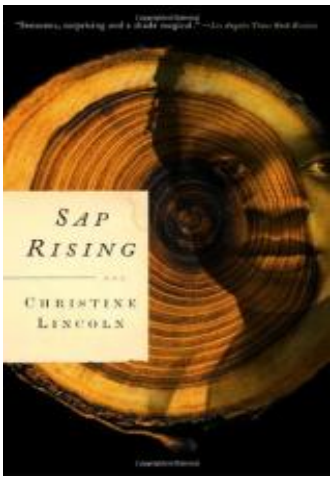
Sap Rising

by Christine Lincoln



About the Book

In this spare and mesmerizing debut, Christine Lincoln takes us inside the hearts and minds of African Americans whose lives unfold against a vividly evoked rural community. As they navigate between old and new, between youth and responsibility, they find themselves choosing between the comforts of what they trust without question and the fearsome excitements of what they might come to know.

One young man?s world is both expanded and contracted by stories he hears from a beautiful stranger. Another stumbles across his mother having an affair with his uncle. An intense friendship forms between one woman afraid she will turn out like everyone else and one afraid she won?t. Lincoln?s down-to-earth voice, saturated with the manner and details of the South, brings her characters to life with a remarkably light touch and an extraordinary depth of emotion. In **Sap Rising**, she proves herself one of those writers whose work transcends its own rich particularity to speak with clarity to the most fundamental elements of the human experience.

Discussion Guide

1. How does each story in **Sap Rising** in its own way exemplify how, as Boag puts it, "a person could wake up one day and find his whole world somehow changed" ("Winter's Wheat"?p. 86)?

2. One of the recurring themes throughout these stories is a child's loss of innocence as he or she teeters on the brink of adulthood. What does this transitional state mean for Boag Mason, at age 13, who must "put away childish things" ("Winter's Wheat"?p. 74); or Scoogie, who feels simultaneously a "weariness that made him feel much older than his sixteen years" and "as unguarded as when he was a child" ("At the Water's End"?pp. 143, 150)? What other stories capture such a loss of innocence and what exactly is lost? Is the experience different for a boy, like Boag who "never forgot how grown up he felt having pants, and how frightened he was to learn his mother could be so easily defeated" ("Winter's Wheat"?p. 84), than for a girl, like the young Ma'D who, when she met Hiron, was "still young enough to

believe in fairies and magic and a man like him"("A Very Close Conspiracy"?p. 125)? Between 1789-1794, the English poet William Blake published two collections of poems, **Songs of Innocence** and **Songs of Experience**, which reflect contrasting visions of the world depending on the state of one's soul. If you are familiar with Blake's work, do you see its influence in the stories of **Sap Rising**?

3. In the words of Scoogie's poetic inner voice: "The world is terrible. The world is beautiful" ("At the Water's End"?p. 150). For the people that inhabit Grandville, the world is a place where the "hideous and the exquisite" are "one and the same" ("Bug Juice"?p. 12). Where is the beauty in the world of **Sap Rising**? Does Lincoln succeed in achieving a delicate balance of the beautiful and the terrible in each of her stories, or does she reconcile the paradox? Ultimately, do the stories convey a negative or a positive outlook on life, or perhaps just a weary effort to live, summarized by Uncle Jimmy's advice: "Ain't no room for feelin' sorry when you the one tryin' to live" ("Winter's Wheat"?p. 91)?

4. How would you describe the portrait of family life in Grandville that emerges from **Sap Rising**? Besides correcting manners in "Winter's Wheat" (pp. 74-75), doing spring cleaning in "Acorn Pipes" (p. 31), and shining the furniture in "At the Water's End" (p. 140), what else do mothers do? What do mothers teach their children? What do fathers teach?

5. What is invisibility a symbol for in **Sap Rising**, e.g., Pontella thinks she is becoming invisible ("A Hook Will Sometimes Keep You"); Ebbie tries "to catch sight of something?anything?that resembles me, just to keep from falling away" ("Like Dove Wings" ?p. 156); and Hiron learns during his service in the war "what it felt like to exist and not exist" ("A Very Close Conspiracy"?p. 128). In the classic **Invisible Man**, Ralph Ellison used the metaphor of invisibility to convey, ironically, the plight of the African-American man in a racist, white society. If you are familiar with this work, how does **Sap Rising** compare to Ellison's use of invisibility?

6. Lincoln has said that she was inspired by her grandmother telling her stories as a little girl. How has this personal experience influenced her writing? What do all of the storytellers in **Sap Rising** have in common? The knowledge that the storytellers impart to the children is at once indispensable?filled with the "things he needed to know" ("Bug Juice"?p. 19), yet also dangerously limiting: "Never leave to others to teach you all that you must know. That is a slave" ("Last Will"?p. 114). Does Lincoln reconcile these two views of knowledge? How do the stories-within-the-story enhance the meaning of the main action? For example, in "A Hook Will Sometimes Keep You," how does the story of Wheat affect the reader's interpretation of Pontella's struggle with invisibility (p. 24)?

7. From Country's " slick willie" ("More Like Us") to the gentle, duped Franklin Mason ("Winter's Wheat") to the monstrous Dixon Bentlow ("At the Water's Edge"), the portrait of the mature African American male character is simultaneously one of victim and perpetrator. How are the boys different from the men, and what explanation do the stories offer, particularly "A Very Close Conspiracy," for the transformation of the male characters as they grow up? For Hiron, after the war, "[t]he knowledge that she could do the same job as any man made it impossible for Ma'D to go back to where she'd been, and made it unlikely that a man like Hiron would be able to settle back into his old place" ("A Very Close Conspiracy"?p. 130). And Ebbie does not tell Ruthie that "Leonard beat her because she refused to cook and clean. . . . He beat her because she stopped making him believe that he was the only reason she ever existed at all" ("Like Dove Wings"?p. 163). What do these statements tell us about the predicament of the African American man trying to find his place both in white-dominated society and within the framework of his own family? Is Uncle Jimmy different from the other men portrayed and, if so, why ("Winter's Wheat")?

8. Most of the stories are told in the third person, with the exception of "A Hook Will Sometimes Keep You," "More Like Us," and " Like Dove Wings." How are these three stories related, and why might Lincoln have chosen a different narrative voice for these particular stories? How does Lincoln simultaneously convey a universal female voice and an intensely personal one in these three stories? In the remaining stories told in the traditional third-person narrative, what is Lincoln's narrative point of view, and how does it affect the reader's ability to relate to or empathize with the characters?

9. In some cases, a story's title is derived from a line in the body of the story, with a slight change in the phrasing. For example, "A Hook Will Sometimes Keep You" closes with the phrase "sometimes a hook is the one thing, the only thing, that can keep you from becoming invisible" (p. 30); and the title "At the Water's End" is taken from the slightly different line: "His father's boat stood forlorn at the water's edge" (p. 150). In these examples, how does the subtle change in wording impart to the story a much deeper level of meaning? In other stories, such as "All That's Left" and "A Very Close Conspiracy," how does the title reflect and help define the concluding lines of the story, once again enhance the meaning?

10. Does "More Like Us" prove that Sonny's mother was right about the city ("Bug Juice")? Does the unique tone and style of "More Like Us" convey the tangible differences between the city and the country? Are there any similarities between the two, and if there are then what does this say about the universal nature of community?

11. What is the nature of the romantic relationships portrayed among the African-American men and women in the stories? How do the relationships progress through different stages portrayed in the different stories: first, the young lovers Ebbie and Leonard ("Sap Rising"); next, the mature relationships between the older Leonard and Ruthie ("Bug Juice") or the Masons' ("Winter's Wheat"); and, finally, the destructive relationships between Ma'D and Hiron ("Acorn Pipes" and "A Very Close Conspiracy") or Country and her "man" ("More Like Us")? Why does the romance deteriorate? For the couples that stay together, what holds them together? How are the dynamics of these relationships uniquely African-American? Which qualities are universal?

12. In what ways do abuse and domestic violence manifest themselves in "Wishes" and in "A Very Close Conspiracy"? How does Lincoln convey the emotional trauma of such abuse with just the merest hint of the actual event, such as in "Wishes"? Is "A Very Close Conspiracy" an absolution for Hiron's abuse of his family? Does his story merely explain his behavior, or does it justify it? Do you read Hiron's death as a punishment or as a last heroic gesture, and how might your interpretation be affected by looking back to "Acorn Pipes"? What does Scoogie decide to do in "At the Water's End" and what does it imply? What do you think is meant by the final words of Scoogie's poetic inner voice in "At The Water's End": "And the sufferer's tears are the purest" (p. 151)?

13. What do the voices of the women in "Like Dove Wings" tell us about female relationships? How does the women's treatment of Ebbie compare to the town women's treatment of Country in " More Like Us"? How are women portrayed simultaneously as each other's best friends and worst enemies? Is the relationship between the young Pontella and Junie in "All That's Left" portentous of women's dubious friendships? Would Lincoln advocate solidarity as a solution for the positions of abuse or loneliness that many of her female characters find themselves in, or are independence and escape the only possible solutions?

14. How does **Sap Rising** celebrate heritage?both African American and Native American? Are the characters and events uniquely Africans-American? How do "Bug Juice" and "Last Will" comment on both the burden of legacy and

the importance of roots?

15. By weaving the same characters throughout more than one story, Lincoln develops a picture of the whole community. Is she successful in maintaining the distinction between each story while at the same time developing characters and relationships across stories? How does she push the boundaries of the short story genre? Is there significance to the sequence of the stories in **Sap Rising**? For example, why does "A Hook Can Sometimes Keep You" precede "Sap Rising," or why might Lincoln have placed "More Like Us" after "All That's Left"? How might the reader reread "Acorn Pipes" with a new understanding of Hira after having read "Wishes" and "A Very Close Conspiracy," or gain a deeper understanding of the older Ruthie in "Bug Juice" after reading "Like Dove Wings," or view Junie Mason differently in "Last Will" as opposed to "All That's Left"?

16. Is the Church central or peripheral to the individuals of Grandville? What type of community does the Church promote among its African American congregation? If a woman's place in the community is symbolized by her presence or absence from church, such as Miss Neeva ("Wishes"?p. 102) or Ebbie ("Like Dove Wings"?p. 155), what role does the Church play in the life of the African American male? Hira listens to Reverend Snowden's preaching at her father's funeral: "She thought, Daddy was a good man. He loved all of us. The preacher said so, and everyone knows a preacher man speaks for God. And God don't lie" ("Acorn Pipes" ?p. 36). But it is on the day that she "said she wasn't going to church no more" that Cinny grows up ("Wishes"?p. 100). Does age and wisdom bring with it cynicism toward organized religion, God, or simply toward a male-centric view of God? Does "Like Dove Wings" illustrate how a woman's spirituality is something separate from the Church, e.g., Ebbie's conviction that "God is a woman" (p. 162)?

17. If Scoogie's father "could hardly stand to go to the fields anymore: he knew a man could lose his dreams out there" ("At the Water's End"?p. 140), and Ebbie's view of Leonard "hunched over the wheel of his tractor, moving mindlessly" is enough to drive her out of Grandville ("Sap Rising"?p. 71), then is it not understandable that the male characters act the way they do? When Boag spots a deer with human eyes, he realizes that his mother sees it too, but that "[h]is father never saw a thing" ("Winter's Wheat"?p. 73). How does Boag's observation about his father exemplify the male characters' incapability for feeling? Why do the men lose their sensitivity, which they seem to possess as children (witness Sonny or Scoogie), but the women seem able to retain it?

18. "Lincoln has said that her stories enact the tension between personal desire and the struggle to belong to a community, a conflict she finds at the heart of the African American experience where the African consciousness of ?we' meets the American obsession with ?I'" (Press Release, Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland, Graduation Day, May 2000). What examples from **Sap Rising** support this tension that Lincoln describes? What do you think she means by the "American obsession with ?I,'" and do you agree with her?

19. What role does nature play in **Sap Rising**? Are the characters affected when they are physically closer to nature? How might you interpret Wheat hearing the " voices" of the grass and the wind ("A Hook Will Sometimes Keep You"?pp. 27-28)? Or the trees hearing Cinny's secrets ("Wishes"?p. 98)? How do the different images of trees reflect the characters' own hopes and dreams in "A Very Close Conspiracy" (p. 121), "Bug Juice" (p. 10), and "Last Will" (p. 105)?

20. In "Bug Juice," Annie's laughter sounds like "wind chimes" (p. 9); in "Acorn Pipes," "laughter rippled throughout the group, filtered through the slits in the wood floor, and covered the girls like grains of dirt" (p. 45); and in "A Very Close Conspiracy," Hiron laughs "a laugh that sounded more like a man choking to death" (p. 125). How do the different

sounds of laughter reflect the mood or the theme of these stories?

Author Bio

Christine Lincoln was born and raised in Baltimore. At age thirty-four, she graduated from Washington College and was awarded the school?s Sophie Kerr Prize, an event that was covered by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

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Publication Date: August 27, 2002

Genres: Short Stories

Paperback: 176 pages

Publisher: Vintage

ISBN-10: 0375727779

ISBN-13: 9780375727771