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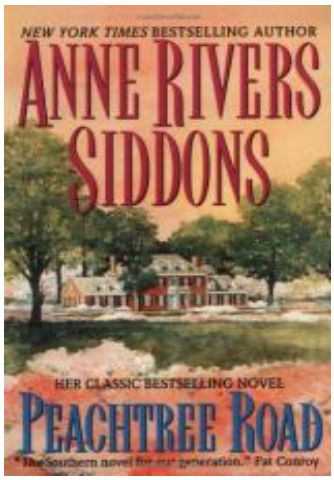
Peachtree Road

by Anne Rivers Siddons



About the Book

Along a quiet street on a hill at the outskirts of Atlanta live a dying breed of Southern aristocrats. Growing up in sprawling mansions, and attended to by black servants, these Buckhead families form a tight nucleus of wealth and power. This privileged way of life is about to be shattered by the nascent Civil Rights Movement, and the arrival of the headstrong, exuberant beauty, Lucy Bondurant. From the moment young Lucy, her siblings, and their mother, Willa, arrive on their in-law's front doorstep, life in the Bondurant mansion at 2500 Peachtree Road will never be the same. Lucy and her shy older cousin, Sheppard Gibbs Bondurant III, instantly forge a tight, obsessive bond with one another that will leave a trail of ruin and misery in its path. As Lucy and Shep grow from children to adults, it quickly becomes clear that Shep will never be the gregarious and suave Southern gentleman his family expects, and Lucy will never become a quiet and demur Southern belle. As the rigid aristocratic social codes exert more pressures on the young cousins, their fierce infatuation with one another grows stronger. When Shep attempts to break away from his cousin and lead a separate life in New York as a librarian, Lucy begins to experience severe manic episodes. Swerving from hospital beds to bad marriages and back again, Lucy desperately searches for the father she never had, and finds, instead, heartbreak and betrayal. As Atlanta transforms itself from a sleepy Southern town into a thriving modern metropolis, the Bondurants struggle with a legacy of incest and their own frustrated, impossible desires.

Discussion Guide

1. Peachtree Road begins with the famous sentence, "The South killed Lucy Bondurant Chastain Venable on the day she was born." How so? What aspects of the South laid the groundwork for her "textbook murder" before Lucy was even born? How was her destruction "classical in concept?" Could anyone have saved her?

2. Both Lucy and her mother, Willa, were outsiders to the world of Peachtree Road. How did they each adapt to their new environment? What steps do they each take to insure their own protection? Who was more successful, and why?

What price did each of them pay for their adaptation?

3. Why were Lucy and Shep so obsessed with one another? How did they each define themselves by the other? By always being Lucy's "rescuing knight," did Shep exacerbate or ameliorate Lucy's manic behavior? How much responsibility does he bear for Lucy's death? Was it a murder, or a suicide?

4. Why does the novel begin with Lucy's funeral? How does the flashback structure affect your experience of Shep's tale? What is the significance of funerals for the Peachtree Road society?

5. By the time Malory turned eighteen, Shep, "had learned, finally, the value of love held lightly in an open hand." What does he mean by that? How had he come to this realization? What are some loves of his life that were NOT "held lightly in an open hand?"

6. Shep remarks frequently on the difficulties faced by Southern women. Do the men of Peachtree Road fare much better? What sorts of pressures do Southern men endure in the novel?

7. How was the elder Ben Cameron the architect of his own political obsolescence? What plans did Ben have for the Buckhead Boys, and Shep in particular? How did the younger Peachtree Road generation fail him?

8. How would you characterize Lucy's relationship with the black people in her life? Why might she have gravitated to their company? Why might she have so fervently adopted their struggles as her own? Do they ultimately betray her? Or does she betray their cause?

9. What role does incest play in the Bondurant family? How does it structure the family's dynamic? Why do you think it is so prevalent? Is it a useful metaphor for the entire privileged class of the South? Why or why not?

10. What role does the elder Ben Cameron play in the Civil Rights Movement? Is it odd that he grooms his chauffeur's son for the position of mayor? Is there a contradiction to having black servants and yet campaigning for racial equality? Do the Camerons' servants enjoy special privileges denied to other servants on Peachtree Road?

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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