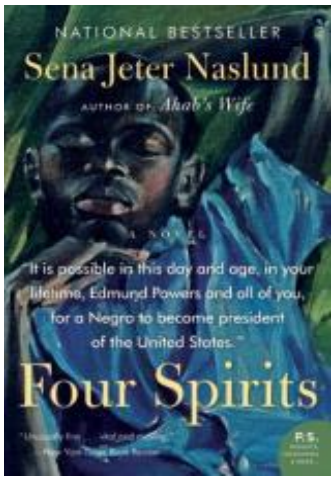
Four Spirits

by Sena Jeter Naslund



About the Book

Transporting us to a time and place that tested the American dream in unprecedented ways, **Four Spirits** portrays a remarkable group of women and men living in Birmingham, Alabama, during the 1960s. This was the site of some of the nation's most brutal attempts to quash the Civil Rights movement, most horrifically in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Yet Birmingham was also where a triumphant swell of courage was born, one that award-winning novelist Sena Jeter Naslund witnessed firsthand while coming of age there.

On the pages of **Four Spirits**, we meet an array of compelling characters -- black and white, racist and integrationist, rich and poor, pacifist and terrorist. Through these fictional faces, this astonishing fight for freedom emerges in a storyline that pays beautiful tribute to unrecognized heroes. By turns exhilarating and poignant, **Four Spirits** is a novel that is meant to bring readers together, stirring emotions, recollections, and vibrant conversation.

Discussion Guide

1. Two quotations, one from William Faulkner and one from Victoria Gray, an African-American Mississippi civil rights activitist, mark the beginning of **Four Spirits**. What is the contemporary relevance of these epigraphs? In what way is America's past still present? Has the promise of a "rich harvest" been fulfilled?

2. The novel's prelude presents the only scenes in which Stella's parents are with her in the present, rather than with her through memories. In what way do the events of that day both disable and sustain her throughout her life?

3. Discuss the concept of destiny in terms of the book's characters. T.J., for example, survived combat overseas and returned home to become a protector in his community. Yet he lost his job when he attempted to register to vote. Lee became embroiled in her husband's violent plots and eventually needed Aunt Pratt to help her find the way home (literally and symbolically). How does a combination of choice and chance create the fates of such characters as

Catherine, Gloria, Lionel, Jonathan, and Stella?

4. Compare the three men who win Stella's affection. How does each one contribute to her growth throughout the novel?

5. How does the book compare to your understanding or recollections of this time period? What did you discover about Birmingham and the Civil Rights Movement that you hadn't known before? How would you have responded had you been in the various characters' situations?

6. The author gives us an unflinching glimpse of a Klansman's perspective. What motivates Ryder to torture innocent strangers, as well as his wife? In your opinion, what are the roots of this behavior in general?

7. The novel underscores the role of unjust laws and corrupt law enforcement officials in perpetuating Birmingham's bloodshed. How did Civil Rights proponents overcome these tremendous disadvantages? Where did they find power?

8. Sena Jeter Naslund vividly recreates the surreal aura that followed John F. Kennedy's assassination. In what way are Stella's experiences that day a reflection of the nation's reaction to tragedy as a whole?

9. Cultural icons and religion form a significant backdrop in **Four Spirits**. The intellectual canon features philosophers, scientists, composers, and literary lions. The spiritual references form a tapestry including Stella's memories of her mother singing in Hebrew; existential skepticism; spiritual intuitions on the parts of Stella, Agnes, Lionel, and Charlotte; traditional Christian faith and the evangelical preaching of Lionel Parrish. How do the realms of thought and faith interact in **Four Spirits**?

10. The act of mentoring is crucial to many of the novel's characters. During his youth, Edmund strove to be one of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's protégés; Catherine finds inspiration in her brother; Christine attempts to mentor Gloria. Who has been your mentor? What would you like to teach future generations about life?

11. Christine, Arcola, Catherine, and Charles make a heavy sacrifice together at the White Palace. In her author's note, Sena Jeter Naslund reminds us of the numerous real-life figures who lost their lives during this chapter in history. What can society do to ensure that they didn't die in vain, and that such bloodshed will be not be repeated in the future?

12. Discuss the literary devices Sena Naslund uses to enhance her storytelling: compact, intense chapters; widely varied points of view; the treatment of time; poetic chapter titles; carefully divided sections; a prelude and a postlude. What is the effect of these details?

13. Four Spirits is filled with intriguing cameo characters, such as department store owner Mr. Fielding, many aunts, and the waiter who dances with Catherine. What makes even these minor roles significant in the context of this particular storyline?

14. Though **Four Spirits** and **Ahab's Wife** span extraordinarily different time periods, do any of the characters experience similar predicaments? How do these two novels complement Sena Naslund's body of work?

15. Two vivid scenes mark the novel's conclusion: the burning of Jonathan's car, and the ascension of Charlotte. What did these images evoke? What is the significance of giving Charlotte the last word?

Author Bio

New York Times bestselling author Sena Jeter Naslund's most recent novel is THE FOUNTAIN OF ST. JAMES COURT; OR, PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD WOMAN*;* she has published seven previous books of fiction.

Critical Praise

"Moving ...pays off in stunning scenes, vivid with action, color and emotion."

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