



Natural Flights of the Human Mind

By Clare Morrall
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Introduction

Clare Morrall's subject in *Natural Flights of the Human Mind* is guilt: the guilt felt by a man who crashed a small airplane into a train as a youth, killing 87 people, and the guilt felt by a woman who worries that her sister's suicide may have somehow been her fault. Both characters live with guilt as a daily companion, and both come up with strategies for protecting themselves from its worst ravages. Imogen Doody feeds an ever-present anger, and meets the world with a large chip on her shoulder. Peter Straker lives alone in a crumbling lighthouse, doesn't speak at all, and surrounds himself with numbers and strictly observed routines. When they encounter each other by chance, each one is somehow forced to step outside the cocoons of habitual behavior in which they have felt safe for many years. Their story asks the question: Is someone who has made a mistake allowed forgiveness; can they be allowed to move beyond guilt? Morrall supplies no pat or simple answer to this question; rather, as the reader watches these two characters come awake to larger possibilities in their lives, it becomes clear that living beyond guilt is a creative process.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think it is that Doody has so much trouble with the novel she is trying to write?
2. On Page 28, Morrall writes that Doody's discovery of anger at the age of 18, "shocked her with its life-giving intensity. It had changed the nature of her existence, woken her up, made her think better." Discuss the ways in which anger operates in Doody's life. Have you experienced this kind of anger?
3. Peter Straker lives with the victims of his plane crash much more than he lives with any living person. Why does he need them so much? What are some of the psychological elements of his imaginary relationship with Maggie?
4. Why does Straker long to be invisible?
5. Why is Doody so angry with her brother Jonathan? Is her anger justified?
6. What are some of the ways in which economic class becomes important in this story?
7. Both Doody and Straker have difficult parents. What roles do these parents play in the guilt later carried by their children? Do they share in that guilt?
8. What role does Straker play in the minds of the many relatives and friends of those who died because of Straker's accident? Why is he so important to them?
9. Doody lives in a cottage that is coming back to life, while Straker lives in a lighthouse that is slowly sliding into the sea. Did you find these two buildings to be symbolic? In what ways?
10. Did your feelings about Doody and Straker change over the course of the novel? What points in the story caused the change?

About the Author

A music teacher with two grown children, Clare Morrall lives in Birmingham, England. Her debut novel, *Astonishing Splashes of Colour*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2003.