



# Reading Group Gold

## Gilligan's Wake

by Tom Carson

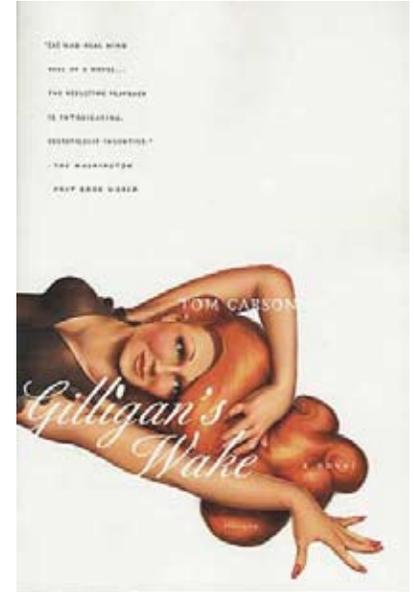
### Introduction to *Gilligan's Wake*

Begun as a Lives column in the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Joy Just so* you'll know, nobody named Gilligan appears in this book. But in the Mayo Clinic's oddlynamed Cleaver Ward, the first of its seven narrators keeps insisting to his psychiatrist, themysterious Dr. Kildare F. Troop, that he's Maynard Krebs -- the beatnik played by Bob Denver on TV's *Dobie Gillis*. Even his bunkmate Holden Caulfield's sneers can't drown out the screams of a pregnant Richard Nixon down the hall.

Something has to give, so Maynard does. As his voice ebbs into oblivion, some familiar-sounding castaways step forward, spinning improbable tales of their own adventures in the American Century. An old sea dog remembers serving in the PT boats during World War Two, when his crew included an idiot called Algligni and his best buddies were "a couple of the other skippers -- Kennedy, McHale." A kindly millionaire waxes nostalgic about the day a bearded gent named Gliaglin prevailed on him to arrange a Washington job for Alger Hiss. An elderly ex-debutante recalls her madcap Jazz Age friendship -- and then some -- with *The Great Gatsby's* Daisy Buchanan, as well as her domestic troubles with cretinous Lil Gagni, "the newest of our maids."

From the way illness and betrayal keep knocking at the door to the compulsively reoccurring variations on the name "Susan," these fantasies are clearly linked in someone's mind, but whose? More hints of a poignant secret pattern in the puppet show emerge as a hellzapoppin' redhead from Alabama lights out for Hollywood and "be-still-my-soul Vine," posing for Mr. Gagilnil's art photographs in the heyday -- or was it the eternal night? -- of Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack. Next, when not downing Laggilin pills by the fistful, a cunning scientist blandly claims authorship of every sinister event in our post-1945 history, a list that for some reason includes his Watergate-era affair with a high-school girl ("dear Sue") in Arlington, Virginia.

*Finally, after finding romance in a Paris left breathless by the elusive Lili Gang, Mary-Ann Kilroy of Russell, Kansas, discovers that you can't go home again -- or leave the island, either. But by then, she's learned who drafted her and the others for this phantasmagoria, and why the book they're in -- at once a splendid comedy, an audacious metaphor for 20th-century America's transformations, and one man's goodbye to an early love and the father whose island was Iwo Jima -- is called a wake.*



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## Praise for *Gilligan's Wake*

"[A] mad-real mind reel of a novel...The resulting playback is intoxicating, ecstatically inventive."--*The Washington Post Book World*

"Read[s] like a crossword puzzle based on the album cover photo of 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'...Vivid and inventive...Ultimately, all that comic energy deepens into a genuinely moving elegy." --*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Wow. In their wacky conflation of fact and fiction - and their happy confusion of high and low brows - the septet of stories amount to [a] carnivalesque daydream.... Just sit right back and you'll hear a playfully paranoid history of the 20th century." --*Entertainment Weekly*

"Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale that will snap your synapses like Jiffy Pop on a bonfire....[*Gilligan's Wake*] is a wacked-out ride through history and pop culture." --*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"[An] irreverent splashing around in our stream-of-pop-culture-consciousness." --*The Dallas Morning News*

"Dazzling and witty...Wild inventiveness and terrific wordplay, reminiscent sometimes of S.J. Perelman, sometimes of Peter DeVries. By making language the star, Carson transforms his boob-tube conceit into a captivating romp through our popular culture and Cold War history." --*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"Very funny...Carson's prose often has the energy of a song by his beloved Ramones." --*The New York Times Book Review*

"A heck of a lot of fun." --*Fortune*

"If there were an America's Cup Final for fevered, often brilliant writing, he'd be in it, and probably disqualified for ramming David Foster Wallace's dinghy, for scuttling Thomas Pynchon's trimaran, for pooping on Robert Cover's poop deck.... It's not all jokes, wordplay, and mad flights, though. Carson has given his characters full lives; more accurately, full inner lives."--*San Diego Union-Tribune*

"The pastiche is surprisingly smart and entertaining; it offers some genuinely inspired sketches for those who know their television -- and their Cold War history." --*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"There can't be many books with energy, depth and sheer verbal agility enough to set James Joyce spinning in his grave, but here is one, a tour de force of a novel which expresses the American century from World War II on, both as an hilarious and biting satire and as a dark, delirious, psychedelic dream. 'Genius' is not a word to sling around carelessly, but Tom Carson must have had one sitting near him when he wrote *Gilligan's Wake*." --Madison Smartt Bell, author of *Master of the Crossroads*



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“The title...barely hints at the conceptual audacity of this seriously comic debut novel. Carson here combines outsized literary ambitions with a voracious appetite for cross-cultural references, concocting a Pynchon-meets-sitcom parable of the American Dream.” --*Book Magazine*

“What other book could court comparison with *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Finnegan’s Wake* and still survive? And how, by the way, does it survive? By force of imaginative invention, verbal excitement, and delirious wit. *Gilligan’s Wake*, offering a brilliant, tragic reading of twentieth century American history, is as ambitious and provocative a novel as I’ve read in a long, long time.” --David Shields, author of *Enough About You and Remote*

“This novel bends 75 years or so of political and television history into an enormous Technicolor pastiche, as thick with satire as it is with pop-culture references.... Carson’s style suggests David Foster Wallace after watching 72 hours of nonstop sitcom reruns; his verbal antics make for an intellectually stimulating read.” --*Booklist*

“Only a novelist of Tom Carson’s sweeping intelligence and punk but not pitiless iconoclasm could have written this epic: audacious and original, subversive and often very funny, and spectacularly played out in the interzone between American glory and madness.” --Steve Erickson, author of *The Sea Came in at Midnight*

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. *Gilligan’s Wake* is a series of connected fantasies invented by the man eventually revealed as the novel’s shadow narrator, Gil Egan, whose addled recap of 20th-century American history turns the familiar castaways from the 1960s sitcom *Gilligan’s Island* into his mouthpieces. In the life stories he imagines for them before they were shipwrecked, characters borrowed from literature and popular culture interact with actual historical figures and events. Do you find these juxtapositions annoying, or does Gil’s skewed version of our past reflect something accurate about the mixed-up way we remember and understand our history in an age of media overload? Did the use of characters from a series as inane as *Gilligan’s Island* prevent you from taking the book seriously? Or is their very recognizability, as TV stereotypes Americans still refer to 40 years later, part of the author’s point? We think they’re absurd, but we all know them - - just as we “know” Richard Nixon, Frank Sinatra, or the statue of the Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

2. Although each narrator tells a separate story, the chapters are connected in a number of ways. Especially in the interpolated parodies, like the German silent movie that Daisy and “Lovey” see in Ch. 4, certain situations keep cropping up in burlesque or otherwise distorted form, such as a father’s death or an episode of sexual betrayal. Then there are the recurring appearances by female characters whose names are one or another variation on “Susan,” as well as repeated references to an ex-Marine and CIA agent named John G. Egan or Jack Egan, who turns out to have been Gil Egan’s father. Gil also signals his presence in each chapter with an anagram of “Gilligan” - - Algligni, Gliaglin, Lil Gagni, and so forth. As you noticed these patterns emerging, were you curious to find out the hidden story linking Gil’s fantasies? If his game-playing seems intrusive, can you argue that it’s supposed to be?



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3. Names are clearly important in this book. The one that never appears, of course, is “Gilligan” - - the derisive nickname Gil hated in high school, as we obliquely learn toward the end from Sukey Santoit (whose own name’s syllables, rearranged, produce “Susan key to it”). Except for Thurston Howell, who is too bluffly imbecilic to care, and Mary-Ann, Gil’s stand-ins for the *Gilligan’s Island* castaways all take pains to avoid mentioning their names. The “Ginger” character challenges Sammy Davis Jr. to tell her her name, which he can’t do. Sinking into delirium, the Professor informs us that he’s forgotten his - - although, when his host in Japan calls him “X-San,” alert readers may note that this sounds uncannily like Exxon. What do you think is the purpose of all this? Is it the author’s way of reminding us that these people aren’t quite the sitcom characters they resemble, but rather Gil’s distorted, hallucinatory versions of them? Does the emphasis on garbled or unspoken names also reveal something about Gil’s ambivalent sense of his own identity, especially once you recall his father was a spy?

4. The novel’s opening chapter is jangled and difficult. Gil introduces himself by impersonating an incoherent mental patient who insists he’s Maynard G. Krebs — a character played by future *Gilligan’s Island* star Bob Denver on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* — and is enraged when anyone tries to call him Gilligan. While readers who remember that Denver played both roles can understand this as a joke about sitcom actors and the characters they’re identified with, not until the end of the novel are we given enough information to retrospectively grasp that this fantasy was the adolescent Gil’s reaction to the trauma of his father’s death and the discovery of his first love’s infidelity. He’s refusing to accept that his world has changed and he has to become a different person to cope with it, but does the author’s way of presenting Gil’s situation really have to be so damned oblique? Even critics who reviewed the book favorably were often mystified by the inner logic motivating Gil’s hallucinations -- or else simply ignored that dimension of the novel, not that any of us here at Picador are bitter. Discuss whether the first chapter is \*necessarily\* confusing, or just a chore to get through before the more entertaining narrators take over.

5. One reviewer remarked that *Gilligan’s Wake* “reads like a crossword puzzle based on the album cover photo of ‘Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’.” Because Gil’s mind is teeming with allusions and cross-references he seldom bothers to explain, there can be a “Where’s Waldo?” side to spotting them. For instance, in the Skipper’s chapter, a PT-boat captain named McHale makes a crude joke about Ethel Merman — who was, in fact, married to Ernest Borgnine, the star of the sitcom *McHale’s Navy*. Just for fun (answers below), ask yourselves who was able to find:

... Angie Dickinson and Marilyn Monroe?

... James Dean in *Rebel Without A Cause*?

... the marriage of Nick Carraway (the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*) to pioneering woman pilot Amelia Earhart, presumably on the rebound from the relationship with Jordan Baker described in Fitzgerald’s novel?

... Homer Simpson from *The Simpsons* and his namesake in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, who here turn out to be the same person?



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. . . author Kurt Vonnegut?

. . . the Marine sergeant played by John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*?

[ANSWERS to Question 5:

(a) In Ch. 2, when McHale's crassly asks the young Jack Kennedy if he's ever slept with a movie star, the Skipper mentions that the future President is "looking across Dickinson Inlet at the U.S.S. Monroe." (For the record, Ms. Dickinson has always refused to confirm or deny any tomfoolery with JFK. Ms. Monroe, of course, is in no position to confirm or deny anything — except possibly to St. Peter, who no doubt prizes her autograph.)

(b) Thurston Howell describes his son going through "a mildly rebellious phase, during which he lurked about in blue jeans, white T-shirt and red windbreaker . . . while swigging milk directly from the bottle," a description of Dean's appearance and behavior in one famous scene from *Rebel Without A Cause*. The unspoken connection is that the actor Jim Backus played both Thurston Howell in *Gilligan's Island* and Dean's father in *Rebel*, and Gil is here imagining himself as Thurston/Backus's son.

(c) In Ch. 4, the future "Lovey" Howell attends the wedding of "some Midwestern second cousin" of Daisy Buchanan's — Nick Carraway's family relationship to her in Fitzgerald's novel — and an unnamed "aviatrix" whom Lovey claims to know slightly. Shortly afterward, she and Daisy launch their friendship under a banner reading "NICK AND AMELIA: MANY YEARS OF HAPPINESS." If you're wondering, the author has explained that Nick — plainly drawn to active, independent women — struck him as a "perfect husband" for Earhart, who also makes brief cameo appearances in Chapters 6 and 7.

(d) Matt Groening named Homer Simpson in tribute to a character in West's *The Day of the Locust*. In *Gilligan's Wake*, Ginger's description of her neighbors in the sleazy Poil du Chien Hotel includes someone named Homer who has come to Hollywood "in hopes of getting work as a cartoon character." Like the Poil's other residents — pinup queen Bettie Page and *Plan 9 From Outer Space* director Ed Wood — Homer is highly offended by the "two-dimensional" portrait of him in *Day of the Locust*, Carson's way of expressing his low opinion of West's much admired but hateful and hysterically supercilious novel.

(e) In Ch. 6, the Professor's lecture tours promoting the Atomic Energy Commission are arranged by "a mustachioed young veteran of the Battle of the Bulge" employed in General Electric's publicrelations department, who treats him with barely disguised disgust. Although the narrator claims not to remember his factotum's name — "Fungott or Vangut, something like that" — the c.v. is Kurt Vonnegut's. (Bonus question: ask yourself why he's here. How indebted is *Gilligan's Wake* to Vonnegut's example, and what other tributes of this sort appear elsewhere in the book?)

(f) In Ch. 7, the letter from Corporal John G. Egan to Mary-Ann's mother, describing Eddie Kilroy's death on Iwo Jima, mentions a fellow Marine and friend of theirs named "Duke Stryker" who was also killed in the battle. Sergeant Stryker is Wayne's character in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, one of only a handful of movies in which "the Duke" (Wayne's offscreen nickname) dies.



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6. The flickering presence of Amelia Earhart, who never sticks around for long because people flying airplanes don't, hints at an important theme in the novel's look back at 20th-century America. In what other ways does *Gilligan's Wake* celebrate women's liberation? The author has said that, for him, the stories of the female characters are the heart of the book, and that part of his reason for using *Gilligan's Island* as his hook was the innocent way the show's gender stereotypes reflect the prefeminist society we've largely left behind. Discuss how this theme evolves from the Skipper's crude views of women and the future Mrs. Howell's scornful portrait of her suffragist mother -- who is, of course, the character in Chapter 4 the author most admires -- to the way "Ginger"'s chapter links blacks, Jews and women as outsiders in 1950s America and the "wild surmise" she and Mary-Ann share when a scrap of newspaper reveals to them how the world has changed in the novel's final pages. How does this relate to Gil's situation - - particularly in his letter to his old girlfriend in Ch. 7, when his adolescent bitterness is replaced by the mature man's gratitude?

7. Another theme that grows more central as the book progresses is America's role in the world since World War II and the nature of our national character. In what ways do the Professor's and Mary-Ann's chapters present two conflicting views of America? Compare his gleeful account of using the atomic bomb to her mixed feelings about Hiroshima - - even though she knows that, if the bomb had been invented six months earlier, her father would probably be alive. If the novel's two final chapters are in fact a debate in Gil's mind about the goodness or wickedness of the United States in the past century, which side do you think wins? If Mary-Ann is, as she says, "the personification of America," how does the Professor personify a very different U.S.A.? Compare his indifference to his parents and childhood with her feelings for Russell, Kansas. Discuss the difference between his sexual encounter with one foreigner in Tokyo and hers with another in Paris, and whether the contrast could conceivably be symbolic.

8. Before writing *Gilligan's Wake*, Carson spent many years working as a critic, with occasional forays into political journalism. Discuss the various ways his novel doubles as "criticism" — e.g., how imagining Daisy Buchanan's version of events up-ends *The Great Gatsby*. Is his parody of the profundities that Jean-Luc the film critic reads into Ginger's silly movie *Every Girl Is an Island* a playful reflection of his own book's treatment of *Gilligan's Island* as the modern version of a classical myth? Here and elsewhere, is he just being clever for the sake of being clever, as some reviewers maintained? And if, in fact, you've lost interest in this Reader's Guide, at what point did you do so?

## About the Author

Tom Carson won a 2000 National Magazine Award for his work as *Esquire's* "Screen" columnist. A long-time writer on pop culture and politics for *The Village Voice* and *LA Weekly*, he has also contributed to *Rolling Stone*, *The Boston Phoenix*, and *The Washington Post*, among others. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.