

The Edge of Heaven

by Marita Golden



About the Book

In **The Edge of Heaven**, Marita Golden has fashioned a deceptively simple story of a family whose lives have been shattered by a single moment of angry carelessness--told through the eyes of Teresa Singletary, a twenty-year-old college student with an overwhelming emotional burden; her father, Ryland; and her mother, Lena, whose return to her own mother's home has precipitated a reckoning with Teresa. Together they all struggle to find a place to re-learn each other--somewhere that transcends the painful reality etched into their souls--only to discover that even the darkest tragedy is rivaled by love's transforming light.

Discussion Guide

1. How important is the author's choice to use the three generations of women--Ma Adele, Lena, Teresa, and Kenya--as the focal point in *The Edge of Heaven*? In what ways are these individuals similar yet different? And how does that impact on the outcome of the story?
2. Usually an author explains all of the details of a crime at the very start of a novel, but that is not done here. Instead, the reader is given the details of the incident in fragments, in flashbacks that interrupt the ongoing action of the book. Does this approach weaken or strengthen the power of the novel? Does it allow the author to flesh out the characters and their actions at the expense of the overall plot?

3. The older daughter, Teresa, who is often the conscience of the novel, sets the tone for the entire book by addressing its key themes in the opening lines of **The Edge of Heaven**: "My mother returned that summer from an exile both imposed and earned. Nothing had prepared me for her departure. I was unsure how to claim her homecoming. But I share her talent for perseverance, for we are joined by more than I can bear. My mother came back to recognition and reckoning. I thought she came home to me." Discuss the importance of these words and how they set the stage for all that occurs afterward in the novel.
4. Kenya, the younger daughter, is the pivotal character in this domestic tragedy, offering a metaphorical mirror in which the actions of those around her are viewed. How might her strong personality factor into her death?
5. The author makes several insightful comments about the awesome responsibility of parenthood. What is she saying with Lena's statement to her husband: "Are we good enough? As people, as a couple?" Is this doubt and insecurity concerning mastering the task of parenthood common? Do Lena and Ryland have reason to fear their parenting skills?
6. The fate of Lena in her marriage is one shared by many women in our society, especially when passion and communication are no longer present. The author aptly describes their situation: "But living within the borders of her marriage, Lena knew three things, that she loved Ryland, that he had failed her, and that she would not leave him." Is their union worth preserving? Are the measures they take to save their marriage effective or is it beyond repair?
7. Some critics have questioned the author's depiction of the incident which takes Kenya's life. Is there a reason for how the child's death is presented in an almost ambiguous manner? Are we sure that Lena intended to kill her child? Was it murder or an unfortunate accident?
8. Ryland, the father and husband, is portrayed with fairness and realism, unlike many African American men in recent black novels. What role does he play in the untimely death of his child? Should he blame himself for what happened to Kenya?
9. In the key scenes following Kenya's death, Teresa cares for her emotionally numb mother in a reversal of familial roles. How do these scenes reflect the healing power of love within the family? Is the lack of anger and bitterness in the scenes accurate?
10. What effect does the imprisonment of Lena have on her daughter Teresa? Does the nature of the crime that led to her mother's incarceration change her affection for her mother? What emotional adjustments does Teresa make to cope with her mother's return?
11. How does Ma Adele attempt to relate to her daughter after her crime? Upon review, discuss how her reaction to Lena's behavior and failed marriage show the contrast between these two women from two different generations.
12. What is the author emphasizing when she recounts Lena's words about her fellow female inmates: "They weren't so different from me. And in many ways, I was like them. They were individuals, not numbers. That's how I became their friend." What is the author saying about women in prison and the families they leave behind in the outside world?

13. The memory of Kenya's death disrupts the lives of all who survive her. What psychological damage occurs within each family member? How is Lena's response to the loss different from the others'?

14. Ryland's passion for his art is significant and has cost him a great deal. How does he use it to heal himself after Kenya's death, rather than reaching out to others for comfort and solace? Why is his art so important in his honoring of his daughter's memory? What role did his art play in the erosion of love in his marriage?

15. In **The Edge of Heaven**, Metropolitan Baptist Church becomes a haven for Lena when she seeks to find a way toward personal redemption after her release. Is the author's depiction of the woman's acceptance by the congregation an honest one, considering the conservative nature of the black church? What is symbolic about Lena seeking forgiveness at the church where her daughter's funeral was held?

16. Kenya, in many ways, seems to be a reflection of her father, especially in her love of art. Is this likeness a major reason for her mother's animosity toward her? Does this resemblance in Kenya's temperament contribute to her death?

17. Teresa's love and loyalty for her mother begins the family's quest for healing and forgiveness. The author's gift for language shines in Teresa's words about her mother: "I slept beside my mother at night on Sycamore Street, trying my father's place, loyal, loving, needing her despite everything. I lay next to my mother and listen to her sleep, partial, nightmarish, my sister's name breaking through her sobs. And as terrible as it was, there was no other place for me. She was my mother. I knew they would take her away from me. We would all pay for what she had done." What do these words suggest about the daughter's love for her mother? And what do they say about the emotional cost of the crime on the family as a whole?

18. Upon her release from prison, Lena confronts the tremendous struggle to re-integrate herself into her family and community. Which scenes reveal how difficult this goal will be? In reality, would an African American family be so forgiving of a mother convicted of such an unspeakable crime?

19. Reviewers have cited the author's exceptional ability to examine family relationships and the psychological depths that move her stories "beyond race and the confines of the black community." What scenes in this novel best exhibit her skill in this area? What elements of **The Edge of Heaven** make it of universal interest?

20. Redemption, forgiveness, and renewal are never easily achieved. At what point in **The Edge of Heaven** can readers begin to hope that Lena's family will survive this terrible ordeal? What images and metaphors does the author use to indicate this possibility?

Author Bio

Marita Golden has distinguished herself as a writer, teacher, and literary institution builder. Born and raised in Washington, D.C., she grew up in a household where at the age of fourteen her mother told her she was going to write a book one day and her father, a raconteur and history buff, supplemented her formal education with his own in-depth knowledge of African and African American history.

In her first book, a memoir, **Migrations of the Heart**, she transformed her own experience of marrying a Nigerian and

living in Nigeria for several years into a story that has resonated with a wide audience and has become a book used on college campuses around the country in women's studies programs. Her novels, **Long Distance Life, A Woman's Place, And Do Remember Me**, and **The Edge of Heaven**, have dramatized the intersection of the personal and the political, as well as the everyday tragedies and triumphs of contemporary African American life. In her nonfiction book **Saving Our Sons**, she explored the continuing contradictions and challenges faced by black parents raising male children in America today. She is also the editor of **Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women Writers on Men, Love, and Sex** and the co-editor of **Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write about Race**. Her latest book is **A Miracle Every Day: Triumph and Transformation in the Lives of Single Mothers**.

In 1983, with Clyde McElevine, she formed the African American Writers Guild, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that offers workshops and support programs for black writers in the metropolitan D.C. area. An active member of the national literary community, Marita Golden has served as a member of the PEN Faulkner board and is currently on the advisory board of the Mobil Pegasus Prize. She is president of the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation, which presents a summer workshop for black writers and awards the nation's only national award for college fiction writers of African descent.

Critical Praise

"Fiercely intelligent, brimming with ethical questions, never overtly political, the novels of Marita Golden have an old-fashioned earnestness about them. . . . This is a powerful story, which Golden tells with great sensitivity and respect for her characters. . . . In a departure from her previous novels, Lena's troubles can be traced not to oppression by the white world but to her eager participation in that world. In enjoying the fruits of inclusion in white corporate America, she also paid a grievous price in the destruction of her marriage and her daughter's death. . . . Golden seems to be suggesting that the Singletarys' tragedy is colorblind and could just as easily have befallen other families, black and white. "

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