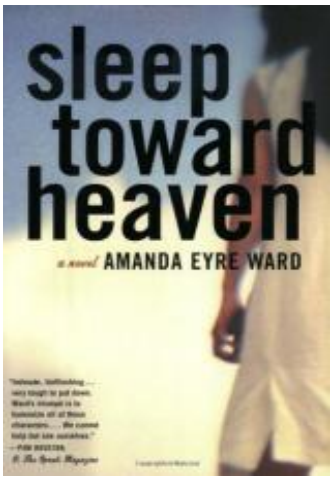
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Sleep Toward Heaven: A Novel

by Amanda Eyre Ward



About the Book

In Gatestown, Texas, 29-year-old Karen Lowens, dubbed the "Highway Honey," awaits her execution and bides her time in the company of a host of convicted serial murderers, all of whom cling to a final hope of absolution. In Manhattan, Dr. Franny Wren, also 29, resists the urge to escape from her carefully crafted but suffocating life. She begins to rediscover herself through the lens of her past as she revisits her Gatestown roots to bury the uncle who raised her. In Austin, Texas, a day's drive from Gatestown, Celia Mills, a once sublimely happy and vibrant young librarian, clutches on to the essence of her slain husband as she struggles to continue a life without him, to reclaim her hallmark brio, and to foster her will to live a normal life. In the backdrop of this fictional Texas town, peppered with oddball natives who are often deluged by media obsessed with ideology and death penalty rhetoric, Ward puts faces to people who are as funny as they are morbid -- people who deal with overwhelming issues in daily doses.

Sleep Toward Heaven's primary thematic concerns -- the sanctity of life, the responsibility of family to nurture, loyalty, and betrayal among friends, the doctor/patient relationship, tenderness in unexpected places -- are finessed into an impressive portrait of these women's disparate lives as they are similarly touched by violence, loss, and self-destructiveness -- and connected by a murder spree that can only end in state-sanctioned execution.

Discussion Guide

1. Karen Lowens is a hardcore drug addict, a prostitute, a thief, and a serial murderer. What is her attitude toward her victims and the families who survive them? Is she remorseful and is remorse necessary to redeem a life gone wrong? In other words, is the sanctity of Karen's life devalued by her crimes?

2. Under different circumstances, abandonment is an issue for Celia, Karen, Franny, and Janis, Mountain View's warden. How does each of these women deal with having been discarded -- by society as a whole or, in various ways, by people to whom they had personal connections?

3. Are the women on Death Row connected to each other on an emotional level? Having failed to function in normal society, what kinds of relationships are they capable of? Behind prison walls, why do some of the guilty women hold out hope for freedom and a second chance?

4. "Karen will ask for only one thing on her last day, a peach. She thinks about it sometimes, the way the ripe flesh will give, spilling juice on her tongue. The first bite of a sweet peach: this is the closest Karen will come to love." What does Karen's imagined, ripe fruit symbolize? Can this metaphor be extended to other characters, including Franny, Janice, Celia, Rick and the women on Death Row -- Tiffany, Sharleen, and Veronica? How does Ward use common objects to intensify her characters' experiences and to bring her readers into the moment?

5. This novel's structure is complicated: it is divided by month over the course of a summer as well as distinguished by its three main characters. Franny and Karen are presented in an omniscient voice but Celia is told primarily in first person. What effect was Amanda Eyre Ward trying to achieve with this structure? Did their voices, in their variations, affect your sympathy or attachment to any of the characters -- and how so?

6. Does Celia have survivor's guilt? Does she blame herself for Henry's tragic death? Does she believe she deserves real happiness? How does she inhibit her own healing? Do any of the characters in **Sleep Toward Heaven** feel they deserve happiness or contentment?

7. What is the role of love in this novel? How does each of the women on Death Row, as well as Celia, Franny, and Nat, define love -- is it finite? How do they recognize it? How do they express and receive love and how does this affect their individual feelings of identity and wholeness? Does love, as a concept and in practice, change throughout the novel?

8. How does Celia cope with a life without Henry? How does she fill her time and what comes to be most important to her after his death? What has she learned from his death? What does her magenta bikini signify -- is it an indicator of progress or is it just a magenta bikini? What is Franny's "magenta bikini?"

9. How does Franny mourn the deaths of Anna and of Uncle Jack? How do her actions compare to the emotional aftermath of her broken engagement to Nat? Why does she establish a relationship and begin to care for Karen when, inevitably, Karen will be executed by the end of the summer? Is Franny's insistence on providing Karen proper treatment for her HIV-related illnesses and infections a marker of Franny's altruism or is she selfishly motivated? Similarly, is Celia's final scene with Karen an act of altruism and forgiveness or is Celia acting on and for her own behalf?

10. How did you interpret Celia's final revelation to Karen? Did you see it as a miscarriage of justice, an act of mercy, or something altogether different? Knowing what she does, why do you think Celia decides to attend the execution with her mother and Henry's family? What role does Henry play in her decision to intervene?

Author Bio

Amanda Eyre Ward is the *New York Times* bestselling author of CAT & VIVIAN, SLEEP TOWARD HEAVEN, HOW TO BE LOST, LOVE STORIES IN THIS TOWN, FORGIVE ME, CLOSE YOUR EYES, THE SAME SKY, THE NEARNESS OF YOU, THE JETSETTERS, THE LIFEGUARDS, LOVERS AND LIARS and ARRIVALS AND DEPARTURES.

Her bestselling novels have been featured in *People* magazine, the *New York Times* and more. Amanda publishes nonfiction in *Travel + Leisure*, the *New York Times*, *Texas Monthly* and more, and publishes original work on Audible.com. Amanda?s work has been optioned for film and television and translated into 15 languages. She lives in Austin, TX.

Critical Praise

"[Ward] gives us vivid, often jarring images of life in and about women's death row. Remarkable and surprising...."

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