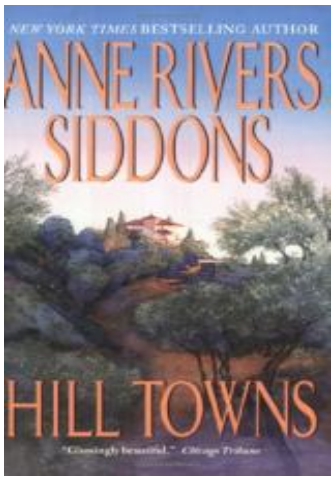
ReadingGroupGuides
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Hill Towns

by Anne Rivers Siddons



About the Book

As a small girl, Catherine Gaillard witnesses an event which irrevocably alters the rest of life: her parents, lying naked and in the throes of ecstasy atop a bridge, are accidentally run over and killed. The experience leaves young Cat traumatized, and renders her incapable of leaving her cloistered mountaintop town in Tennessee. Once she escapes to the lofty heights of Trinity College, atop Morgan's Mountain, Cat simply refuses to ever come back down, in the fear that she would be sacrificing her ability to "see danger coming." Over the years, Cat constructs a perfect, self-contained world first for herself and then for her husband, Joe, a Yankee professor at Trinity. She manages to become the hub of social activity at Trinity, as well as raise her blind daughter, Lacey, all without ever leaving the safety of her mountain. But now, thirty years later, Cat realizes her need to confront her childhood fears and venture out into the world. When Joe's star pupils, Colin and Maria, invite the Gaillards to their wedding in Rome and then to accompany them on their honeymoon through Venice, Florence, and the surrounding Tuscany, Cat decides to take them up on their offer. Armed with the wise words of her psychiatrist and friend, Corinne, as well as a healthy quantity of Valium, Cat and Joe arrive in Rome, both exhilarated and apprehensive. They immediately find themselves swept up in the high society world of Maria's aunt Ada, and her husband, Sam Forrest, the internationally renowned charismatic painter. They are joined by the libidinous television personality, Yolanda Whitney, and soon all seven are traveling together throughout Italy. But as Italy releases in Cat a feeling of strength and confidence, her newfound freedom threatens to disrupt the comfortable patterns of her marriage. When Sam, who is currently experiencing a crippling dry spell in his painting, asks if he can paint Cat's portrait as they travel, the sexual tensions mount. The once-carefree trip turns into a journey to the very heart of their relationship and identities, as Cat and Joe find themselves in the midst of the ultimate test of their love.

Discussion Guide

1. Three troubled marriages are portrayed in Hill Towns: Colin and Maria's, Sam and Ada's, and Cat and Joe's. How are their struggles and coping methods unique? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each couple? How would you

characterize each couple? What aspects of each relationship do you find healthy? Unhealthy?

2. Cat remarks that in Venice, "we began to change in earnest, Joe and I, on that first slow ride down the Canal Grande. Or perhaps it was simply that we began to become . . . us." What does she mean? How were they not themselves while still living at Trinity? What does it mean to 'become yourself?' What role did Venice and Italy play in their changes? Do you think they would have changed had they gone somewhere else in Europe? Or if they had merely gone somewhere else in America?

3. How does Catherine's pathology of needing to always be "able to see what was coming" manifest itself in her behavior? How has it shaped her identity? What is it that enabled her to break free from her fears?

4. How have Cat and Joe coped with their daughter's blindness? Has Lacey's disability served to bring them closer together, or has it planted the seeds of disunion?

5. Compare Joe and Sam. What qualities does Italy draw out of each? What about each of them attracts Catherine? Why are Sam and Joe drawn to Catherine? Which one best understands Cat's needs and desires?

6. Why do you think Sam wants to paint Cat's portrait? What is it he is trying to capture on canvas? Why does Sam show Cat Bernini's "Saint Teresa in Ecstasy?" What is the relationship between Sam's art and his sexuality?

7. Cat and Joe's relationship undergoes a profound change as a result of their visit to Italy. By the end of the novel, what is the state of their marriage? Has Cat betrayed Joe? Has Joe betrayed Cat? How do you define betrayal? What do you think is the next step?

Author Bio

THE GIRLS OF AUGUST is Anne Rivers Siddons's 19th novel. Her previous bestselling novels include BURNT MOUNTAIN, OFF SEASON, SWEETWATER CREEK, ISLANDS, NORA NORA, LOW COUNTRY, UP ISLAND, FAULT LINES, DOWNTOWN, HILL TOWNS, COLONY, OUTER BANKS, KING'S OAK, PEACHTREE ROAD, HOMEPLACE, FOX'S EARTH, THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR and HEARTBREAK HOTEL. She is also the author of a work of nonfiction, JOHN CHANCELLOR MAKES ME CRY. She and her husband, Heyward, split their time between their home in Charleston, SC and Brooklin, ME.

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