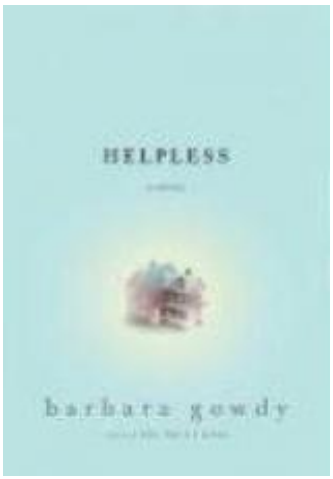
Helpless

by Barbara Gowdy



About the Book

From the internationally acclaimed author of *The White Bone* and *The Romantic*, a haunting and suspenseful novel of abduction and obsessive love

Nine-year-old Rachel Fox has the face of an angel, a heart-stopping luminosity that strikes all who meet her. Her single mother, Celia, working at a video store by day and a piano bar by night, is not always around to shield her daughter from the attention?both benign and sinister?that her beauty draws. Attention from model agencies, for example, or from Ron, a small-appliance repairman who, having seen Rachel once, is driven to see her again and again.

When a summer blackout plunges the city into darkness and confusion, Rachel is taken from her home. A full-scale search begins, but days pass with no solid clues, only a phone call Celia receives from a woman whose voice she has heard before but cannot place. And as Celia fights her terror and Rachel starts to trust in her abductor?s kindness, the only other person who knows where she is wavers between loyalty to the captor and saving the child. Will Rachel be found before her abductor?s urge to protect and cherish turns to something altogether less innocent?

Tapping into the fear that lies just below the surface of contemporary city life, Barbara Gowdy draws on her trademark empathy and precision to create a portrait of love at its most consuming and ambiguous and to uncover the volatile point at which desire gives way to the unthinkable.

Discussion Guide

1. How do the structure and multiple points of view in the story enhance the atmosphere of anxiety and apprehension? Discuss the exquisite way in which the author builds tension, by accelerating and slowing down the pace of the narrative.

2. Rachel is virtually a fatherless child. How does that fact affect the way she relates to Ron?

3. What has Mika?s presence taught Rachel about men? Is he a father figure? What are his feelings toward Rachel?

4. How do Ron and Nancy?s motives for keeping Rachel differ? How much does Nancy understand Ron? How does her desperation to avoid being alone contribute to her behavior. Discuss Nancy?s reaction to the situation.

5. What role does ?beauty? play in the novel?

6. Discuss Rachel?s relationship with her mother. Is Celia a bad mother? Did she neglect or fail to protect her daughter? How has being a single mother produced a nine-year old girl who is a curious mixture of maturity and innocence? Why does Celia feel a selfishness regarding her love for her daughter?

7. Discuss the title ? ?Helpless? ? and to what and who it refers in the novel. Note Nancy?s description of ?helpless fury? (p. 133).

8. How much does Rachel understand about the danger of her situation? Does that change as the days pass? When Rachel leaves the house while Ron is distracted, why doesn?t she go for help?

9. What is the significance of the day Ron chooses to kidnap Rachel (his birthday, the anniversary of his mother?s death?)

10. Most of the characters are victims of some abuse. How has this brought them together? Many of them feel guilty; discuss each one and what the source of that guilt might be.

11. Ron thinks of his act as an ?immaculate abduction.? Discuss this term. At what point and why does Ron begin to feel he wants to take credit and let the public know what he has accomplished?

12. What are the final choices made by each character and how does that affect the outcome of the novel. Was this the expected resolution? How else might Gowdy have concluded her novel?

Author Bio

Barbara Gowdy is the author of five previous books, including **Mister Sandman, We So Seldom Look on Love**, and **Falling Angels**, all of which have met with widespread international acclaim and critical praise. Twice a finalist for both of Canada?s most prestigious literary honors, the Governor General?s Award and the Giller Prize, Gowdy has previously worked as a book editor, teacher and critic. Born in Windsor, Ontario, she now lives in Toronto.

Critical Praise

?Gowdy writes astonishingly well... A suspense novel with great characters and a solid plot.?

Helpless

by Barbara Gowdy

Publication Date: March 20, 2007
Hardcover: 307 pages
Publisher: Metropolitan Books
ISBN-10: 0805082883
ISBN-13: 9780805082883