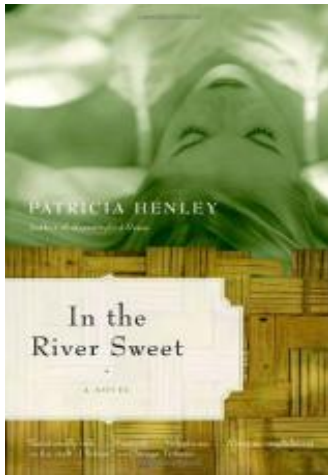


# In the River Sweet

by Patricia Henley

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## About the Book

National Book Award finalist Patricia Henley captivates us with this engrossing novel of a woman whose long-held secret will transform her life and her marriage.

From all appearances, Ruth Anne Bond is enviably lucky. Her husband, Johnny, still treats her like a young lover. Her grown daughter is a staunch friend. Her steady work and devotion to the church have quietly made her a pillar of the community. Then one long Indiana summer brings some unexpected communiqués—including one she has both craved and feared for thirty years. As long-hidden truths threaten to emerge, for the first time in her marriage Ruth Anne is faced with memories she and Johnny never discuss: of a year spent in Saigon in 1968—and a past she has yet to acknowledge. Probing questions of family and faith, Patricia Henley offers us a tender, far-sighted novel about seeking answers and achieving grace.

## Discussion Guide

- 1. In the River Sweet** is filled with images of embroidered quotes on banners, engraved quotes on pillars, quotes on t-shirts, lettered signs, graffiti on buildings, short stories, poems, novels, letters, e-mails. What is the importance of the printed word in this novel? How do the different means of printing affect the way the words are perceived? An e-mail instead of a letter? Graffiti on the church wall as opposed to authorized stone etchings?
- 2.** Ruth Anne lives in River County, Indiana and often goes with her husband for romantic picnics by the river. She grew up on Lake Michigan and returns there for meditation and to be close to her dying aunt. While pregnant with Tin, she walks along the China Sea in Vietnam, and years later meets him again near Lake Michigan. What is the appeal of rivers and lakes for Ruth Anne? What is the connection between water, Ruth Anne's tale, and the title **In the River Sweet**?
- 3. In the River Sweet** occurs over the course of one summer through flashbacks, primarily Ruth Anne's. Why has

Henley chosen this structure? What is the function of Johnny's sudden narration? Does his perspective change your view of Ruth Anne or the situation?

4. How has her Midwestern upbringing and community affected Ruth Anne, her personality and desires? How has it influenced her decisions and compromises? Despite the town and church's disapproval of her daughter, Ruth Anne returns to River County in the end?"it's where she had the most to learn"? Why?

5. **In the River Sweet** is primarily a tale about family. Does the definition of family evolve over the course of the novel? What does family mean to Ruth Anne? To Johnny? To Tin?

6. Why is Ruth Anne attracted to Vo? Compare/contrast him to her husband Johnny. How are their relationships different? What binds Ruth Anne to Vo? And to Johnny? Do the events of the novel change, or shift, these ties?

7. Why didn't Ruth Anne tell Johnny about Vo and Tin? In doing so, did she ultimately betray or protect him? Or was it a mixture of both? What emotional price has she paid for her secret?

8. What does the fishhook poem that Tin sends symbolize? How about the *Tale of Kieu* with which the novel ends? How do they compare with the Western stories that Vo and Ruth Anne read together? "All literature is hope," one of the characters says. Do you agree with this quote?

9. Johnny and Ruth Anne respond differently to their daughter's sexuality and lover. Why the differences? What is it about their personalities, gender, and experiences that influence their reactions? Is one stronger than the other? Do you think they would have responded differently if Laurel were a son?

10. How does the hate crime change/affect each member of the family? Afterwards, why do Laurel and Oceana refuse to press charges? Why must they leave town? Is courage or fear propelling them?

11. What are the various views on organized religion presented in the novel by Father Carroll, Sister Jill, Vo, Oceana? How do Ruth Anne's feelings about religion and spirituality transform in the novel?

12. How do Johnny's and Ruth Anne's opposing opinions on meditation reflect their views on life? What new perspectives does Ruth Anne gain from meditation?

13. "Jill always argued that hearts should be open to each other." Is this philosophy too naïve? Is it a truth? Do you agree with it?in theory or in practice?

14. This is also a novel about forgiveness. Henley gives the example of the burned Vietnamese girl forgiving and embracing the American pilot who sprayed napalm on her village. What is the meaning of forgiveness? And compassion? What does it mean to be moral in today's society?

15. How do the minor characters play into the story of the novel? Limbo, and his special relationship with Ruth Anne? Mairead, and her role in Johnny's summer? Aunt Teensy, and her loneliness, anger, and compromises? Father Carroll, and his dogmatism?

## Author Bio

Patricia Henley's first novel, **Hummingbird House**, was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award and *The New Yorker* Best Fiction Book Award. Henley has also written two books of poetry, **Learning to Die** and **Back Roads**, and three story collections: **Friday Night at Silver Star**, which won the 1985 Montana Arts Council First Book Award; **The Secret of Cartwheels**; and **Worship of the Common Heart: New and Selected Stories**. Her stories have been published in such magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Ploughshares*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, and *Northwest Review*, and anthologized in **The Best American Short Stories** and *The Pushcart Prize* anthology. Henley lives in West Lafayette, Indiana, where she teaches in the M.F.A. Creative Writing Program at Purdue University.

## Critical Praise

"Sure to please readers deeply. . . . Henley conjures the bygone Vietnam era with eerie and bittersweet poignancy."

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