband, director Harry Thomason.