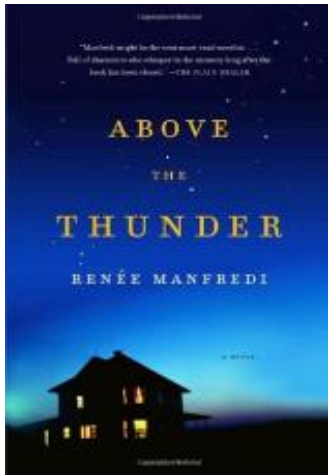


# Above the Thunder

by Renee Manfredi

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## About the Book

A wary, middle-aged widow numbed by loss and disappointment. A preternaturally intelligent little girl who eavesdrops on the dead. A charming, sybaritic gay man torn between his love for his partner and the anarchy of his desires. These are the charged poles of Renee Manfredi's gorgeously written first novel, a book that explores the currents of tenderness, responsibility and chance that turn strangers into a family.

Anna Brinkman meets her ten-year-old granddaughter Flynn when the girl appears on her doorstep, desperate for a love more steadfast than any she has received from her parents. She meets Jack when he shows up in an AIDS support group she is running and does his best to get kicked out. What ensues in a house on the coast of Maine will be the great journey of all their lives. Filled with humor, sadness, and wisdom, *Above the Thunder* is a magical achievement.

## Discussion Guide

1. As the novel opens, Anna doubts her own capacity for compassion: "Deep down she suspected that this trait, along with the maternal one, had never been activated in her. She doubted if it was possible to understand someone else's suffering. Even her beloved husband whose pain had become a private geography on which she couldn't trespass" [p. 21]. Is this cynicism or honesty at work in Anna? Do her relationships with Flynn and Jack change her aptitude for compassion and/or her ability to recognize it?
2. **Above the Thunder** is rich in symbolism, particularly surrounding Anna's voyage to self-knowledge. What is the symbolic significance of her collection of antique hair pins? Her cell pathology slides? What does it mean when she randomly buys a collection of books about female hunters? Why does she have a penchant for dropping things? What other symbols does the author weave into Anna's story?
3. What complex facets of motherhood --- or the desire for it --- does the author explore through the characters of Anna,

Greta, Poppy, Leila, and Jane? What distinction does Anna draw between "maternal instinct" and "motherhood" [p. 116]? What different aspects of the concept of fatherhood are represented by Marvin, Mike, Jack, and Stuart?

4. Flynn's point of view is introduced abruptly at the end of the fifth chapter. What does the reader glean about Flynn from this short, powerful passage? What foreshadowing does it contain?

5. The AIDS support group brings Anna into contact with Stuart and Jack. Is there more significance to the group than serving the plot? How does Anna's involvement with the group affect her?

6. As Jack grapples with the mystery of who has given him the AIDS virus, he muses: "Mysteries and miracles, miracles and destinations, weren't that far apart, in his view. The stricken and the blessed both followed the same path, faith the common point of origin. In the end, there was no difference between Bethlehem and the bathhouses" [p. 79]. What does he mean by "destinations" here? What sort of faith has led him to his dilemma?

7. How does the author weave subtle hints about reincarnation into the text to make Flynn's prophecies more sinister and suggestive? What is Flynn's vision of herself, Marvin, Poppy, and Anna in the next life? What behavior does Anna exhibit that seems to corroborate Flynn's prediction about her?

8. Jack does not fear death but rather fears the possibility of continuing in the beyond: "Spirit without body was repugnant, desire no longer limited by the boundary of skin, expanding to fill the universe, love like sound waves going on forever, not stopped by the density of flesh. How could he ever keep track of himself when his margins were infinite?" [p. 198] In what way does this same fear plague Anna, as well as Flynn? Can it be argued that this is, in fact, the theme of the novel? How does each of these three characters handle this fear?

9. During a particularly alarming episode of Flynn's irrational behavior, Anna begs the girl to always tell the truth: "You should never hide. Never hide the things that make you who you are" [p. 158]. Yet asking this promise of the child fills Anna with an inexplicable sense of dread. "The truth --- whatever Anna meant by it, and she didn't quite know now --- was likely to deliver her granddaughter into the hands of the enemy" [p. 159]. What are the possible meanings of the word "enemy" in this context?

10. What is the significance of the Mahatma Gandhi epigraph, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world"? Which of the novel's characters yearn for change, and which ones achieve it?

11. Why does Greta insist that "Poppy had nothing to do with what Flynn did. She's not responsible"? Is it possible to separate Flynn's propensity for depression from her abandonment by her mother? Does Anna find Poppy culpable?

12. What role does the late Hugh play in the way Anna approaches her new life in Maine? How does the memory of him act as a conduit between her and Flynn? What finally allows Anna to let go of Hugh to the extent that she is open to the possibility of romance?

13. Are the adults in the novel too self-absorbed to realistically see how troubled and endangered Flynn is, or are they earnestly trying to allow her the freedom of eccentricity? Why does Anna muse only half-heartedly about Flynn's possible need for professional help? Is the consequence of Flynn's action an avoidable tragedy or an instance of fate?

14. During a game of "would you rather" with Flynn, Anna chooses to be a fig tree rather than a whale, stating, "I would always prefer to bear fruit" [p. 139]. How can this conviction be reconciled with her apparent distaste for motherhood? Does this moment mark a turning point for Anna, or is she simply accessing her real feelings on the matter?

15. What is the significance of the birch log fire Anna smells the morning of the tragedy?

16. Jack imagines infection with the AIDS virus as a kind of pregnancy, giving him a sense of being rooted, or caught up in a continuum. He envisions "the lineage of all those he'd ever loved and his lovers' loved ones, through this virus, a kind of terrible, merciless child who gestated over and over" [p. 40]. What does this odd reflection reveal about Jack? Is he a likeable character despite his patent untrustworthiness? How does Jack's character evolve over the course of the novel?

17. What does Anna mean to convey when she tells Marvin, "Mourning is easier than worry. Or any of those emotions you feel for the living" [p. 116]? Has she closed herself off to the possibility of love and relationships? Or is she entering another phase of dealing with them?

## Author Bio

Renee Manfredi received her MFA from Indiana University, a fellowship from The National Endowment for the Arts, and was a regional winner of *Granta's* Best American Novelists Under 40. Her story collection, **Where Love Leaves Us**, won the Iowa Short Fiction award. Her short stories have been published in *The Mississippi Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and the Pushcart Prize anthology, and were featured in NPR's "Selected Shorts" series. Manfredi is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Alaska. **Above the Thunder** is her first novel.

## Critical Praise

"In this moving, engrossing family drama about journeys taken willingly and, for the most part, not, relatives' and acquaintances' lives intersect, and tests of family loyalties and friendships spur growth and insight. Meanwhile, Manfredi handles each character confidently and credibly."

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