

Downeast

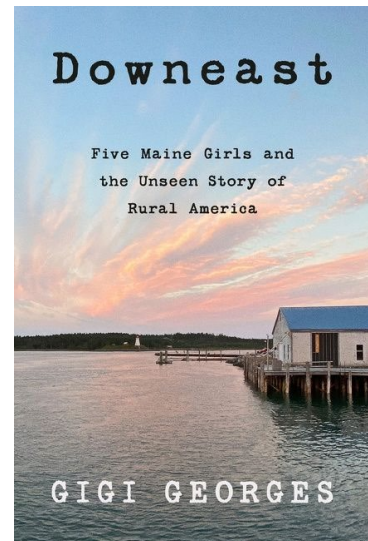
Harper Perennial

By Gigi Georges

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Introduction

In *Downeast*, Gigi Georges follows five girls as they come of age in one of the most challenging and geographically isolated regions on the Eastern seaboard. Their stories reveal surprising truths about rural America and offer hope for its future. “It’s almost impossible not to care about these fierce young women and cheer for their hard-won successes” (*Kirkus*) in this “heartfelt portrait” and “worthy tribute” (*Publishers Weekly*).



Nestled in Maine’s far northeast corner, Washington County sits an hour’s drive from the heart of famed and bustling Acadia National Park. Yet it’s a world away. For Willow, Vivian, Mckenna, Audrey, and Josie—five teenage girls caught between tradition and transformation in this remote region—it is home. *Downeast* follows their journeys of heartbreak and hope in uncertain times, creating a nuanced and unique portrait of rural America with women at its center.

Willow lives in the shadow of an abusive, drug-addicted father and searches for stability through photography and love. Vivian, a gifted writer, feels stifled by her church and town, and struggles to break free without severing family ties. Mckenna is a softball pitching phenom whose passion is the lobster-fishing she learned at her father’s knee. Audrey is a beloved high school basketball star who earns a coveted college scholarship but questions her chosen path. Josie, a Yale-bound valedictorian, is determined to take the world by storm.

All five girls know the pain and joy of life in a region whose rugged beauty and stoicism mask dwindling populations, vanishing job opportunities, and pervasive opioid addiction. As the girls reach adulthood, they discover that despite significant challenges, there is much to celebrate in “the valley of the overlooked.” Their stories remind us of the value of timeless ideals: strength of family and community, reverence for nature’s rule, dignity in cracked hands and muddied shoes, and the enduring power of home.

Revealed through the eyes of Willow, Vivian, Mckenna, Audrey, and Josie, *Downeast* is based on four years of intimate reporting. The result is a beautifully rendered, emotionally startling, and vital book. *Downeast* will break readers’ hearts yet offer them hope, providing answers to what the future may hold for rural America.

Questions for Discussion

1. Chapter 1 juxtaposes the community-wide celebration of the local girls’ basketball team victory with the challenges of life in Washington County—as “social and economic forces continue to push hard against hope.” What does the basketball victory signify in the context of these forces?

2. At the end of Chapter 2, Downeast is described as “willfully timeless.” As you read about the early lives of the girls and the place they call home, what does this mean to you? Would you describe the place of your upbringing, or your current hometown, in this way? What’s similar or different?
3. Phoebe is distraught when she is pregnant and learns that she’s having a girl (Mckenna). Why is she ultimately surprised? What does Mckenna represent in this generation of young women growing up in rural places?
4. Mckenna and Audrey are both born into “fishing families.” How are their families’ influences similar or different? How are the two girls similar or different in outlook, personality, and desires for their own lives?
5. How are Josie and her sisters similar to or different from many of their peers? What factors do you attribute most to their success?
6. What does the wharf signify for Willow?
7. Josie and Vivian grow up in the same Baptist church in a culture of strong faith. How does each react to the centrality of faith in her youth? In what way do their reactions help inform their life choices?
8. Several key mentors in the book—Frannie (the art teacher), Ann-Marie (the English teacher), and the Seacoast Mission’s Manny and Lois—find their way to Downeast Washington County as adults. How are their influences different from those of multigenerational Downeast mentors like Olivia (the basketball coach/lobstering captain) and Lauren (the high school principal)? How are they similar? In your view, does one group offer more to the students than the other?
9. What do you take away from reading about the development and efforts of the Narraguagus High civil rights team? Do you believe that efforts such as these, designed to raise awareness and advocate for greater tolerance, are more or less difficult to sustain in small communities like those Downeast (versus suburban or urban areas)? Why?
10. One of the book’s themes is the success of girls in the region—how many are excelling, surpassing the boys in academics, athletics, and leadership within and outside the school walls. In Chapter 7, Narraguagus High principal Lauren Donovan wrestles with the question of why so many local boys are falling behind. She observes “a kind of batting down among the boys that goes on, that constant feeling like everything they say and do is wrong.” She also concludes that “maybe that’s why they’re not trying. Someone needs to show them the way, without making it seem as though they are being put down all the time.” What do you think of Lauren’s observations? Why do you think so many boys are “falling behind”?
11. Do you believe there is a “class system” within the Downeast community that mirrors broader societal and economic inequalities, or a notable lack of one? Why?

12. In a region where 25 percent of the population lives in poverty, many Downeasters pride themselves on rallying as a community to help each other. And indeed, there is evidence that they do rally consistently and in meaningful ways, creating a high degree of social capital. Do you believe this phenomenon is more prevalent in smaller communities, or is it also significantly evident in larger cities or suburbs?

13. In Chapter 12, Audrey makes a decision to leave Bates College that many would call difficult, but to her was natural. What do you think of her choice, and why?

14. Willow and Vivian take dramatic steps to change aspects of their lives after high school, and struggle to find their footing. Mckenna and Josie, on the other hand, appear to chart a more unfettered course toward their pursuits. What factors influence the trajectory of each of the girls' stories? How do Willow and Vivian's choices help them build toward a future that reflects their hopes and desires?

15. Which of the five young women do you most relate to—and why?

16. Resilience is a core theme in the book. Which of the girls do you believe shows the greatest resilience? In what ways do you see that exhibited?

17. As COVID-19 overtakes the nation in the spring of 2020, Downeast's lobster fishing industry appears in peril. How do fishermen like Olivia Marshall and Mckenna navigate this obstacle? What do their experiences reveal about the Downeast community?

18. What do Grandma Sarah and Audrey represent in the context of past and present in places like Downeast Maine? What is Sarah's view of "progress"? How does Audrey navigate between tradition and progress in her outlook and choices?

19. The final line of the Epilogue states that, when thinking about Downeasters and other small-town Americans, "perhaps, it is not they who have been left behind, but the rest of us." What does this mean to you, and to what extent do you think this is true?

Profiles of Downeast's Five Young Women:

Josie is an artist and class valedictorian, now at Yale. She's the second student ever to attend Yale from the local high school (the first was her sister). She's been working to reconcile her Baptist upbringing with new perspectives. Although she plans to pursue a career and life beyond her Downeast roots, she returns regularly and continues to be strongly connected to her family and community.

Mckenna is a gifted softball pitcher who has been hauling lobsters since childhood. As she finishes high school, she is torn between offers from two colleges and her passion: becoming one of the few women in the area to captain her own lobster boat.

Willow grew up with an abusive, drug-addicted father. She moves in with her grandparents and finds some respite—until her grandmother is sent to prison for embezzling. She searches for stability in her relationships with boys but ends up repeating the cycle of her childhood.

Vivian comes from an established multi-generational Downeast family. A talented writer, she struggles emotionally after her parents' divorce and rebels against the values of her church and town. As she comes of age, she searches for her path without permanently severing family ties.

Audrey is a beloved high-school basketball star who graduates at the top of her class and earns a coveted scholarship to a top college. Once there, she finds a mismatch between the liberal arts curriculum and her goal of returning Downeast to provide much-needed speech pathology services. The campus feels unfamiliar, and she longs to be closer to her family and community.