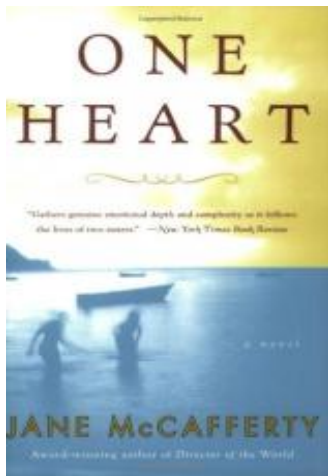


One Heart

by Jane McCafferty



About the Book

I make my little friends up here at camp and school, but I'm drawn to the cheerful. Life is short and I'm not here for the gloom. I been a good sister to Gladys, and that's enough gloom for any one soul, and I don't say that to blame her, and it's not like we haven't had some laughs even in the darkest of dark years. But Gladys had a hard life. I say had not because she's dead. I say had because I think it's changed now. --Ivy

A small wind bent the flames. I peered over at Raelene's firelit face, which looked young, dangerously young. Needy. I rowed back inside myself all the way for a clear moment. I could row myself back inside like I was a cave. A cave with ice on the walls, nice and dark. I could see the world and anyone in it standing at the cave's mouth, framed and manageable. I had to do this right away with Raelene. Because I see now that she scared me . . . Raelene dragged me out of my cave. Mad at her for even showing up. I wished she'd go back to where she came from . . . Of course, once you're out of the cave, you're out. You're rearranged. Bigger. So if you try going back in the cave, the fits no longer quite right. --Gladys

Gladys and Ivy are sisters and reluctant best friends. For the past ten years they've cooked side by side in the kitchen at Camp Timber and Timber winter school in a quiet, rural town in upstate New York. On the outside both women are similar-middle-aged, generously built, plainly dressed. Sadly, Gladys' lifetime has been marked by grief, including a divorce and the immeasurable loss of both of her children. While Ivy has been there with her through all of it, wanting to console and help, Gladys has been too frozen inside her grief to accept her sister's offering.

Then one April day, seventeen-year-old Raelene appears at the screen door of the sisters' house. A mysterious character, "with her long hair and pale face walking through the closed-up town on a bitter evening in her Salvation Army black coat," Raelene ultimately helps free Gladys to take a long denied emotional journey. While Raelene and Gladys travel across the country on a Greyhound bus, Ivy is left behind to grapple with her sister's absence and an inner life long ignored. Then, shortly after Gladys' departure, an unexpected visitor arrives on her doorstep—Gladys' estranged husband,

James-further challenging Ivy's own quiet existence and driving a wedge between the sisters.

The sisters' temporary parting of ways allows both Gladys and Ivy to face truths about themselves and their lives that their well ordered co-existence helped keep at bay. In the end, they arrive at a new and transformed understanding of their relationship-and of their own lives.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the significance of the title, particularly in the context of Gladys' and Ivy's lives? Do you feel that it adequately represents the main themes of this story?
2. This story is largely told from Gladys' and Ivy's respective points of view, with smaller portions from James and Raelene. What would the effect on the story have been had it been told solely from Ivy's point of view? Gladys'? James' or Raelenes'?
3. One Heart is a story told by adults, but in some ways it is mostly about children. Although we never directly meet Wendell or Ann, their characters are two of the most compelling. What are some of the techniques that McCafferty uses to evoke Ann and Wendell? What kind of children do you think they were? How does the author use the camp children to illuminate Ann's and Wendell's characters?
4. What kind of effect does it have on the story that both Gladys and Ivy have poor grammar and yet intense storytelling powers? Can you locate specific places in the story where this effect heightens the emotion of the moment? How does McCafferty differentiate the two sisters' voices?
5. Late in the novel, James becomes enraptured with a gosling family and its journey to the lake. What is the significance of this episode? Can you locate other examples in the story where the natural world is employed to set a mood or tell us something?
6. "I used to be a woman who thought of the eggs when she made the eggs-I liked that scrambled yellow color, and the bacon when she made the bacon-the smell and sizzle It's not as pleasant when your mind drifts. It's really not the right way to live. I'm against it. But I can't seem to make it stop." (p.40) One might construe this as Ivy's philosophy of life, do you agree? What would you say is Gladys' philosophy of life? What about Raelenes' and James'?
7. How does the setting of Camp Timber contribute to and illuminate the sisters' story? Would another setting have worked as well? What about the kitchen as the place that Ivy and Gladys worked side by side for years?
8. "What matters in the end, she suggests, has less to do with conventional images of happiness than with the deep, close-to-the-bone bonds that actually sustain us" (New York Times Book Review). What do you think the reviewer means by this comment? How do the themes of love and loneliness play out in this story? Grief and redemption? Do you feel this story has a happy ending?
9. Both of the sisters take journeys of discovery Gladys with Raelene and Ivy with James. What does Gladys learn from her journey? What does Ivy learn? Why do you suppose James allows himself to become involved with Ivy even though

he is still deeply in love with Gladys? Why is Raelene so determined to befriend Gladys?

10. At James' urging, he and Gladys revisit the lake where their three-year-old daughter, Ann, drowned. Gladys is deeply upset with herself for going in the water on that day. Why? Can you trace Gladys slow journey to forgiving herself? What are the other turning points for her?

Author Bio

Jane McCafferty was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for a section of this novel. Her stories have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Story*, *Witness*, and other publications, and her short story collection, **Director of the World**, was awarded the 1992 Drue Heinz Literature Prize. She teaches at Carnegie Mellon University and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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