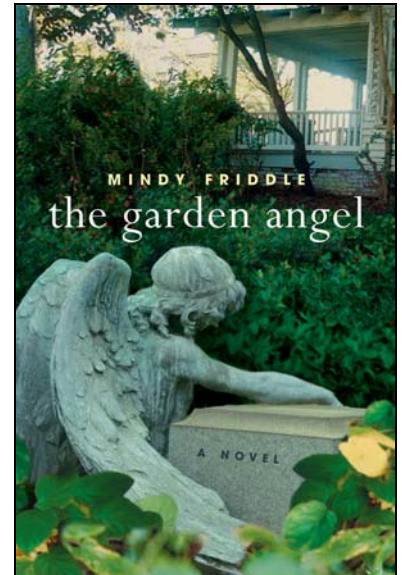


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Garden Angel* by Mindy Friddle

St. Martin's Press

ISBN: 0-312-32674-2 (hardcover)



### Introduction to *The Garden Angel*

Cutter Johanson is plucky and eccentric, nostalgic about her family's once glorious past. While writing obits for the Sans Souci Citizen and waiting tables at the Pancake Palace, she is desperate to ward off potential buyers from her dilapidated family homestead-and goes to extreme and often hilarious lengths to succeed.

Elizabeth Byers, stricken with panic attacks, rarely ventures outside the house she shares with her husband, a professor at the local university. Agoraphobic, even her tentative trips to the supermarket turn frightening and grotesque.

Cutter is losing her house and Elizabeth is losing her husband. Surrounded by offbeat characters, the two women pull together to seek sanctuary from their troubles. In the tradition of richly comic Southern writing, this quirky debut novel captures life in a down-at-the-heels small town and celebrates women's friendships.

### Praise for *The Garden Angel*

"Mindy Friddle has a great comic touch, and her novel is a touching, heartfelt debut."

- Richard Russo, author of *Empire Falls*

"*The Garden Angel* takes on the shifting alliances defined by family, love, and friendship with quirky grace and raucous wit. Mindy Friddle's details are shocking and flawless. I'm thankful for her reminder that our frail souls can be ultimately triumphant."

- Julianna Baggott, author of *Girl Talk*, *The Miss America Family* and *The Madam*

"Agoraphobes and adulterers, lovers of history and advocates for the future, the mentally ill and the putatively sane all line up to do battle in *The Garden Angel*, a warm-hearted, funny novel about the vagaries of small-town life and the encroachments of the big, bad world."

- Debra Spark, author of *Coconuts for the Saint* and *The Ghost of Bridgetown* and editor of *Twenty Under Thirty: Best Stories by America's New Young Writers*

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. In the course of the novel, Cutter and Elizabeth form a strong friendship. What is it that draws them together? In what ways does their friendship change each of their lives? In desperate circumstances, have you ever relied on friends instead of family?
2. Cutter's home has a strong presence in the novel, as if it were a character. What is the significance of setting in the novel—Cutter's ancestral home and neighborhood, the city-swallowed town of Sans Souci, Elizabeth's suburban ranch? Identify how the theme of "home" as both a sanctuary and a trap weaves through the novel.
3. How would you characterize Elizabeth and Daniel's marriage? What kind of husband is Daniel? Did you ever sympathize with him? Did you agree with Elizabeth's decision regarding her marriage at the end of the novel?
4. How do you feel the author portrayed the issue of agoraphobia? Were Elizabeth's near-debilitating panic attacks believable? Have you, or someone you love, ever suffered from panic attacks?
5. Discuss the betrayals that occur between Daniel and Elizabeth, Cutter and Ginnie, and Elizabeth and Cutter. Were any of the disloyalties—between husband and wife, siblings, and friends—more justified than others? By the end of the novel, which of the rifts between the characters have healed?
6. Do you recognize and relate to the family squabble over inheritance that occurs between siblings? Do you think Ginnie and Barry's insistence that the house be sold a sign of their greediness or practicality? How does the figure of Gran, the family's dead grandmother, affect Barry, Ginny and Cutter in different ways?
7. Do you agree that Emily Dickinson's poetry helped to characterize Elizabeth's plight? How did the selected stanzas, especially in chapters two, twelve and fourteen express Elizabeth's emotional state? Why do you think the author chose Dickinson's line, "A Prison gets to be a Friend," for the epigram?
8. From the first time she appears in chapter two, Elizabeth begins to push herself to take risks and change her life. What is the biggest moment of risk for Elizabeth in the novel? For Cutter?
9. How did Cutter's jobs help define her as a character? What factors helped her succeed at "the dead beat?" How did Cutter's working at the Pancake Palace provide readers with insight into the town and its characters?
10. What is the significance of the title, *The Garden Angel*? How did the theme of tending the family cemetery parallel Cutter's nostalgic view of her family and town? Why do you think Ginnie hated the family cemetery, while Elizabeth loved it?
11. How did minor characters such as Father Bob, Alfred, Jolene and Priscilla Worthington provide comic touches throughout the novel? Were there other minor characters you found eccentric? Memorable? Why?

12. Was Cutter naïve about her relationship with Curt Sams? How did their nostalgic views of the town bring Cutter and Curt together? Should Cutter forgive him?
13. Where could you imagine Elizabeth and Cutter's lives heading after the novel closes? What about Ginnie? Daniel? How might a sequel to the novel unfold?

## Mindy Friddle on *The Garden Angel*

I was inspired to write *The Garden Angel* after happening upon a dilapidated, once beautiful estate in the upstate of South Carolina that was gradually being swallowed by a strip mall and several fast food joints. I wondered what kind of people might have lived there, back when the local Southern textile town boomed. The house, more than a century old, had been vacant for years and ravaged by trespassers and transients, but the rumor was that two sisters from the town's once prestigious family had lived—and died—there, spinsters.

I arranged for a realtor to take me inside and explore the grounds. I was immediately taken with the hidden beauty there: a kitchen garden gone to seed, a dried up fishpond, and inside, stained glass lamps, threadbare rugs and water-stained cabbage rose wall paper, and, of course, claw foot tubs. A few days later, I began writing the novel. I envisioned a woman in a claw foot bathtub in an attic of a dilapidated Victorian house. She was soaking, and patting on a homemade herbal facemask.

A few weeks later, while staying at a rented beach house in Edisto Beach, South Carolina, I perused the bookshelves and wedged between the *People* magazines and mysteries, I happened upon a psychological case study of agoraphobia. What struck me, as I read about the torturous daily life of a woman who was confined to her home by her agoraphobia, was the idea of one's home as both a trap and safety hatch from the world, the pull and poison of that kind of sanctuary. And so, going back to my character in the bathtub, I immediately saw that she was in the warm comfort of her homestead, a kind of elegiac, shabby museum that honored her once prestigious family, a home she was determined to keep, and I wondered what might happen if she befriended an agoraphobic, one who finds a home a trap...and what the two of them might do together to face the world out there.

## About the Author

**Mindy Friddle** is a native of South Carolina, where her family has lived for more than two centuries. She has received a fellowship in fiction from the South Carolina Academy of Authors, and is a two-time winner of the South Carolina Fiction Project and the Piccolo Spoleto Fiction Open. A former newspaper reporter, she holds a B.A. from Furman University, a Master's degree from the University of South Carolina, and is pursuing an MFA from Warren Wilson. She attended Bread Loaf, courtesy of a scholarship program through the Emrys Foundation and recently completed a writer's residency at the Ragdale Foundation. She lives in Greenville, South Carolina with her family.