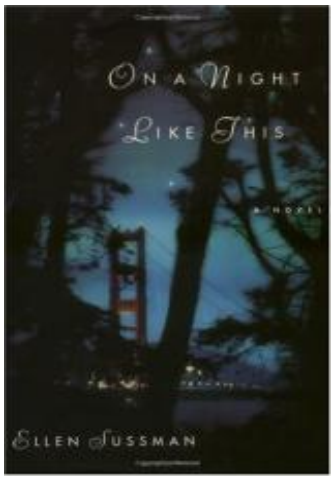
On a Night Like This

by Ellen Sussman



About the Book

A dusty box discovered in the wreckage of a once prosperous plantation on Agate Hill in North Carolina contains the remnants of an extraordinary life: diaries, letters, poems, songs, newspaper clippings, court records, marbles, rocks, dolls, and bones. It's through these treasured mementos that we meet Molly Petree, the heroine of Lee Smith's novel.

Raised in those ruins and orphaned by the Civil War, Molly is a refugee who has no interest in self-pity. When a mysterious benefactor appears out of her father's past to rescue her, she never looks back. Spanning half a century, **On Agate Hill** follows Molly's passionate, picaresque journey through love, betrayal, motherhood, a murder trial--and back home again, under circumstances she never could have imagined.

Discussion Guide

1. Early on, Molly writes in her diary, ?I want to be a real girl and live as hard as I can in this world, I dont want to lie in the bed like Mama or be sick like Mary White. Or be a lady. I would rather work my fingers to the bone and die like Fannie. I want to live so hard and love so much I will use myself all the way up like a candle, it seems to me like this is the point of it all, not Heaven? (page 78). This says so much about Molly?s character. How do you think Molly came to reach this conclusion about her aspirations, and how do you think it shapes what hap-pens later on in her life?

2. How do Nicky Eck?s crimes against Molly affect the rest of her life?

3. On Agate Hill is a story within a story, told from many different perspectives. The novel opens with a letter from Tuscany Miller, a university student from the present day who is looking into her own past and the pasts of those who lived at her father?s (Ava?s) new home. What parallels can you draw from both stories, and why do you suppose the author chose to set it up this way? How would the book be different if the author left out the Tuscany Miller thread altogether?

4. Why does Mariah Snow take an immediate dislike to Molly? Is this a clue to what happened in Mariah?s past? Do you believe people like or dislike other people because they possess similar qualities (either positive or negative)?

5. At the beginning of the chapter titled ?Paradise Lost,? Agnes Rutherford de-scribes Agate Hill in a letter to her sister, Mariah Snow. She says that it is ?sur-rounded by an air of loneliness? and ?Defeat. Failure. Loss. Decay? (page 132). She goes on to say that ?the interior of the house was so unkept as to appear ran-sacked? (page 135). This is far different from what we are led to believe from reading Molly?s journal. How do you think your reading experience would?ve been affected by knowing the true state of the plantation right from the very be-ginning?

6. What do you make of the author?s choice to write a majority of the novel in journal entries and letters? How would the novel be different if she had chosen to tell the story using straight prose?

7. In the September 22, 1873, letter to her sister, Agnes relays the story of how Molly first came to be accepted by her peers at Gatewood Academy (page 157). Why did the rest of the girls choose to accept Molly instead of shunning her after Ida and Adeline Brown made fun of her background? What does this say about girls and group mentality?

8. In her May 3, 1874, journal entry, Mariah Snow writes (referring to women), ?We lose our names as we lose our Youth, our Beauty, & our Lives? (page 163). What does this say about her character? About how women were treated in gen-eral at that time? How is that different from how women are treated now? Do you know women who feel the way Mariah does? Do you feel that way about your life?

9. What do you think happened to Mary White?

10. In the beginning of the section titled ?Up on Bobcat,? Agnes writes in her ?Final Impressions,? ?I wonder if I could have done anything different, if I could perhaps have waited and chosen a less drastic course, and what would have hap-pened then . . . but it is impossible to wrest a decision out of its time and place, and even now I cannot think what I should have done? (page 219). In your opin-ion, could things have been different? What are other possible outcomes? Would a different outcome make the story less or more interesting in your opinion?

11. When Simon Black visits Molly in the mountains in February (page 241), Molly doesn?t discuss with Agnes what transpired between them. What do you suppose was said?

12. After Jacky?s funeral, why do you think Molly asks BJ to take her to Icy Hin-shaw?s cabin, and then leaves without saying a word? Later, she asks BJ to give Icy and her children her house, the one she shared with Jacky. She says, ?take care of them, for they are Jacky?s. They are yours? (page 325). What exactly does she mean by this?

13. Who do you believe killed Jacky (with the first shot in the stomach, not the second shot in his neck)? Why do you suppose BJ helped Molly cover up what really happened to Jacky?

14. Discuss this quote: ?love lives not in places nor even bodies but in the spaces between them, the long and lovely sweep of air and sky, and in the living heart and memory until that is gone too, and we are all wanderers, as we have always been, upon the earth? (page 328).

15. What are the reasons behind Molly?s decision to go back to Agate Hill in the end? How does this illustrate the change in Molly from the beginning of her life to the end of it?

16. Which character do you relate to the most in the book, and why?

Author Bio

Ellen Sussman is the author of four national bestselling novels: A WEDDING IN PROVENCE, THE PARADISE GUEST HOUSE, FRENCH LESSONS and ON A NIGHT LIKE THIS. All four books have been translated into many languages, and FRENCH LESSONS has been optioned by Unique Features to be made into a movie. Ellen is also the editor of two critically acclaimed anthologies*:* DIRTY WORDS: A Literary Encyclopedia Of Sex and BAD GIRLS: 26 Writers Misbehave. She was named a San Francisco Library Laureate in 2004 and in 2009. Ellen has been awarded fellowships from The Sewanee Writers Conference, The Napoule Art Foundation, Hedgebrook, Brush Creek, Ledig House, Ucross, Ragdale Foundation, Writers at Work, Wesleyan Writers Conference and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She has taught at Pepperdine, UCLA and Rutgers University. Ellen now teaches through Stanford Continuing Studies and in private classes out of her home. She has two daughters and lives with her husband in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Ellen was born in Trenton, NJ and has lived in Boston, Philly, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Paris and Northern California. She has worked lots of jobs including tennis instructor, restaurant manager, and college teacher but through all the transmutations of her life she has been writing, since the age of six, stubbornly, persistently, with great cockiness and wild insecurity, through praise and piles of rejection letters. She has given up her writing career many times, but only for a day or two, and her family has now learned to ignore her new career choices. She is a writer, an almost daily writer, a writer who actually loves to write.

Critical Praise

"The novel's elegant denouement and Sussman's fluid treatment of tough moments make this a keeper for fans of high-caliber weepies."

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