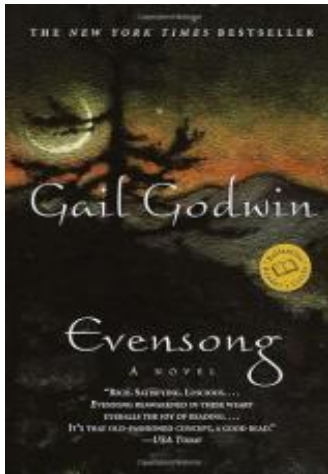


Evensong

by Gail Godwin



About the Book

To read Gail Godwin is to touch the very core of human experience. With inimitable grace and aching emotional precision, Godwin probes our own complexities in characters whose lives oscillate between success and struggle, stoic resolve and quixotic temptation, bitter disappointment and small, sacred joys. Now with **Evensong**, she again translates our everyday existence into soul-touching truths as she brings to brilliantly realized life the people of a small Smoky Mountain town--and a woman whose world is indelibly altered by them.

Discussion Guide

1. Is **Evensong** a religious book, a book about religion, or neither?
2. Was the profession of the heroine a plus or a minus in your own reading of the novel?
3. Did you find it difficult to empathize with a minister who was female, or with a female who was a minister? Would men and women have different answers to this question?
4. Did you feel that Gail Godwin was writing from serious religious convictions? Were you convinced by Margaret's thoughts about her calling as she went about her daily tasks? For example, how do you think she handled crises such as Helen Britt's tragedy or the dying Shaun asking if there were an afterlife?
5. How did you feel about the burning of the church at the end of the novel? Was there a message there?
6. Is Gail Godwin's most important topic women's search for identity? What are the women--Margaret, Gus, Grace, Madelyn, Helen Britt-- in **Evensong** searching for?

7. On page six, Godwin writes, "Mothers and fathers go away and never come back." Are the departing parents (Margaret's mother, Adrian's father, Grace Munger's parents, Chase Zorn's and Father Mountjoy's parents) running away from their lives or toward something they perceive as salvation? Is anything positive accomplished by their flight? What do their abandoned children have in common?

8. What do the unrepentant Chase and the obsessively competent Jennifer have in common?

9. With such a large number of families split up in different ways, does the sudden appearance of Tony seem contrived or unrealistic? And how would you have handled the situation if you had been Margaret and Tony had revealed his secret to you?

10. Grace Munger's aggressive, evangelical Christianity, which confronts the world with a "he who is not with me is against me" style of rhetoric, is contrasted vividly with the faith of the conscientious but quiet Margaret. Is this contrast at the heart of the book?

11. Godwin's story unfolds within the confines of a fairly ordinary community with the usual troubles and conflicts. Is Grace Munger put into the story to shake up the complacency of the community? Is she following a genuine call to assert the presence of God in High Balsam at the time of the millennium?

12. Does the reader get to know Adrian Bonner enough to know where his religious sympathies fall? Is he too cerebral to become a satisfactory husband for Margaret? Does he elicit your sympathy or your exasperation?

13. "The gift of your art goads and inspires me to risk further narrative adventures of my own," says Margaret to her twenty-- year-- old daughter near the conclusion of *Evensong*. What narrative adventures do you envisage for Margaret if Godwin should ever decide to write a sequel?

14. Does reading *Evensong* cause those of you who haven't read its prequel, **Father Melancholy's Daughter**, to want to find out more about how Margaret Bonner became the person she is, or have you learned all you need to know about her as a woman and a minister?

15. If you have read both volumes, did Margaret mature as you might have expected from the young woman you met in **Father Melancholy's Daughter**?

16. Would you recommend this novel to a friend who has no interest in any kind of organized religion or belief in a higher being? If so, why?

Author Bio

Gail Godwin was born in Birmingham, Alabama June 18, 1937, during the summer her father was managing a Krahenbuhl cousin's lakeside resort. (Gail's maternal grandfather, Thomas Krahenbuhl, a first generation Swiss-American, was raised in Alabama.) Gail's parents divorced soon after, and she and her mother and newly widowed grandmother, Edna Rogers Krahenbuhl, moved back to the mountains of Asheville, N.C., the grandmother's home. In Asheville, Kathleen Godwin supported the family by teaching at two colleges, working as a newspaper reporter, and writing romance stories for pulp magazines. Gail attended St. Genevieve's of the Pines, a Catholic school for girls, through the ninth grade. Her new novel, *Unfinished Desires*, was inspired by St. Genevieve's. Her mother remarried when Godwin was eleven, and the family moved frequently after that. Godwin attended five high schools in four years. She reunited with her father at her high school graduation from Woodrow Wilson in Portsmouth, and went to live with him in Smithfield, N.C. Godwin graduated from

After graduation, she worked as a reporter on the Miami Herald (a year that inspired *Queen of the Underworld*) and subsequently traveled to Europe, working for the United States Travel Service at the US Embassy in London. (These years are documented in Volume One of *The Making of a Writer*, and also treated in her novella "Mr. Bedford" in *Mr. Bedford and the Muses*.) In 1967, she was accepted into the Writers' Workshop program at the University of Iowa. Along with John Irving and John Casey, she studied with Kurt Vonnegut. Her Ph.D. dissertation was published in 1970 as her first novel, *The Perfectionists*, thus launching a long and prolific career as a writer.

Three of her novels, *The Odd Woman*, *Violet Clay*, and *A Mother and Two Daughters*, were National Book Award finalists and five of them (*A Mother and Two Daughters*, *The Finishing School*, *A Southern Family*, *Father Melancholy's Daughter*, and *Evensong*) were New York Times best sellers. Godwin has lived in Woodstock, N.Y. since 1976 with her long time companion, the composer Robert Starer, who died in 2001. Together they wrote ten musical works, including the chamber opera *The Other Voice: A Portrait of Hilda of Whitby*, available from Selah Publishing Company: www.selahpub.com. *Evenings at Five* is a novella based on Godwin's and Starer's life together. Godwin received a Guggenheim Fellowship and two National Endowment grants, one for fiction and one for libretto writing. Her archives are in the Southern Historical Collection, the Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Critical Praise

"A deeply considered, even dignified novel . . . One stays engaged with the story for sheer narrative hook: As with story lines from Dickens . . . you simply want to find out who does what to whom. . . . The final beauty of *Evensong* is its ability to address God--to address the mystery of faith by comprehending, then embracing, this premise of uncertainty itself."

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