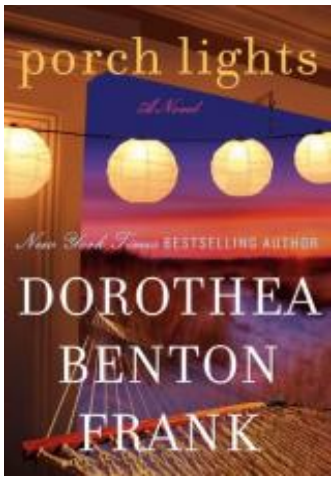
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Porch Lights

by Dorothea Benton Frank



About the Book

When Jimmy McMullen, a fireman with the NYFD, is killed in the line of duty, his wife, Jackie, and ten-year-old son, Charlie, are devastated. Charlie idolized his dad, and now the outgoing, curious boy has become quiet and reserved. Trusting in the healing power of family, Jackie decides to return to her childhood home on Sullivans Island.

Crossing the bridge from the mainland, Jackie and Charlie enter a world full of wonder and magic --- lush green and chocolate grasslands and dazzling red, orange, and magenta evening skies; the heady pungency of Lowcountry Pluff mud and fresh seafood on the grill; bare toes snuggled in warm sand and palmetto fronds swaying in gentle ocean winds.

Awaiting them is Annie Britt, the family matriarch who has kept the porch lights on to welcome them home. Thrilled to have her family back again, Annie promises to make their visit perfect --- even though relations between mother and daughter have never been what you'd call smooth. Over the years, Jackie and Annie, like all mothers and daughters, have been known to have frequent and notorious differences of opinion. But her estranged and wise husband, Buster, and her flamboyant and funny best friend Deb are sure to keep Annie in line. She's also got Steven Plofker, the flirtatious and devilishly tasty widowed physician next door, to keep her distracted as well.

Captivated by the island's alluring natural charms and inspired by colorful Lowcountry lore --- lively stories of Blackbeard and his pirates who once sailed the waters surrounding the Carolinas and of former resident Edgar Allan Poe --- mother, daughter, and grandson will share a memorable, illuminating summer. Told in Annie's and Jackie's alternating voices, and filled with Dorothea Benton Frank's charming wit, indelible poignancy, and hallmark themes --- the bonds of family, the heart's resilience, and the strength of love --- PORCH LIGHTS is a triumph from "the queen of Southern fiction" (*Charlotte Observer*).

Discussion Guide

1. PORCH LIGHTS opens with an epigraph, a poem written by Edgar Allan Poe, and each chapter begins with a snippet from Poe's short story, "The Gold-Bug." How does the poem set the tone for the story that follows? What is the significance of the excerpts from the short story? How do these excerpts tie into the novel?

2. PORCH LIGHTS is a story of family --- of mothers and children. Compare and contrast Jackie and Annie. What is the source of friction between them --- their differences, or their similarities? What are they like as mothers? How do mother and daughter change as the summer progresses?

3. Dorothea Benton Frank beautifully captures the simple and enduring pleasures of family life. In our stressed out, too busy, overextended culture, do you think we've lost sight of these joyous moments? What are some of your favorite moments from the novel?

4. PORCH LIGHTS is also a story of friendship. Talk about the bond between Annie and Deb. What draws these women together? How do their different personalities complement each other?

5. Would you call Annie a romantic? Early on in the novel she admits, "Maybe I was too old for romance or a new love. But I refused to completely believe such a depressing thought because of Deb. She says that on the day you stop believing in love you may as well lie down and die. I think she may be right." Is love --- or the hope of it --- essential to living?

6. Annie and her estranged husband, Buster were separated for 11 years. Why didn't they divorce? Was it jealousy over the handsome neighbor, Dr. Steve Profker, that brought Buster back to Sullivans Island, or do you think he was looking for a way to reunite with Annie? What does Jackie learn about her mother, her father, and their relationship?

7. How have Jackie's experiences as an army nurse shape how she views the world around her --- the people and the events that unfold? Is it unfair of her to compare America with Afghanistan, or do her comparisons help keep her grounded? How does Annie's understanding of her daughter's experiences influence her viewpoint?

8. As the summer winds down, Jackie is determined to go back to Brooklyn. Why? What makes her change her mind? What role does Steve play in her decision? What is it about Steve that earns Jackie's trust?

9. Food is also central to the story. Annie loves to cook and entertain. For Jackie, "it seemed like people who cooked like mad just made work for themselves." Do you agree with her? How does the act of making a meal reinforce bonds of family and friendship? Is it work --- or a labor of love? By the end of the novel, do you think Jackie still thinks this way?

10. Sullivans Island is both the novel's setting and a character in its own right. What does the island mean to Annie, Deb, and Buster? What about Jackie and Charlie? Describe the island you discovered in the pages of PORCH LIGHTS. How does this special place help heal the characters' emotional wounds? Does a cottage on the beach like the Salty Dog sound like an inviting place to visit or live?

11. When Jackie arrives she wonders, "What is it about this crazy little island? What did it always feel so far away from the rest of the world?" Based on your impressions while reading PORCH LIGHTS, how would you answer her? What does Sullivans Island offer her and Charlie that Brooklyn does not?

12. Annie is proud of Sullivans Island's rich history and lore. What about the place you call home? Do you know any historical facts about the town in which you live?

Author Bio

Dorothea Benton Frank was the author of 20 bestselling novels set in the Low Country of South Carolina. She passed away on September 2, 2019 at the age of 67 following a brief struggle with leukemia.

Photo Credit: Debbie Zammit

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