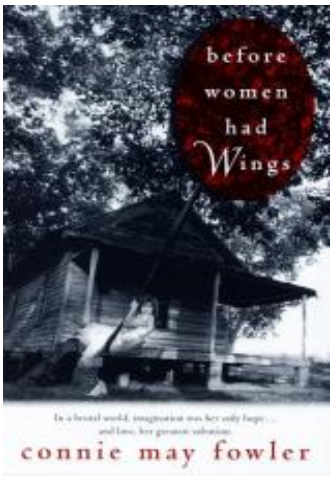
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Before Women Had Wings

by Connie May Fowler



About the Book

In a brutal world, imagination was her only hope...and love, her greatest salvation.

The premiere Oprah Winfrey Presents movie on ABC Network Television

My name is Avocet Abigail Jackson. But because Mama couldn't find anyone who thought Avocet was a fine name for a child, she called me Bird. Which is okay by me. She named both her children after birds, her logic being that if we were named for something with wings then maybe we'd be able to fly above the shit in our lives....

So says Bird Jackson, the mesmerizing narrator of Connie May Fowler's vivid and brilliantly written, **Before Women Had Wings**.

Starstruck by a dime-store picture of Jesus, Bird fancies herself "His girlfriend" and embarks upon a spiritual quest for salvation, even as the chaos of her home life plunges her into a stony silence. In stark and honest language, she tells the tragic life of her father, a sweet-talking wanna-be country music star, tracks her older sister's perilous journey into womanhood, and witnesses her mother make a courageous and ultimately devastating decision.

Yet most profound is Bird's own story--her struggle to sift through the ashes of her parents' lives, her meeting with Miss Zora, a healer whose prayers over the bones of winged creatures are meant to guide their souls to heaven, and her will to make sense of a world where fear is more plentiful than hope, retribution more valued than love. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. This story takes place in the mid-1960s. How have our perceptions of child abuse changed since then? What options do families have today to cope with domestic violence that they might not have had thirty years ago? Women--especially

poor women like Glory Marie--had far fewer opportunities than women today. Did that lack of opportunity contribute to her anger and frustration and the physical abuse that resulted?

2. How would you describe the differences in the ways in which Bird and Phoebe deal with the same set of difficult circumstances?

3. Why do you think Billy Jackson committed suicide?

4. Why does Bird shut herself off verbally from the outside world? Why do you think she becomes convinced that a blackbird stole her voice?

5. What is the significance of Miss Zora's role as a guardian of the bones of dead birds?

6. What do you think happened to Bird's family in the years after the story ends? Do you think Glory Marie recovered from her fear-scarred life? Did the family reunite? Did Phoebe make it to college and stability? Did Bird find some measure of peace and pleasure in the healing presence of Miss Zora?

7. How does Bird manage to remain full of hope under such difficult circumstances? How might you react if you were in her shoes? What is it that keeps this family together despite the abuse and turmoil?

8. In considering a picture of Jesus hanging on her bedroom wall, Bird says, "He was skinny, but I bet He was strong. I loved his silky, long brown hair . . . . In my daydreams, Jesus and I would walk off into a blazing sunset, holding hands. I may have been nothing but a kid, but in that gauzy dream, I was gorgeous. There we were, Him with his Prell-perfect hair, and me sporting a good figure. In my heart of hearts, Jesus was my first boyfriend. And I was dead certain he loved me special. . . ." Why was Bird so preoccupied with Jesus and with religion? Why does she think Jesus and the Devil are battling for control of her life? And why does she feel jilted by Jesus?

9. Do you think Glory Marie truly loves her daughters? Why didn't she feel like she could keep the family together and get help for her alcoholism and abusive nature at the same time? Do you think she made the right decision in allowing the children to go with Miss Zora?

10. Do you think Bird's brother, Hank, understands how bad things are for Phoebe and Bird? Why doesn't he take stronger steps to intervene or keep his sisters from being hurt by their mother's beatings?

11. Is it fear or jealousy that causes Glory Marie to cut up Bird's Christmas present for Miss Zora? What fueled Glory Marie's dislike of Miss Zora? Why do you think Glory Marie engineered things so that Bird got blamed for stealing money from Mr. Ippolito?

12. Why does Bird blame herself and her sister for the beatings they receive at the hands of their mother?

13. How does the picture of Florida painted by Fowler differ from the way Florida is depicted in other books?

14. While many people might want to leave such memories behind, Fowler admits she wants to keep these memories alive and vibrant. Why? What purpose do you think these painful memories serve for Fowler?

15. Fowler mixes themes of religion and spirituality in her stories. How does Fowler's use of spirituality compare to spiritual themes in other books you might have read?

16. What is it that Bird learns from Miss Zora about hell, and why does this change everything for her? What do you see as the connection between the kindness of Miss Zora and Bird's discovery of her own capacity for forgiveness?

17. Fowler says that Miss Zora believes that forgiveness is for the people who are doing the forgiving; it's a way for them to create a usable past instead of the past continually dragging them down. Do you agree with Miss Zora's ideas about forgiveness? If so, why?

18. This book is clearly the story of Fowler's own childhood. How do you think her siblings felt about having their family history revealed in the pages of a novel? How would you feel under similar circumstances?

19. Fowler has said, "I wanted to characterize the mother honestly, presenting the trauma she inflicted but also the inner turmoil; that she was reacting out of frustration. I also want to reveal the humanity of her life. I hope it comes off in the book that she was very courageous." Do you see the mother as a humane or sympathetic character? Do you consider her courageous?

Author Bio

Connie May Fowler is an essayist, screenwriter, and novelist. Her previous books include **Sugar Rage**, **River of Hidden Dreams**, and most recently**Remembering Blue**. Her 1996 novel, **Before Women Had Wings**, won the Southern Book Critics Circle Award and was made into a successful "Oprah Winfrey Presents" TV movie. **Remembering Blue** won the Chautauqua South Award for Fiction. She and her husband are cofounders of the Connie May Fowler Women with Wings Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to aiding women and children in need. She lives in Florida.

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Critical Praise

" A thing of heart-rending beauty, a moving exploration of love and loss, violence and grief, forgiveness and redemption. "--***Chicago Tribune***"There is no denying the depth of Connie May Fowler's talent and the breadth of her imagination. "--***The New York Times Book Review***"Brilliant. "--***The Boston Sunday Globe*** Winner of the 1996 Southern Book Award

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