

In Hovering Flight

by Joyce Hinnefeld



About the Book

At 34, Scarlet Kavanagh has the kind of homecoming no child wishes, a visit back to family and dear friends for the gentle passing of her mother, Addie, a famous bird artist and an even more infamous environmental activist. Though Addie and her husband, ornithologist Tom Kavanagh, have made their life in southeastern Pennsylvania, Addie has chosen to die at the New Jersey home of her dearest friend, Cora. This is because the Kavanagh's ramshackle cottage is filled with too much history and because, in the last ten years or so, and for reasons that are not entirely clear, even bird song has seemed to make Addie angry, or sad, or both. Now, in their final moments together, Scarlet hopes to put to rest the last tensions that have marked their relationship.

Through tender conversations with Cora and Lou, another of Addie's dear friends, Scarlet slowly comes to peace with her mother's complicated life. But she can do the same with her own? Scarlet has carried a secret into these foggy days—a secret for Addie, one that involves Cora, too.

In its structure and style this novel follows in the tradition of writers like Virginia Woolf, Harriet Doerr, and Carol Shields: musical and dramatic, with myriad stories and voices. But the evocative language of this soaring novel is Hinnefeld's own.

Discussion Guide

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel, such as the untimely death of a parent, or having longtime close friendships similar to those in the novel? A love of nature and bird song? Or a strong interest or activism in a particular area of interest? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel?
2. How would you describe the tone and style of this novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel? What did you

have problems with, if anything? Why?

3. One of the ongoing debates in modern and contemporary American literature, to some extent in all the arts, is whether Art is or is not --- or should or should not be --- ?political,? or ?didactic.? Two statements expressive of the differing points of view on this issue that you might be acquainted with are the old dictum, ?Art for art?s sake,? on the one hand, and Ezra Pound?s admonition --- ?All Art is didactic? --- on the other. What do you think this novel is saying about that debate? If you came to this novel with a strong position or opinion about the relationship between Art and Politics, how, if at all, did it affect your reading of this novel? Do you agree with Addie?s assessment of herself as an artist at the end of the book?

4. You have read what Hinnefeld thinks **In Hovering Flight** to be ?about.? How would **you** describe this novel to someone who asks you what the book is about? What major themes can you identify in the novel? How do you come to your conclusions?

5. What themes do you find echoed in the titles of each of the novel?s parts? I --- field notebooks; II --- k-selected species; III --- proximate and ultimate causes; IV --- zugunruhe; V --- hypotheticals.

6. What is your understanding of Haeckel?s Theory of Recapitulation --- ?Ontogeny recapitulates Phylogeny,? which Tom always prints up on the blackboard the first day of his class, Biology of the Birds. Why does he use this statement, despite its having been largely discredited? Can you connect its basic meaning to any elements of the novel, including its structure?

7. How would you describe the portrait of family life, marriage, and friendship as presented in this novel? Whose story is it, do you think? What about the characters in the novel? How do we learn about each of them? The author says her favorite is Tom. Which is yours, and why? Which is your least favorite, and why? With respect to Addie, does your opinion of her change over the course of the novel? If so, why? If not, why not?

8. Birds: What about them, in this novel? How many and in what ways can you find that the author uses birds and bird song as symbols, or metaphors, in this novel or to carry the narrative? Do you believe that Addie ever really saw the Cuvier?s Kinglet? What is it symbolic of, if anything, to you?

9. How did or did not the inclusion of the events of 9/11 affect your reading of the novel? Why? How well, or not, do you think the author handled this part of the narrative?

10. Would you recommend this novel to a friend to read? Why? If not, why not?

Author Bio

Joyce Hinnefeld is an Associate Professor of Writing at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pa. She is the author of a short story collection, **Tell Me Everything and Other Stories** (University Press of New England, 1998), which was awarded the 1997 Breadloaf Writer's Conference Bakeless Prize in fiction in 1997. **In Hovering Flight** is her first novel.

Critical Praise

"My kind of book --- great dialogue, interesting complicated characters, and who doesn't like birds? I loved the pace of the novel which allowed me to breathe as I read, imaging watching birds in flight, feeling the changes in the seasons, delighting in new life."

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