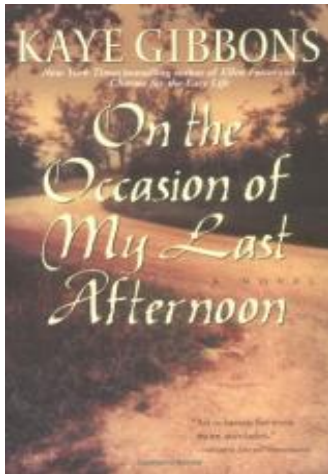

On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon

by Kaye Gibbons



About the Book

Emma Garnet Tate, the daughter of a rich plantation owner on the James River in Virginia, is the narrator of Kay Gibbons's extraordinary sixth novel, a journey into the past and into the heart of a woman. Although she lives a pampered life, wrapped in the love of her gentle mother and cared for by the warm and feisty servant Clarice, she must bear the crude dictates of her father, a self-made man who has acquired the trappings of wealth but remains marked by his humble origins and the dark secrets of his own childhood. Emma Garnet refuses to conform to the ideal of Southern womanhood, reading books supposedly not fit for a girl, disturbed by the "peculiar institution" of slavery, indifferent to developing the charms and wiles to attract a well-born Southern husband. When she marries Quincy Lowell, a doctor and the scion of a famous Northern family, her father ceases to communicate with her.

Accompanied by Clarice, she and Quincy settle in Raleigh, where their comfortable life is soon swept aside by the advent of the Civil War. Through the long years of strife, Emma Garnet nurses horribly wounded young men and watches as the ways of the Old South shatter around her. The war reaches deep into her life; when the conflict ends, both Quincy and Clarice succumb to its destructive powers. With her three daughters, Emma Garnet begins life anew in her husband's hometown of Boston. For her, however, there is only one true home, and she returns to Raleigh to help build a new South, in which all people are treated with respect and humanity. On the occasion of her last afternoon, exploring the poignant, horrific, and joyful events of more than fifty years, she faces death with equanimity, proud of her accomplishments, and at peace with herself.

Discussion Guide

1. As a prelude to this novel, Gibbons offers poetry by Allen Tate and Robert Lowell, poets who share her heroine's surnames. How do the poems foreshadow the events and mood of the novel? What do they, and the novel itself, reveal about the legacy of the Civil War?
2. What insights do Emma Garnet's initial reaction to her father's murder of Jacob give you into the society in which she grew up? How does she conform to antebellum Southern beliefs and behavior, and in what ways does she defy them?
3. Why, despite his impressive accomplishments as a self-educated man, is her father so hostile to his bookish son and so critical of Emma Garnet's interest in learning? Why does he prefer his daughter Maureen? What circumstances beyond his personal background influence the way he treats his children?
4. Why doesn't Alice Tate protest her husband's behavior? What, if anything, could Emma Garnet have done to make her mother's life easier?
5. Emma Garnet and Quincy acknowledge Clarice's freedom when they arrive in North Carolina, yet they tell the other servants, who are in fact free as well, that Clarice owns them. Is there any justification for their lie? Do you think Charlie, Mavis, and Martha would have remained with the Lowells, as Clarice did, had Emma Garnet and Quincy been honest with them from the beginning? Why do the three leave immediately when they learn the truth from Clarice?
6. When war breaks out, why does Quincy refuse to take a commission but agree to assume command of a Southern hospital? Given his background and his beliefs, do you think he should have returned to the North? Why does Emma Garnet work so hard in the hospital despite her ambivalence about the Southern cause? Looking back many years later, she writes, "I still hold that it was a conflict perpetrated by rich men and fought by poor boys against hungry women and babies." Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of the Civil War? Is it true of every war?
7. Do you feel any sympathy for Samuel Tate when he arrives in Raleigh after Seven Oaks is taken over? What does Quincy hope to accomplish by telling his father-in-law about the horrors he sees in the hospital every day and reading him newspaper reports about the battles that are devastating the Confederate army? What does Quincy's destruction of the Titian painting symbolize? Do you think that the means by which Samuel Tate dies can be justified?
8. Just before she dies, Clarice reveals the terrible secret that shaped Samuel Tate's life. Would it have made a difference in their relationship if Emma Garnet had known the truth about her father earlier in life?
9. What kind of life would Emma Garnet have had without Clarice? If she hadn't married Quincy? What particular strengths did she get from each of them, and how does she express what she learned in the life she creates for herself after their deaths?
10. How does Emma Garnet's view of the Civil War differ from accounts you've read in history books and gleaned from other novels or movies? Kaye Gibbons is from North Carolina; keeping that in mind, do you think the novel reflects a Southern woman's perspective, or does it embrace a broader point of view?

Author Bio

Kaye Gibbons is the author of **Ellen Foster**, **A Virtuous Woman**, **A Cure for Dreams**, **Charms for the Easy Life**, and **Sights Unseen**. She has received numerous honors, including the Sue Kaufman Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a PEN/Revson Award. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Critical Praise

"Despite the comings and goings of literary fashion, not much of real importance has changed since Horace said that our stories should aim to instruct and delight. Beginning with *Ellen Foster*, Kaye Gibbons has achieved both on every page. And she does it again here, strikingly, in a novel about the bright habits of mind required for survival??and the high price paid for living on. "

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