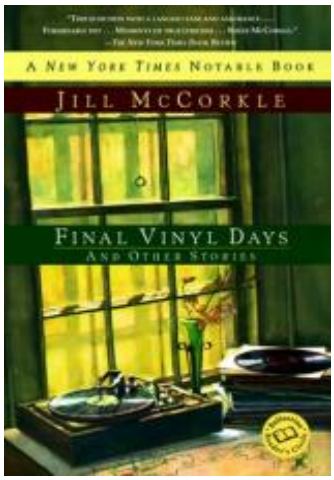
Final Vinyl Days

by Jill McCorkle



About the Book

When Jill McCorkle feels a short story coming on, she goes right ahead and "wastes" wonderful ideas instead of hoarding them for a novel. The result is another extraordinary collection of stories and characters.

In "It's a Funeral! RSVP," the storyteller is a woman who takes up self-styled "careers" that suit her circumstances. Now she's stumbled onto one that's so successful that she just can't quit. It's planning funerals, what she calls Going Out Parties, in which the clients are the soon-to-be-deceased themselves.

In "Life Prerecorded," perhaps McCorkle's finest short piece to date, the pregnant narrator finds the real meaning of new life by visiting with a very old neighbor who's waiting, too, for his own new life.

In these and the rest of the nine stories, Jill McCorkle acts on her penchant for taming the outrageous, humanizing the forbidden, and grounding the hilarious. As ,*Booklist* noted some time ago, "McCorkle just keeps getting better and better!"

Discussion Guide

1. One reviewer describes the characters in **Final Vinyl Days** as all "traveling off the beaten path." Discuss how each character is both different and yet similar to us all.

2. As the epigraph to the novel, McCorkle uses words from Marvin Gaye's song "If I Should Die Tonight": "How many hearts have felt their world stand still?" How and why has the world "stopped" momentarily for each main character in these stories? Is it a negative or positive pause?

3. What role do songs play in each story?

4. How is "Paradise" a satire of love, romance, and the Garden of Eden? What is McCorkle suggesting about the possibilities of finding eternal love in our modern society?

5. Discuss Tina and Twyla in "Last Request" as alter egos; that is, how are they reverse images of each other?

6. How do dirty and clean laundry work symbolically in "Last Request"?

7. In "Life Prerecorded," how are Mrs. Porter's fears about pregnancy and child-rearing related to her bigger fears about being an adult and mother?

8. How and why does the narrator in "Final Vinyl Days" sabotage his own chances at happiness?

9. How is the narrator in "Dysfunction 101" creating a "primer" for happiness? What is her "plan" to avoid dysfunction in her own life and the lives of Mary Edna's children?

10. Discuss the importance of a mother figure in the life of a young girl in "Dysfunction 101."

11. Discuss the significance of the title "A Blinking, Spinning, Breathtaking World." Why does Charlotte feel the need to control every aspect of her life at this point in time?

12. How do the references to Alice in Wonderland relate to what Charlotte is experiencing in her life in "A Blinking, Spinning, Breathtaking World"?

13. Is "Your Husband Is Cheating on Us" a feminist story? How is the story ironic? Consider how the story would be different if it were narrated from the wife's point of view or the new mistress's point of view.

14. Discuss McCorkle's combination of comedy and tragedy in such stories as "It's a Funeral! RSVP" in light of these words by George Bernard Shaw: "Life does not cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh."

15. Discuss the various conflicts the pastor is exploring in "The Anatomy of Man." How does his final "vision" help him resolve some of those conflicts?

16. Discuss the pastor's seemingly mystical abilities in comparison to his uncle's. Why is society more willing to accept the pastor's abilities while the uncle was sent away to an institution for displaying the same?

Author Bio

Jill McCorkle?s first two novels were released simultaneously when she was just out of college, and the *New York Times* called her ?a born novelist.? Since then, she has published five other novels and five collections of short stories, and her work has appeared in *Best American Short Stories* several times, as well as *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Five of her books have been *New York Times Notable* books, and her novel, LIFE AFTER LIFE, was a *New York Times*

bestseller.

She has received the New England Booksellers Award, the John Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. She has written for the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *Garden and Gun*, the *Atlantic* and other publications. She was a Briggs-Copeland Lecturer in Fiction at Harvard, where she also chaired the department of creative writing. She is currently a faculty member of the Bennington College Writing Seminars and is affiliated with the MFA program at North Carolina State University.

Critical Praise

"**Final Vinyl Days** is a charming collection of nine short stories that can be compared to a good country music song: honest, poignant, and real."

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