



## Divining Women

By Kaye Gibbons  
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### Introduction

In autumn of 1918, rumors of peace are spreading across America, but spreading even faster are the first cases of Spanish influenza, whispering of the epidemic to come. Maureen Ross, well past a safe childbearing age, is experiencing a difficult pregnancy. Her husband, Troop -- cold and careless of her condition -- has battered her spirit throughout their marriage. Into this loveless ménage arrives Troop's niece, Mary Oliver, who has come to help Maureen in the last weeks of her confinement. Horrified by Troop's bullying, she realizes that her true duty is to protect her aunt, and she approaches the challenge with an unmatched energy and responsibility.

As the influenza spreads and the death toll grows, Troop's spiteful behavior worsens. He terrorizes the household, but when Mary fights back, he begins to go over the edge. Maureen rallies, releasing a stunning thunderstorm of confrontation and, ultimately, finds spiritual renewal.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How does the longstanding feud in *Divining Women* between the Washington, D.C. and North Carolina branches of the Ross family expose some of the differences between the culture of the North and the South?
2. "I grew up around three women who did not ask permission before they offered me a view of their wide and deep universe..." How do Mary Oliver's relationships with her mother, Martha, and her two grandmothers, Leslie and Louise, enable her to stand up to her uncle, Troop Ross?
3. In what ways is Troop responsible for the physical and emotional fragility of his wife, Maureen?
4. How does the prevailing notion of feminine "hysteria" complicate the diagnosis of Maureen's medical condition?
5. How would you describe the intimacy that develops between Maureen and Mary, and what explains Troop's feeling threatened by their growing friendship?
6. What class and race differences and similarities does the influenza epidemic in Elm City, North Carolina, unmask?
7. How do the letters from Maureen's mother and from Judith Stafford help Maureen resist her husband's verbal abuse?
8. Why does Troop respond to the death of his child with such unmitigated resentment toward his wife?
9. To what extent is Mary responsible for Maureen's ability to overcome her husband's oppression of her spirit?
10. What unconventional images of marriage and motherhood does *Divining Women* offer, and how did these images resonate for you?

### About the Author

Kaye Gibbons was twenty-eight when her first novel, *Ellen Foster*, was published. Walker Percy hailed it as "a lovely, sometimes heart-wrenching novel," while Eudora Welty called Gibbons "a stunning new writer." Gibbons is also the author of *A Virtuous Woman*, *A Cure for Dreams*, *Charms for the Easy Life*, *Sights Unseen*, *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*, and *The Life All Around Me*. She lives in New York and Raleigh, North Carolina, with her three daughters.