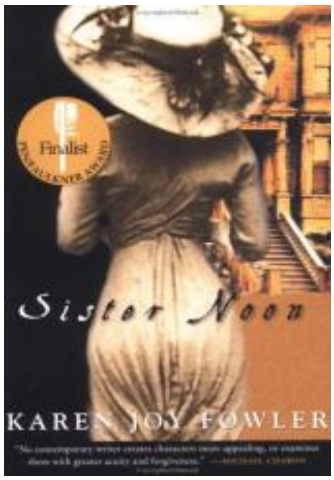
Sister Noon

by Karen Joy Fowler



About the Book

The fiction of Karen Joy Fowler has been hailed as "powerfully imagined and delightfully readable" (*The Washington Post*). *The New York Times* praises her "willingness to take detours, her unapologetic delight in the odd historical fact, her shadowy humor, and the elegant unruliness of her language." Now this critically acclaimed writer introduces readers to Lizzie Hayes, a remarkable heroine born into a wild, dazzling, unrestrained and uninhibited age that could not have existed at any other time in our nation's history.

San Francisco during the Gilded Age is a city bursting at the seams?a thrilling, electric, somewhat unsavory place of newly paved streets and cable cars running up and down Nob Hill, of unbridled egos and flamboyant ambition, of gentility, gossip, and greed?where great fortunes and dynasties are being built that will outlast many of the city's colorful, eccentric inhabitants.

A spinster just past forty, Lizzie is at once a part of and separate from, the city's dazzling vitality and ostentatious elitism. A devout, fiercely intelligent women given to ironic self-reflection and filled with hidden passions, Lizzie spends her days as a volunteer and treasurer for the Ladies' Relief Home, a refuge for the poor and displaced commonly called the Brown Ark. It is here that Mary Ellen Pleasant, the city's most scandalous benefactress, suddenly appears one day to deposit a little girl named Jenny. This brief visit becomes the catalyst for Lizzie's gradual transformation. She has never met anyone like Mrs. Pleasant. Or Madame Christophe, as she was known in her native New Orleans, where she was born into slavery. Or Mrs. Ellen Smith, as she called herself in 1852, a strikingly beautiful widow who would become as famous for her affairs, marriages, shocking behavior, and rumored voodoo powers as for her stunningly mismatched eyes. Lizzie, who is fat, unlovely, and unloved, is intrigued and excited by this fascinating woman who opens a window onto a world Lizzie has only read about, a world as much of the imagination and senses as it is of one firmly grounded in reality. For, as Mrs. Pleasant tells her, "You can do anything you want. You don't have to be the same person your whole life."

Karen Joy Fowler's most masterful achievement, **Sister Noon**, is a lush, stylistically daring, brilliantly realized portrait of a vanished era and an extraordinary woman that will shimmer and haunt readers long after the final page is turned.

Discussion Guide

1. In the Prelude, "Mrs. Smith" says that "life is loss." What do you think she means by this? Is she speaking about more than the death of her husband, who she might never have really loved? How does your opinion of this character and her statement change once you discover her "real" identity as Mary Ellen Pleasant?

2. Who and what does Mary Ellen Pleasant represent in the novel?

3. How would you describe Pleasant?s relationship with Lizzie?

4. Lizzie is described as "short, dusty, fat as a toad." How does the inner Lizzie differ from the outer woman? How does Lizzie fit into the world around her?

5. "An easy person to underestimate," Lizzie is also fiercely protective of the children in her care and single-minded of purpose once she decides to take action. How does Mrs. Pleasant become the catalyst for Lizzie?s transformation?

6. How does Lizzie respond to the news about Jenny?s true parentage? Is her reaction indicative of the "old" or "new" Lizzie?

7. Throughout the book, Teresa Bell remains a shadowy, ethereal character. And yet she plays a crucial role in the narrative?s unfolding. What does she symbolize in the book?

8. Lizzie has an epiphany of sorts in her scene with Mr. Finney on page 317? Has she at last become the liberated woman she always dreamed of becoming but never believed she actually would? How do her behavior and actions change after this "perfect day she would always remember?"

9. What is the significance of the séance wherein Lizzie gets to finally tell off her dead mother? Is this part of her "liberation?"

10. How does Lizzie feel about children? She is the caretaker and nurturer of many, yet has none of her own. On page 125 we learn that Lizzie "didn?t like children particularly, but they went to her heart." And on page 244, she muses that "all children are precious to God." How does her behavior bear this out? Does her attitude toward them change during the course of the story? How does her discovery about Jenny affect these feelings?

11. What is the significance of "Sister Noon" and Sister Night?" Which is Lizzie, and why?

12. What role does Ti Wong play in the story? How does he change after his near-fatal bout with diphtheria?

13. In the prelude to the Prelude, Mary Ellen Pleasant is quoted as saying, "Words were invented so that lies could be told." Why do you think she uses the word "lies" and not "stories," which has a far less negative and precise connotation? Is this what she believes her entire life to be, one brilliant invention after another?

Author Bio

Karen Joy Fowler, a PEN/Faulkner and California Book Award winner, is the author of six novels (two of them *New York Times* bestsellers) and four short story collections. She has been a Dublin IMPAC nominee, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Critical Praise

"The novel unfolds in mysterious and, at times, supernatural ways."

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Publication Date: May 28, 2002
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Plume
ISBN-10: 0452283280
ISBN-13: 9780452283282