

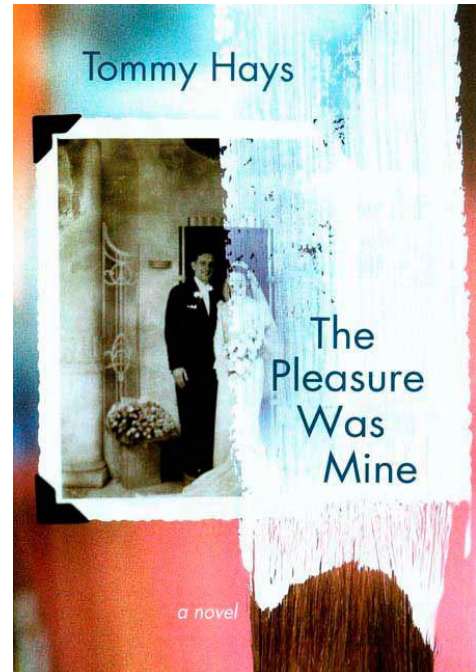
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Pleasure Was Mine

By *Tommy Hays*

ISBN 13: 978-0-312-33933-3

ISBN 10: 0-312-33933-X



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Pleasure Was Mine* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Pleasure Was Mine*.

About the Book

Prate Marshbanks proposed to his future wife on a muggy July night at Pete's Drive-in back in '52. "She said yes to me between bites of a slaw burger all-the-way." A college graduate and daughter of a prominent lawyer, Irene was an unlikely match for Prate, a high school dropout. He lived his married life aware of the question on people's minds: How in the world did a tall, thin, fair-skinned beauty and one of the most respected high school English teachers in all of Greenville County, in all of South Carolina for that matter, wind up married to a short, dark, fat-faced, jug-eared house painter? That their marriage not only survived for fifty years, but flourished, is a source of constant wonder to Prate. Now he faces a new challenge with Irene.

From the author of *In The Family Way*, a novel the Atlanta Constitution called "an instant classic" and the *Charlotte Observer* praised as "a lovely, moving book," comes a powerful story of hard-earned hope. *The Pleasure Was Mine* takes place during a critical summer in the life of Prate Marshbanks, when he retires to care for his wife, who is gradually slipping away. To complicate things, Prate's son, Newell, a recently widowed single father, asks Prate to keep nine-year-old Jackson for the summer. Though Prate is irritated by the presence of his moody grandson, during the summer Jackson helps tend his grandmother, and grandfather and grandson



READING GROUP GUIDE

form a bond. As Irene's memory fades, Prate, a hardworking man who has kept to himself most of his life, has little choice but to get to know his family.

With elegance and skillful economy of language, Tommy Hays renders an unforgettable character in Prate Marshbanks. *The Pleasure Was Mine* is at once a quietly wrenching portrayal of grief, a magical and romantic story about the power of love, and an unexpectedly moving take on the resilience of family.

About the Author

Tommy Hays is executive director of the Great Smokies Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Asheville and creative writing chair for the Academy at the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. His novel *In The Family Way* received the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award in 2000 and was a choice of the Book-of-the-Month Club. He is a graduate of Furman University and the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina, with his wife and two children.

Discussion Questions

- 1) *The Pleasure Was Mine* is in part about Irene Marshbanks and how her Alzheimer's shapes or reshapes the lives around her. What are some of the changes her illness brings about in her husband Prate, her son Newell and her grandson Jackson? In your own family, has an illness reconfigured how your family members interact? Has it brought out some surprising strengths or weaknesses in your family members?
- 2) Every story has to have a disturbance to the pattern of its characters lives, something that makes this particular time in its characters lives worth telling the reader about. Irene's long illness is part of that, but the specific event that precipitates the novel is Jackson coming to spend the summer with Prate, who has gotten used to living alone. How does Jackson's presence over the summer challenge Prate? Have you ever ended up spending a long period of time with a family member you really didn't want to spend time with? Did it bring you closer or drive you further apart?
- 3) One of the dangers in writing about a character with a debilitating illness like Alzheimer's is that the illness becomes bigger than the character. The illness obscures the character's qualities, and the character becomes a kind of walking symptom. Do you think the writer was able to get across Irene's deeper self even as he portrayed her illness? If so, what were some of the ways he accomplished this?
- 4) This story is told in first person through Prate Marshbanks's eyes. One of the hardest things about writing a story in first person is getting across a sense of the narrator. We hear what the narrator chooses to tell us, but that's usually not enough to give the reader a deeper sense of the narrator. What are some ways that the writer conveys Prate's true nature besides what Prate tells the reader about himself? Does your perception of Prate change over the course of the novel?



READING GROUP GUIDE

- 5) Prate never attended college, didn't even finish high school for that matter. He came from a poor family. His father was a butcher. Yet he married Irene, a very educated woman, from a very educated family. Does this seem believable? If so, what qualities of Prate and Irene make it believable? Have you known couples who came from drastically different social classes yet sustained a long and fruitful relationship?
- 6) Do you have a loved one or a close friend who has Alzheimer's? How did the disease change them? What about them remained the same? And their caretakers. Taking care of someone with Alzheimer's can be overwhelming. How did the disease affect their caretakers? Were they as stubborn as Prate in trying to care for their loved one at home? Did they ultimately have to hire a nurse or put their loved one in a nursing home?
- 7) What kind of son is Newell? Is he selfish to ask his father to keep Jackson for the summer? Or does he deserve a break from his fatherly duties to pursue his art? When Newell loses his temper with Jackson early on in the book how does that make you feel about him? Can you relate to his frustration or do you feel his anger is unjustified or a little of both?
- 8) A good title is one that the reader finds herself referring back to as she reads the book, a kind of touchstone. What are some ways that the title *The Pleasure Was Mine* is inhabited over the course of the novel?
- 9) When Irene goes missing at Penland, Prate blames himself. Is he right to? Is it poor judgment to bring her along? Or is it worth the risk to get her out of the nursing home? Is his motivation in taking her to Penland, at least in part, the hope that something might happen between him and Irene? When something does happen, are you surprised? Is Prate right to sleep with Irene? Or does he take advantage of her?
- 10) If you had to have one of the characters in *The Pleasure Was Mine* move in with you for a week, who would you choose? Who would you choose to move in with your worst enemy?
- 11) Toward the end of the book Prate says, ...the thought flit through my head that Irene's gradual mental departure from us might allow Newell and me to grow a little closer... In other words, Irene's illness provided an opportunity for father and son to get to know each other in a new way. The same might be said for grandfather and grandson. What other new opportunities does Irene's absence, physical and mental, provide for the characters around her?
- 12) What kind of feeling does the ending leave with you with? Hopeful? Sad? A little of both?
- 13) If you were to write one more chapter, what or who would you write about? How much time do Irene and Prate have left before she's totally lost to Alzheimer's? What does Prate do with himself then? Does he start visiting Newell and Jackson in Asheville? Do Newell and Billie ultimately end up together?
- 14) What images from *The Pleasure Was Mine* have stayed with you?

© 2006 — Tommy Hays

For more reading group suggestions, visit

www.readinggroupgold.com

