

READING GROUP GUIDE

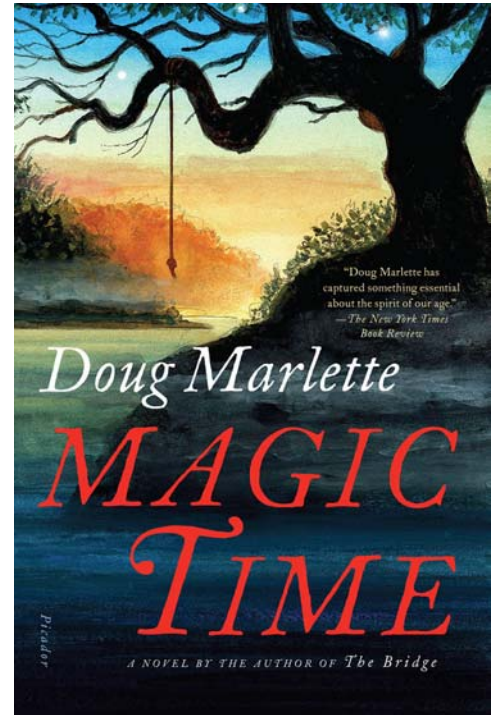
Magic Time

A Novel

by Doug Marlette

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Magic Time* 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 *Magic Time*.

About the Book

In *Magic Time*, award-winning novelist Doug Marlette combines the spellbinding elements of a first-rate mystery with an evocative, bittersweet portrait of the Civil Rights Movement's most valiant heroism. Moving deftly between that tumultuous period and the 1990s, this is the story of Carter Ransom, a son of the South who rose through the ranks as a journalist and became a successful New York newspaper columnist. When a bombing in Manhattan nearly claims the life of the woman he loves, he finds himself confronting emotional scars from thirty years ago. Returning to his hometown of Troy, Mississippi, he must sift through the memories of the deadly violence that shattered everything he had believed about hope.

It was during the cataclysmic Freedom Summer of 1964 that Carter fell passionately in love with Sarah, an East Coast volunteer working in the trenches of the Deep South to further the cause of racial equality. But their relationship was not allowed to flourish; she and three other coworkers lost their lives in a brutal Ku Klux Klan ambush. Carter's father, a local judge, presided over the first trial for the murders. But now there's evidence that the original trial was flawed, even fraudulent. With a new trial brewing, and the images of the East Coast bombing fresh on his mind, Carter must finally confront his greatest fears, including the possibility that his own father was knowingly involved in a cover-up that set a killer free. With an enthralling story line about a provocative chapter in American history, *Magic Time* yields rich topics for conversation. We hope the following questions will enrich your experience as you explore this riveting novel of justice and love.

Praise for *Magic Time*:

"I have always loved that word 'page-turner,' and that is just what Doug Marlette has given us with *Magic Time*. He bridges the modern South to one of its bleakest, most violent periods and does so with a story that you can't put down. I love the way Marlette brings my South to life with all its glory and warts. With this book, with the dilemma that modern-day Southerners find themselves in because of their ancestors' actions, we see once again what Faulkner meant about how the past isn't dead, or even past." —Rick Bragg, author of *All Over but the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man*

"Doug Marlette knows how to make a reader turn the page, again and again, with rising excitement. But he's after more than that in *Magic Time*. He sets out to fill in the canvas of the modern South with the darker colors of its history. He shows us every kind of Southerner, from the noblest to the worst. He makes his characters answer for who they are and where they come from, but he loves them—all of them. We can't ask for more from a novelist or a novel." —Mark Childress, author of *Crazy in Alabama* and *One Mississippi*

"As in *The Bridge*, Doug Marlette asks urgent questions about society and directs us to look for the answers within our own hearts. His kind intelligence shows through in every word. He's one of my favorite writers." —Kaye Gibbons, author of *Ellen Foster* and *The Life All Around Me by Ellen Foster*

"*Magic Time* is a beautiful memorial to the brave young people who made the ultimate sacrifice in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964. Doug Marlette has vividly captured the spirit of history that animated those of us who were part of that extraordinary time." —John Lewis, U.S. House of Representatives

"In *Magic Time*, Doug Marlette does with words what we are used to seeing him do so masterfully with pictures: he sets us down firmly in a sharply drawn time and place and tells us a great story. *Magic Time* proves that *The Bridge* was no fluke: Marlette is a great writer of Southern fiction, and he understands that region as it was in the turbulent days of the Civil Rights Movement, and as it has reshaped itself since." —Henry Louis Gates, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University

"It was the summer that divided time in America, and Doug Marlette has brought it—and the people who lived through and after it—so stingingly alive that it can never be forgotten. *Magic Time* is a blazing, beautiful novel." —Anne Rivers Siddons, author of *Peachtree Road* and *Sweetwater Creek*

About the Author

Doug Marlette won every major award for cartooning, including the Pulitzer Prize. His award-winning first novel, *The Bridge*, was published in 2001. Marlette was a distinguished visiting professor in the School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and inducted into the UNC Journalism Hall of Fame in 2002. On July 12, 2007, North Carolina Governor Michael F. Easley selected Doug Marlette to posthumously receive the honor of membership to the Order of the Long Leaf Pine. This award is the highest civilian honor in the state of North Carolina.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the ironies in the novel's title. What "magic" did Lige and his team of volunteers achieve? As a locale, what did Magic Time mean to all those who gathered there?
2. What was the effect of the author's use of time lines? Why was it useful to intersperse the 1990s with memories of the 1960s? Does this technique mirror the way your own powerful memories seep into everyday life?
3. How does the E. B. White quote near the beginning of chapter two speak to Carter's relationship to New York? How is his sense of identity linked to his sense of place?
4. When have you faced a homecoming similar to Carter's and Stephen's? What history is always tied to certain locations in your mind, regardless of how much time has passed?
5. What does the history contained in this novel—a fictionalized version of terrorist bombings in New York and of bombings executed by white supremacists—indicate about the way violence has been witnessed in twentieth-century America? How was the SNCC able to gain power without violence?
6. What were the roots of the White Knights' racism? Why did so many white supremacists believe they were "protecting" the country from communism? Does race camouflage money, as Carter says near the end of chapter twenty-two?
7. How were so many divergent groups able to unite around the cause of civil rights during the 1960s? What tensions between these groups were illustrated in the novel? At what point does Carter realize that remaining passive is morally unacceptable to him?
8. The parallels between Sarah and Emily are clear. What are the differences between them? Was Carter able to separate his memories of Sarah from his relationship with Emily? Do you agree with Emily's assessment of him in chapter twenty three? What makes Sydney an ideal match for him?
9. Though *Magic Time* is a work of fiction, it conveys the spirit of recent murder trials of white supremacists who were not brought to justice until three decades after their crimes were committed. In what ways does the book speak to your own knowledge or memories of headlines from this time

period? How would you have responded to the cultural turmoil that marked Carter's life forever? Why is fiction an important complement to journalism in capturing such events?

10. How did you react to the notion that the Ransoms formed Nettie's "white family" (last paragraph of chapter nine)? What do you imagine was going through the mind of the African American man hired to tend to Bohannon? What enabled Lige to gain a career in politics, with a level of power never previously held by Troy's black citizens?

11. One essential component of civil rights is a citizen's access to a voting booth, a cause to which Sarah devoted tireless hours. Did volunteers such as Sarah succeed? Is the American voting system now free from injustice?

12. How does Lonnie's background compare to Carter's? In what way did fate versus willpower shape their futures? What ties, both tragic and triumphant, bind Carter to his boyhood friends?

13. What is the difference between the power brokers of Troy, such as Glen Boutwell, and the power brokers of New York, such as Marcy Tutweiler? Is status achieved through the same means, no matter where you go?

14. How did your impressions of Carter's father evolve throughout the novel? How did you react to his brief affair with Sheppy? What does Hugh represent to the citizens of Troy, and eventually to Carter?

15. In chapter fifteen, we read the story behind Carter's name and ancestry, as well as details about the judge's war service. How do legacies shape the Ransom family?

What did it mean to Carter that he was classified 4-F and therefore disqualified from service in Vietnam? What determines whether we follow or defy these legacies?

16. Discuss the factors in the trial that led to a conviction. What was needed to build a solid case? Besides jury selection procedures, what had changed in Troy's judicial system during that thirty-year span?

17. How did Sarah's family respond to Carter? How did his family respond to her?

18. During the chilling hostage scene in chapter twenty-seven, how did you react to the combination of humiliating poses and photographs used to evoke fear and degradation? How did you react to Hullender's use of biblical quotations, particularly in light of Shiloh Church as the crime scene?

19. What do the novel's closing events regarding Schlank indicate about new battles to wage, such as environmentalism? What tactics were ultimately successful in that case? What does the future hold for Sydney and Carter?

20. How might the author's career as a leading editorial cartoonist shape his use of dialogue and imagery, and his overall approach as a novelist? What parallels did you discover between *Magic Time* and his previous novel, *The Bridge*?

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