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Gone for Good

by Mark Childress



About the Book

By the time *Newsweek* dubs thirty-four-year-old Ben (Superman) Willis "The New Super-Poet of Pop," he has millions of adoring fans, piles of money, a beautiful family--and a secret desire to chuck it all and disappear forever. He gets his wish after a violent storm, some wicked Mexican weed, and a faulty compass cause his precious plane to crash on a remote tropical island.

When he hears Marilyn Monroe's breathless voice saying he's "kind of cute," Superman thinks he has woken up dead. Amelia Earhart is there too, noting the worst landing she has ever seen, while Jimmy Hoffa cooks up some fine chicken barbecue. They never died, you see. They just came here to escape their celebrity--invited guests, living out their lives in total privacy, all expenses paid, every need fulfilled. To Superman, it is heaven on earth.

Until he discovers the one little catch: he can never leave...

Discussion Guide

1. Before crashing into the island, Ben was feeling disenchanted with his fame and success: "His life would be perfect, he thought, if he could disappear right now. . . ." Why do you think fame and music stopped being fun for Ben? What kind of story would he have had if he had not gotten lost?

2. When Ben realizes that he has no choice but to land his plane in the water, he thinks of all the things he wishes he had and had not done. He takes photos of himself and the island and writes a note to Ben Jr., briefly thinking of communion as a child and his father and his son's smile. You are in the same situation: What do you do with the few moments before you crash?

3. Consider the voices that tell the story. The chapters about Superman are told through a narrator and refer to Superman

in the third person. The chapters about Ben Jr., however, are told through his own voice. How does this affect how we feel about the characters? Do you feel closer or sympathize with one more than the other? How does the narrator's voice relate to Superman? Is it Superman speaking to himself, the author, or something more?

4. After Amelia's death, Ben has an epiphany about God and life on the island: "God is the frog, the spider, the firefly with twin headlamps. . . ." Daisy immediately notices the difference in him. How does Ben make this spiritual change? Does this come from realizing his past failures? From letting the nature around him finally affect him? From the Red Dot that Rabbit gave him? Have you ever had realizations like this? If so, what caused them, or allowed them?

5. After Daisy and Ben were together for the first time he had the urge to run from her because he needed to stay focused on getting back home: "Every waking moment would be given to adoring her, inhaling, imbibing her. She would become your addiction, the thing you did with your life." Later, he accepts his place on the island, a life with Daisy, and stops trying to get off the island: "The months slipped through his fingers, and turned into years." In a sense, he was right in that loving her did trap him. Is that always the case with love? Was he being true to himself by running away from her or by being with her--or both?

6. If you could spend time with one of the mysteriously disappeared, who would you choose and why? Whose character's presence surprised you the most? Were Amelia's and Daisy's personalities what you expected from knowing their pasts?

7. Fame controls most of the people in this story. The Magician was willing to sacrifice people for the immortality he thought fame could give him. Do you think you can live on through fame? What does this story say about superstardom?

8. How does celebrity affect your own life? Would you want to be famous? If so, could you avoid the unhappiness it caused some of these characters? How important are celebrities to you personally? How much do you know about them? Do you think our culture is overly obsessed with famous people? Why or why not?

9. Considering how little his father was involved in his life, why do you think Ben Jr. felt a need to find him? Do you see similarities between the two characters?

10. We see Alexa only through Superman or Ben Jr. until nearly the very end of the book. How did your feelings about her change after reading chapter 28, "Her Real Life"? Do you think her husband or her son understands her well?

11. Consider this conversation between Ben and Daisy: "But everything they told us is a lie!" "Welcome to the real world, Ben. Where've you been keeping yourself? People don't want the truth. They just want confirmation of the lies they've already heard." If you, like Ben, were faced with incredible conspiracies, dead people, and magical powers, would you be able to adjust? Would you be able to believe what was happening? How do people learn to accept the impossible?

12. Do you think Ben's reunited family will stay together?

13. Considering the fairy-tale aspect of the book, what would you say the moral to this fable is?

Author Bio

Mark Childress was born in Monroeville, Alabama. He has lived in Ohio, Indiana, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, California, and Costa Rica, and currently lives in New York City.

Attending high school in the 1970s in Mississippi was an experience that contributed to his desire to become a writer. (He wore a tasteful charcoal-gray tuxedo to the prom, and the girl he invited was very good-looking.)

After graduation from the University of Alabama in 1978, Mark was a reporter for *The Birmingham News*, Features Editor of *Southern Living*magazine, and Regional Editor of *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*.

His articles and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Times of London, San Francisco Chronicle, Saturday Review, Chicago Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer, Travel and Leisure*, and other national and international publications.

Tender, a Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club selection, was named to several Ten Best lists, and appeared on many national bestseller lists. **Crazy in Alabama**, a featured selection of the Literary Guild, was an international bestseller in the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Russia, Holland, Denmark, Poland, and Finland, and appeared on many Ten Best lists. **Crazy** was named *The (London) Spectator*'s "Book of the Year" for 1993 and a *New York Times* "Notable Book of the Year," and spent ten months on the Der Spiegel bestseller list in Germany.

Mark received the Thomas Wolfe Award, the University of Alabama's Distinguished Alumni Award, and the Alabama Library Association's Writer of the Year. He has also written three picture books for children, **Joshua and Bigtooth** (1992), **Joshua and the Big Bad Blue Crabs** (1996), (both from Little, Brown), and **Henry Bobbity Is Missing And It Is All Billy Bobbity's Fault**, (Crane Hill Publishers, 1996).

He wrote the screenplay of the Columbia Pictures film "*Crazy in Alabama*," directed by Antonio Banderas, and starring Melanie Griffith, an official selection of the Venice and San Sebastian film festivals.

Mark is the author of six novels: **A World Made of Fire** (1984), **V for Victor**(1988), **Tender** (1990), **Crazy in Alabama** (1993), **Gone for Good**, (1998), and **One Mississippi**, to be published July 3, 2006 by Little, Brown and Co.

Critical Praise

"Triumphant . . . It is a measure of Mr. Childress's skill as a novelist that he soon had me eating out of his hand. . . . This novel seems not only fresh and original but positively inspired. "

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