ReadingGroupGuides
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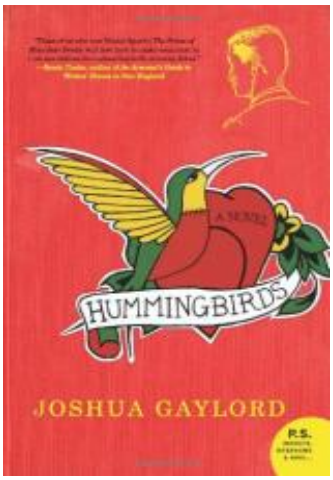
Hummingbirds

by Joshua Gaylord



About the Book

This spellbinding debut novel takes you inside the clique-driven, emotionally and physically charged world of high school and proves that the students aren't the only ones wrestling with maturity, self-confidence and self-doubt.

Spend a year at the Carmine-Casey School for Girls, an elite prep school on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The year when the intimate private school community becomes tempestuous and dangerously incestuous, as the rivalries and secrets of teachers and students interact, intersect, and eventually collide.

In the world of students, popular and coquettish Dixie Doyle with ironic pigtails battles to wrest attention away from the smart and disdainful Liz Warren and her self-written plays based on Oresteia. In the world of teachers, the adored Leo Binhammer struggles to share his territory with Ted Hughes, the charming new English teacher who threatens to usurp Binhammer's status as the department's only male teacher and owner of the girls' hearts. As a secret is revealed between them, Binhammer becomes increasingly fascinated by the man he has determined is out to get him.

As seasons change and tensions mount, the girls begin to long for entry into the adult world, toying with their premature powers of flirtation. Meanwhile the deceptive innocence of the adolescent world --- complete with plaid skirts and scented highlighters --- becomes a trap into which the flailing teachers fall. By the end of the year the line between adults and teenagers begins to blur, and the final exam is: who are the adults and who are the children?

Discussion Guide

1. Two rivalries are at the heart of **Hummingbirds**: the competition between Dixie Doyle and Liz Warren, and the popularity battle between Leo Binhammer and Ted Hughes. What similarities do these characters share? How are they different? Did you favor one over another? Why?

2. The school portrayed in the novel is an exclusive private all-girls institution. Why do you think the author chose this as the setting? Would the events have had the same resonance in a coed public school?

3. After hearing his wife's confession, Binhammer states that "he suddenly thought of himself as a character in a book." What do you think he was expecting to happen when he sets off on his course of revenge, of confrontation, of reconciliation? Was he being realistic? In what ways might he have been disappointed with the outcome? How does his view of himself (or what he wants himself to be) affect his actions?

4. Binhammer and Ted Hughes may be the big men on campus, but discuss the ways in which the women of the book --- Sarah, Sibyl, Dixie, Liz --- shape the direction of the two men's lives.

5. After Binhammer's masterminded plan to bring his wife and Ted Hughes together shatters the illusion "that he could maintain the delicate balance forever," Binhammer muses that he feels like a little boy at a wedding, causing a scene for attention. How do you see the lines between boy and man, girl and woman defined in this novel? Are there scenes in which you can see the characters actually fluctuating back and forth?

6. Liz sends a poem to Hughes, who in turn sends it to Binhammer. Why? What is the importance of the poem and how does reflect the relationships between these three characters? Why do you think Dixie, the fourth main character, is left out of this exchange?

7. Were you satisfied with Ted Hughes's departure at the end of the story? Did you feel he deserved stricter punishment? Was he entirely to blame for his involvement with Liz? How would you characterize Binhammer's response to Hughes's downfall and departure, and why do you think he responds the way he does?

8. Liz Warren criticizes The Sun Also Rises for being contingent on the rise and fall of "maleness." Do you see Hummingbirds as contingent on the rise and fall of maleness? Why or why not?

9. Liz Warren claims at the end of the novel that she thought seeing the adult world would be like seeing Oz --- everything would be in color. What do you make of the adult world here versus the world of adolescence? Does one seem brighter? Do you think the teachers at Carmine-Casey have nostalgia for adolescence, or no?

Author Bio

Joshua Gaylord received his Master's and Ph.D. in English at New York University, specializing in 20th-century American and British literature. For the past nine years, he has taught English at an elite Upper East Side prep school. He also teaches literature and cultural studies as an adjunct professor at The New School. He lives in New York with his wife, the Edgar-award-winning novelist Megan Abbott.

Critical Praise

"Gaylord has delivered a story that?s ripe with acute and wry observations on men and women, competition, sexuality,

and secrets."

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