



## Low Country

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"We need myths more than food or water. They give shape and put us in touch with the world. We don't have enough heroes or myths in this century . . ."

### Plot Summary

Caroline Venable has everything her Southern heritage promised: money, prestige, a rich husband, and a predictable routine of country-club luncheons and cocktail parties. Caroline is the chatelaine of a magnificent home, hostess to her husband's wealthy friends and prospective clients, and the official "one woman welcome wagon" for the young, eager talent that her husband, Clay, imports to their corner of South Carolina to work for the family company, a vastly-successful land-development conglomerate, Peacock Island Plantation. But ever since her ten-year-old daughter, Kylie, drowned in the nearby ocean, Caro hasn't been able to fully cope with her hostess role, and she hasn't been able to stop drinking. Instead, she has been taking refuge on "the island," the wild and undeveloped part of Peacock Island, in the house she grew up in. As Clay's booming business takes him away from home more frequently, Caro finds herself alone in her grandfather's old lodge, immersed in the spectacular beauty of the unspoiled flora and fauna. Roaming the island are a band of wild ponies whose freedom

and spirit captivated both Caroline and, during her lifetime, the young Kylie. Across the island is Dayclear, a community of Gullahs, direct descendants of the West African slaves, who still retain much of their ancient culture and way of life. But that way of life is about to be shattered. The Gullahs learn from a visiting botanist, Luis Cassells, that they do not own the land on which they live. When Caroline learns that her husband's business is collapsing and the only way to save it is to develop her beloved "island," including Dayclear and the ponies' grazing lands, she realizes she must confront the part of herself that she has numbed with alcohol and careful avoidance, and she must reconsider her priorities. Luis challenges her to imagine what she would be "willing to die for," forcing Caroline to redefine her role in society, her marriage, and ultimately, herself.

### Topics for Discussion

1. What role does painting play in Caroline's life? What dictates her interest or ability to paint on a given day? How does her relationship to her painting change through the course of the novel?
2. Caroline's grandfather remarks to her, "No sense thinking we could keep this island to ourselves much longer, and I'd rather Clay looked after opening it up than anybody I know of. He's going to keep the spirit of it, and that's all I care about." Does Clay keep the spirit of the island intact? How has he betrayed his early vision? How do you think Caroline has managed not to notice for so many years?
3. What aspects of the Gullah culture and faith has Caroline adopted? How do the Gullah help Caro through her time of trial? What role do the Gullah myths play in Caroline's life? What does it mean to "hear the panther?"
4. The Gullah are a dying culture in need of medicine and electricity. Do you think Clay's development plans answer any of the Gullahs' needs? Is it the best solution? How else might the Gullah be better served? How else might their culture be preserved?
5. What has brought Luis Cassells to Peacock Island? How would you characterize his initial opinion of Caroline? Is there an agenda behind his initial friendship toward her? How does that agenda change through the course of the novel? Luis describes himself as a coward. Do you agree with his assessment of himself? Why do you think his granddaughter, Lita, is so drawn towards Caro?
6. What role does Kylie's ghost play in the lives of Caroline and Clay? Why does Caro want to sever relations with Kylie's ghost? How is she able to do so?
7. Clay has deeply betrayed Caro by placing everything she holds dear in dire jeopardy. Do you think it is possible for them to salvage their marriage? How will Caroline's future differ from her early years of marriage? How has she grown?