

Early Leaving: A Novel

by Judy Goldman



About the Book

Is it possible for a mother to love her child too much? This is the question that haunts Kathyne Smallwood the night before her son, Early, faces sentencing for killing another teenager.

Kathyne has devoted her life to her only child. She has made herself present in his every activity, every decision, every move, in hopes of protecting him. But it may just be this powerful force that sends her son spiraling in the opposite direction.

Critically acclaimed author Judy Goldman tells a riveting, deeply moving story of a well-to-do southern family whose smooth, easy lives are suddenly disrupted irreversibly. As Kathyne Smallwood waits for morning and her son's fate, she searches her memory for details of his life and her own to discover where she went wrong, how she could have stopped the unspeakable act her eighteen-year-old son has committed. All she ever wanted was to keep him safe and happy. Isn't that what every mother wants? Kathyne realizes, too late, that the hardest part of parenting might be knowing when to hold back. Now she must come to terms with Early's leaving and what to do when her one reason for living is gone.

Goldman presents a wise, sharp-eyed invitation to explore the nature of family and, in particular, the nature of marriage and parenting -- how we think we're doing the right thing when what we're really doing is following our own hungers.

Discussion Guide

1. Kathyne's best friend, Joy, says, "We're only as happy as our unhappiest child." Can a mother love her child too much? When does a mother's normal concern for her child's well-being become an abnormal dependency on her child's happiness?

2. What advice would you give Kathrynne when Early is a child? When he's a teenager?
3. Kathrynne idolizes her mother, although she knows that "some people spend their lives railing against the way they were raised, every action a reaction to their parents, a fierce determination to do the opposite with their own children." In what ways do you parent like your parents? In what ways are you different? If you do not have children, would you consider your own parents permissive?
4. With whom do you identify more -- Kathrynne or Peter? How did each of their childhoods contribute to the people they became?
5. How responsible is Peter for Early's downfall?
6. Kathrynne enlarges photographs of Peter and herself, then mounts them on cardboard to use as masks for Joy's New Year's Eve Mardi Gras party. Kathrynne thinks it "would be funny to use our own faces to create an illusion." In what ways is Kathrynne's life an illusion? How does this fit with her love of movies?
7. How is Early dependent on Chip? How is Chip dependent on Early?
8. Must we all eventually come to terms with our limits in combating injustice? Do you agree with Peter that "we may want to do the right thing, but sometimes our own self-interest takes over"?
9. Are Kathrynne and Phyllis bound to one another? Explain.
10. How inevitable was it that Peter would end up marrying Ann? Is this part of his growth, or evidence of a lack of growth?
11. How inevitable was it that Peter would end up marrying Ann? Is this part of his growth, or evidence of a lack of growth?

Author Bio

Judy Goldman is the author of two award-winning poetry collections and two novels, *EARLY LEAVING* and *THE SLOW WAY BACK*, which was a finalist for SIBA's Novel of the Year and winner of the Sir Walter Raleigh Fiction Award and the Mary Ruffin Poole Award for First Fiction. Her memoir, *LOSING MY SISTER*, was a finalist for both SIBA's Memoir of the Year and *ForeWord Review's* Memoir of the Year. Her work has appeared in *Real Simple*, *The Washington Post* and in many literary journals. She teaches writing workshops throughout the Southeast, and serves on the permanent faculty of Table Rock Writers Workshop. Born and raised in Rock Hill, South Carolina, Goldman has lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, for many years. She and her husband have two children and four grandchildren.

Critical Praise

"Haunting questions of parenthood ripple through the pages of this thoughtful second novel."

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