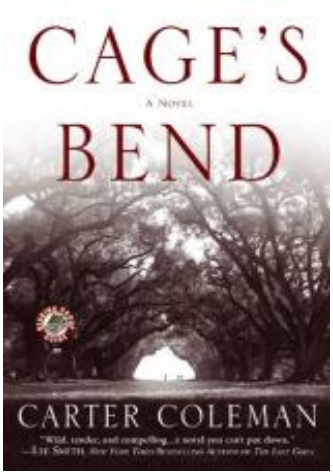
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Cage's Bend

by Carter Coleman



About the Book

Born eleven months apart and coming of age in the Deep South of the sixties and seventies, Cage and Nick Rutledge are the eldest sons of a preacher and a Tennessee housewife. The firstborn, Cage, is the golden boy-star athlete and scholar, adventurous, handsome, and preternaturally popular. Nick is the quiet, late-blooming middle son, and Harper, ten years younger, chases after his older siblings, trying not to be left out. Then comes the terrible day in July 1987. Tragedy strikes-and the breakdown of the family begins...

The ensuing years will be an extraordinary test of strength, courage, faith, and will as each member of the family tries to cope in the face of unspeakable sadness. Cage, racked with guilt and grief, goes into a tailspin that ultimately leads to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. He careens from dazzling mania to delusional depression, and from grim institutions to promising comebacks. An early success on Wall Street, Harper grudgingly sticks by his brother, at the same time losing himself in vodka, cocaine, and the thrill of the chase. Their father, Franklin, now a bishop, agonizes over his ability to console others while unable to save his own sons. Their mother, Margaret, ever tenacious, refuses to retreat into the past, focusing instead on how to heal her fractured family.

Poignant, often funny, and always moving, **Cage's Bend** is a rich, multilayered story that explores the conflicting nature of family: the competitiveness, resentment, and filial devotion that engulf brothers...and the heartbreaking and sometimes painful decisions that parents of grown children face. With this extraordinary novel, Carter Coleman emerges as one of the most memorable and talented new voices to come out of the American South, an author unafraid to question when it's best to help someone we love, and when it's best to let go.

Discussion Guide

1. While there are many themes in this book, what do you think this book is most about? Family? Mental illness?

Generational differences? Love?

2. What do you think about the title of the book, *Cage's Bend*? To what does it refer? Does it have a symbolic meaning?

3. Harper, the youngest son, says at a Thanksgiving dinner, "I'm thankful for the women in the family....To my mind the women in our family tower over the men. In fact, in society as a whole, women tower over men" (p. 324). Do you agree with him?

4. Do you think the author, being a man, has a "male" point of view of women? If so, how?

5. The author's description of mental illness in this book is extraordinary and moving. Did Cage's bipolar disorder-and seeing it from both inside his head and from the viewpoints of his family members-change your own ideas about mental illness?

6. Over the course of Cage's illness, his family responds to him in different ways. Eventually they try "tough love." Do they maintain that stance? Do you feel it works? Talk about the process they go through, from their initial reaction to the final response in the book.

7. The author doesn't moralize about recreational drugs in this book, but he does seem to come to a conclusion about drug use. What do you think his position is and why?

8. The book begins with a quote from Carl Jung about the importance of acknowledging our emotions and the danger of ignoring them. "Whenever we give up, leave behind and forget too much, there is always the danger that the things we have neglected will return with added force" (p. xi). Does this happen to any of the characters in the novel?

9. How are the three brothers in the novel alike? How are they different? Can you identify some elements that make siblings alike or different from each other?

10. Another interesting idea in this novel is the question of life after death. Nanny has had a "near death experience" and believes in life after death (p. 208). Cage sees and speaks to the dead Nick while he's incarcerated. Is there a continuation of life "on the other side"? What are your thoughts? Does this belief make a difference in how we live?

11. An examination of the purpose of family is an important theme in this novel. Harper says, "I think that families are put here to help each other through this thing, life, whatever it is" (p. 345). According to the mother, Margaret, "The nuclear family has much to answer for" (p. 364). Do you think families are something to escape from or rely upon? Should we return to an extended family, like the Rutledges do?

12. This book begins and ends with a foot race. Why? Is the race symbolic?

13. What is your prognosis for Cage? In other words, what do you think his future holds?

14. Getting back to the women in this book, the two brothers end the book by finding good women. Do you think a woman frequently "saves" a man and establishes stability for the family? Do you think men are the "weaker sex"?

Author Bio

Carter Coleman, a graduate of Vanderbilt University, has written for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review and Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Life*, and *Rolling Stone*. **The Volunteer**, Coleman's debut novel, is the story of a Peace Corps worker in Tanzania determined to escape his past in Memphis, Tennessee and forge a new life. Carter Coleman lives in London with his wife and daughter.

Critical Praise

"The most dysfunctional family south of the Mason-Dixon line makes for fine reading. Wild, tender, and compelling, **Cage's Bend** is a novel you can't put down."

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