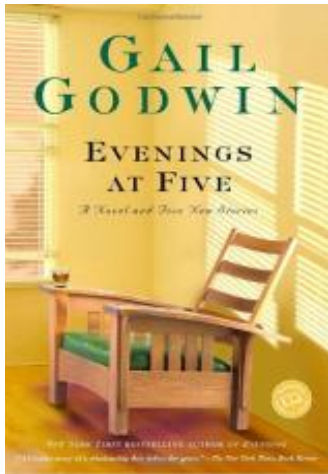

Evenings at Five: A Novel and Five New Stories

by Gail Godwin



About the Book

Every evening at five o'clock, Christina and Rudy began the ritual commonly known as Happy Hour, sharing drinks along with a love of language and music (she is an author, he a composer, after all), a delight in intense conversation, a fascination with popes, and nearly thirty years of life together. Now, seven months after Rudy's unexpected death, Christina reflects on their vibrant bond—with all its quirks, habits, and unguarded moments—as well as her passionate sorrow and her attempts to reposition herself and her new place in the very real world they shared.

Discussion Guide

1. Let's start with the very first sentence in **Evenings at Five**: "Five o'clock sharp." Do you hear a bell tolling? What does this one sentence tell you about what you're about to read? The phrase is repeated on page 29. How do you react to hearing it again? Five o'clock is associated with a ritual in Christina's house. A ritual—originally meaning a prescribed religious ceremony—has taken on the meaning of a regular household activity. Is there such a thing as a household religion? and if so, what composes it?
2. Are stronger memories associated with rituals than with other events? What kinds of experiences make the strongest memories? What kinds of sensations and associations does Godwin latch on to as Christina evokes the cocktail hour?
3. Are rituals necessary in helping us avoid feeling vulnerable in lives easily dominated by our own weaknesses? How does Christina use rituals to counter her ritual alcohol drinking?
4. Some memories are "graven on the heart" (page 16) and others strike familiar chords. Chapter 1 ends with Rudy answering Christina's question, "What are you thinking?" by telling her, "I wasn't thinking. I was hearing music." Does Christina attain this kind of sensitivity in a way? Is what she hears on page 17 a kind of music? To a certain way of hearing, is everything music, including Rudy's answering machine message (pages 38-39), to which Christina applies

the Gregorian term *melisma* (an ornamental phrasing of a word or syllable)? The last chapter, "Coda," reminds us that Godwin has composed a sonata in **Evenings at Five**. In what ways can you sense or hear a sonata in the novel?

5. Godwin says that, after writing the first five pages of **Evenings**, she had tricked herself into a new way of writing. What is that new way? To get a handle on this, look at the kinds of sentences she writes and at how one sentence connects to the next.

6. By the end of chapter 2 of **Evenings**, you realize that Christina is talking with Rudy, who has died. Is such a conversation helpful, or does it cause you to worry about Christina? Your opinion will determine what you think Christina's fate will be in this story. See Rudy's posthumous conversation with Christina on pages 97-98.

7. Look at how Godwin ends each chapter in **Evenings**. Write down the ending sentences or key clauses in succession on a piece of paper and see how they tell the story.

8. What do you know about different grieving ceremonies? Christina undergoes a few. What should the purpose of such services be? Are they effective? What do you think of the ceremonies that Christina experiences? What is the art of condolence letters?

9. What kind of a record of a person's life is left after his death? What kind of a story does an appointment book tell? **Evenings** provides a remarkably comprehensive account of the different kinds of things that linger or last after death—including junk mail. What are those things? What is Godwin's strongest case for eternal life? Keep in mind her opinions on page 58.

10. In a fictional world, memorable impressions are symbols, key events are omens, and coincidences are fate. In our lives, is there such meaning? What is the meaning of Christina's temporary semiblindness? What about the sighting of the bear?

11. On page 57, Christina discovers how much she misses Rudy's awful moments. Are there any personality traits people exhibit that are not lovable? Perhaps shallowness, conformity, or lack of personality? Does this relate to Christina's uneasiness with the paltriness of most confessed sins in "Possible Sins"?

12. Godwin opens up a lot of space in her novel for Gil Mallow. Mallow is the child of a mother who had given birth to him because, at first, she hadn't known she was pregnant, and, then, used her pregnant condition for her art. Eventually, she rejected pregnancy-inspired forms and artistically aborted the idea of Gil. Why is Mallow such an important person in Godwin's and Christina's universes? How much are you affected by the heartbreaking episodes in **Evenings**? Christina sobs, cries, and hoots with laughter at various points. At the end of chapter 3, she says, "My heart is broken." As dream analysts say after hearing about agonizing dreams, what were the feelings you had witnessing the episodes?

13. What percentage of your life do you think is dominated by memories rather than your engagement with present needs? How much do you wish to stay connected with the past? Why? Is it useful to have talismans, such as Rudy's metronome, or passwords, such as the one Christina holds on to in "Possible Sins"? What role does Bud play throughout **Evenings**? Do cats have some special supernatural connection?

14. Godwin's novels always include the names of books that characters are reading or to which they are referring. They

provide a subtext to the story. If you're ambitious, make a list of the book references in **Evenings**, find out what they're about, and see what they say about the novel.

15. What does Christina mean when she says (on page 113), "I have to make the crossover between image and presence"? She then says, "I, the visual one, now have to rely on sounds." Are visuals associated with image, and sounds with presence?

16. You have an opportunity, now that Godwin is including her Christina stories with **Evenings at Five**, to witness the growth of a major work. How do the stories connect to **Evenings**? What major themes are developing? Where are the gaps? What additional stories would you like to see?

17. At the end of "Possible Sins," Father Weir suggests using a favorite food as a password for spiritual communication rather than a memorable piece of wisdom. What information do you use for private passwords in e-mail accounts or as personal information to confirm your identity with credit-card companies? What really sticks in your mind?

18. What fairy tale does "Largesse" evoke? Do modern women have to create a body of stories to counter the messages of traditional fairy tales?

19. Both "Largesse" and "Old Lovegood Girls" involve fellow airplane passengers who play roles in ushering Christina into her story. Are each of the Christina stories a mythological journey? If so, what insight or dividend does Christina retrieve from each descent?

20. How does Godwin struggle with the idea of the ingénue? In her interview, she says that she had never been an ingénue. Yet in "Old Lovegood Girls," she acknowledges an attraction to the old Southern way of life and the importance of such a concept to her father. At the heart of this issue are Christina's views on goodness, expressed in her essay for Miss Petrie. Does Christina's belief in goodness, even though it's a revision of the traditional model, indicate an attachment to the old ideal? Or does Christina reject the ideal as a product of the "market for brides"? How do you think Godwin views marriage?

21. In "Waltzing with the Black Crayon," Kurt Vonnegut issues some rules for writing. Do you agree with them? Do you have a list of rules?

22. In what ways is "Mother and Daughter Ghosts, A Memoir" a ghost story? Why does the term *ghost* apply to the daughter as well as the mother?

23. What is it that causes Godwin to slip into the role that attaches to her at the conference in "Mother and Daughter"? Was Godwin looking for a way out of what had been developing at the conference? What might have been and what were her ways out?

24. What do Godwin's and her mother's imagination exercises say about them at the moment they compose them?

25. "Mother and Daughter" contains a powerful revelation?the mother's admission of what she had witnessed and redressed at her father's funeral. It comes under the heading "the worst thing that had ever happened in her life." What function does revelation play in Godwin's reaction? What kinds of questions elicit revelations? "What is the worst

thing?" is one. Another kind of revelation leads off "Waltzing with the Black Crayon." What are the different kinds of revelation?

Author Bio

Gail Godwin is a three-time National Book Award finalist and the bestselling author of numerous critically acclaimed novels, including VIOLET CLAY, FATHER MELANCHOLY'S DAUGHTER, EVENSONG, THE GOOD HUSBAND and EVENINGS AT FIVE. She is also the author of THE MAKING OF A WRITER, her journal in two volumes (edited by Rob Neufeld). She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts grants for both fiction and libretto writing, and the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Gail Godwin lives in Woodstock, New York.

Critical Praise

"QUIRKY, WRY, AND SURPRISINGLY POWERFUL . . . with a delight in words and the ways people use and abuse them that is typical of this urbane author."

Evenings at Five: A Novel and Five New Stories

by Gail Godwin

Publication Date: March 30, 2004

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Ballantine Books

ISBN-10: 0345461037

ISBN-13: 9780345461032