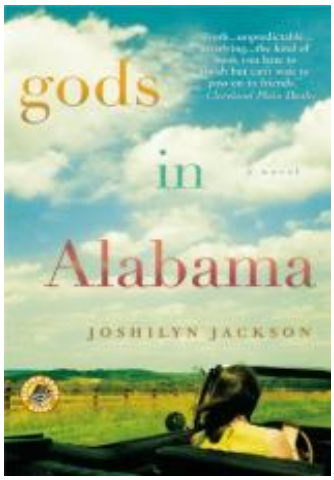
Gods in Alabama

by Joshilyn Jackson



About the Book

When Arlene Fleet heads up north for college, she makes three promises to God: She will stop fornicating with every boy who crosses her path; never tell another lie; and never, ever go back to the "fourth rack of hell," her hometown of Possett, Alabama. All she wants from Him is one little miracle: make sure the body is never found.

Ten years later, God has broken His end of the deal. Alabama has landed on Arlene's Chicago doorstep in the form of her high school archenemy, a young woman who wants to find the golden-haired football hero who disappeared during their senior year.

To make matters worse, Arlene's African American boyfriend, Burr, has given her an ultimatum-introduce him to her lily-white family or he's gone. Arlene would rather burn up in a fire than let him meet her steel magnolia Aunt Florence; her eccentric, half-mad Mama; her sweet-as-pecan-pie Cousin Clarice; and all the rest of her deeply racist kith and kin.

But the fickle finger of fate is pointing her south. All too soon she and Burr are on their way to confront Arlene's redneck roots, the secret she ran from, and the crime that stole her peace of mind. Back in the small town of her girlhood, Arlene's demons are closing in-and after a decade of running away, Arlene must face them all. Yet while the truth threatens to destroy the life she has built for herself, it just may open her eyes to a love powerful enough to revise her past and alter her future.

Crackling with humor, defiantly endearing characters, and plot twists that will astonish even the most jaded reader, **Gods in Alabama** will send you careening from tears to laughter and back. Most of all, it brings a unique, rough-around-the-edges heroine to life and makes her a permanent part of your own.

Discussion Guide

1. Who or what are the gods that the title refers to? Who are the gods in your hometown, workplace, or culture?

2. Arlene finds an imperfect but workable way to live around her family's deeply ingrained racism while maintaining the two most important relationships in her life. How satisfying is this compromise? Is it fair to Burr? To Florence? Should Arlene have asked for and expected more?

3. In what ways does Arlene's "deal with God" allow her to protect herself? How much of it is true penance and how much is a defense mechanism?

4. Arlene has painted a picture of Clarice as beautiful, pure, passive, and wholesome. How does idealizing Clarice influence Arlene's own behavior and sexuality?

5. Arlene's biological mother is almost a non-person in the book, and Arlene has surrounded herself with replacement mothers. Who are these replacements, and what aspects of mothering does she get from each of them?

6. The women in this novel generally tend to overpower the men, whether in conversation, romance, or physical altercations. Is this indicative of Southern society in general? What point might the author be making about gender relations in an outwardly traditional society?

7. The main character in this book is alternately known as Arlene and Lena. What are the distinguishing characteristics of Arlene? Of Lena? How do you think she would identify herself? By the end of the book, had she changed in your mind from one to the other, or had the two been integrated?

8. Arlene has clearly rehearsed a confession for years and years. How do you think her commitment to this retelling of the events of the past has shaped her current course of action?

9. Who is Jim Beverly? How do you reconcile the "pure-hearted, sole good man" Rose Mae Lolley has ever known with the scoundrel on Lipsmack Hill that fateful night?

10. What role does the Southern locale play in the novel? Could such a story take place in another region? Why or why not?

11. Forgiveness and atonement are two of the major themes in this novel. Who do you believe has done the most genuine atoning in this story? Who has the biggest sin to forgive?

12. Arlene baldly states that she is a game player, and she plays both literal and metaphorical games with Burr and the other characters throughout the novel. She is also, on some level, playing a game with the reader. How did you react to this? Do you think she played "fair"?

Author Bio

Joshilyn Jackson is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of numerous novels, including GODS IN ALABAMA and NEVER HAVE I EVER. Her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages. A former actor, Jackson is also an award-winning audiobook narrator. A recent expat from the American South, she and her family

have settled in upstate New York.

Critical Praise

"Southern heroines rarely leap off the page as full of life and trouble as Arlene Fleet, the headstrong protagonist and erstwhile alter ego of young Atlanta writer Joshilyn Jackson, whose marvelous debut, **Gods in Alabama**, is fixing to slap some sense into modern Southern fiction.....**Sweet Home Alabama** meets **Guess Who's Coming to Dinner** as Arlene stumbles toward a redemption that even Rhett and Scarlett would never have imagined. Foulmouthed and hilariously frank, Gods in Alabama is just the shot of sour to counter the diabetic-coma-inducing sweetness that seems to have overtaken Southern literature lately."

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