



River Angel

By A. Manette Ansay
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About this Guide:

The questions that follow are intended to enhance your group's discussion of A. Manette Ansay's *RIVER ANGEL*. We hope they provide you with fresh ways of looking at this startling novel of secrets and faith in a small town.

About this Book:

Many citizens of Ambient, Wisconsin, believe the old tales of an angel living in the Onion River that runs through the heart of their town. Some claim to have seen it, "small and white as a seagull, hovering just above the water." It is this belief that leads a misfit ten-year-old boy to the river's edge one cold winter's night, where he encounters a band of troubled teenagers from the local high school, out drinking and driving around. Gabriel Carpenter vanishes that night, presumed drowned, though the teenagers tell different—and conflicting—stories. And when dawn comes, his lifeless body is found by Ruthie Mader in a barn a mile away. "His body was warm when I touched it," she says. "There was a small like flowers. And when I saw him there, I thought he was just sleeping."

No one in this quiet Midwestern community can agree whether a miracle or a hoax has occurred. But as the story spreads, and curious tourists overrun the town—some skeptical, others reverent, still others angling for financial gain—one fact becomes certain beyond any doubt: life here will never be the same.

Praise for this Book:

"A writer with a gift for persuasive and shapely narrative. . . With *River Angel*, A. Manette Ansay has moved beyond her prior mastery of the family scene to a lucid, eloquent representation of the commingled and conflicting lives of a town." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"Wonderful. . . I feel an overwhelming compulsion to thrust *River Angel* into people's hands and insist 'Read this! Now!'. . . Not many writers can top Ansay's insight into character." —*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"Ansay rivals Jane Smiley in her ability to bring the small-town Midwest to life. . . a wonderful novel." —*Library Journal* (Starred Review)

"Absorbing. . . stirring and provocative. . . a complex story intelligently told." —*Newark Star-Ledger*

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why does the author choose to tell the story from so many different perspectives? What do each of the storytellers add to the broader tale?
2. What's the significance of the name Gabriel, and how does it color how you view his character? Why has the author made the boy, the axis of the story, so unlikable? How do the other characters respond to him, and how does he affect each of them?
3. Gabriel's teacher once told him, "If you believe in something hard enough, if your faith was pure, you could make anything happen" (p. 8). How do these words affect Gabriel? Is his faith responsible for what eventually happens to him?
4. Gabriel says that he prefers to see the world without his glasses, that with them the world "jumped too close and filled with complicated detail" (p. 15). How does his preference for a blurred but beautiful world resonate in the story? What other characters do you think would prefer to experience life without glasses?
5. Do you think Bethany is an admirable person? Do you approve of the way that she's able to keep order in her life, or do you think she is overly rigid? What does it say about her that her son Robert John is Gabriel's biggest tormentor?
6. What makes Anna Grey hate Gabriel so much? And how do her strong feelings reflect what's going on in her own life?
7. When Janey rescues Gabriel from bullies and takes him to her home, why does Gabriel say that his name is Shawn? What do you think this says about how he feels about his father?
8. In chapter five, Big Roly Schmitt is portrayed as a very sympathetic person, but we later learn that other characters hate him and his influence on the town. Why do you think we see such different views of him? Are the other characters right to dislike him? Do you think that his plans for developing the town are positive or negative?
9. What makes Cherish rebel against the life she's always led? Is there any connection between her growing pains and those of the town?
10. How do Cherish's looks affect her? Do you think that the accident will change her for the better or worse? How do you think her life would be different if her father were still alive?
11. Why is it appropriate that Ruthie finds Gabriel? What purpose does the miracle have in her life? Does the fact that Ruthie announces the miracle make it more or less believable?
12. Why is the chapter about the shrine's beginnings told by the parish priest? What does it mean that he is one of the town skeptics? Discuss his idea that the townspeople are "Smorgasbord Catholics" (p. 183). What does this phrase mean to you? Do you think it's true of these characters? Is it a bad thing?
13. Do you think that the celebrity of the shrine and the tourist boom that accompanies it is a good thing or a bad thing for Ambient? What do you think the town's future holds?
14. On page 239, Ruthie considers the miracle and decides, "She'd been called to bear witness—to what, she did not know. Perhaps that was what Cherish was trying to do: bear witness to something Ruthie could not see." Can the idea of bearing witness be considered one of the book's themes? Who bears witness and to what? How does the act of bearing witness change them, strengthen them, or hurt them?
15. What is the purpose of the *Ambient Weekly* notices that run between the chapters? What do they add to the story? The last notice is from Bethany, who asks for help locating Gabriel's father. Does this message bring some sort of closure to the book? What is its implied commentary on the river angel shrine and, perhaps more important, on Gabriel's short life?

About the Author:

A. MANETTE ANSAY was born in Wisconsin and now lives in New York. She is the author of the novel *Sister*, winner of the 1996 Banta prize and a *New York Times* Notable Book, as well as a collection of stories, *Read This and Tell Me What It Says*, which won the AWP Short Fiction Prize, the 1995 Peterson Prize, and the 1996 Great Lakes Book Award for fiction. *Vinegar Hill*, the first of her novels, won a Friends of American Writers Prize and was named a Best Book of 1994 by *The Chicago Tribune*. Ansay's most recent novel, *Midnight Champagne*, was published in summer 1999.

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SISTER By Manette Ansay

THE MERMAIDS SINGING By Lisa Carey

ZABELLE By Nancy Kricorian

THE NIGHT BIRD CANTATA By Donald Rawley

LAST DAYS OF SUMMER By Steve Kluger