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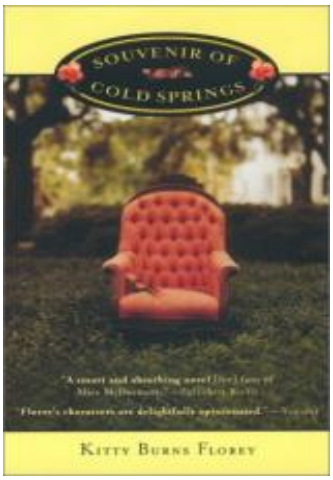
Souvenir of Cold Springs

by Kitty Burns Florey



About the Book

Tumbling backwards in time, from 1987 to 1938, and seen through the eyes of four generations of women, **Souvenir of Cold Springs** is the story of one extended family and the secrets from the past that shape their lives.

Readers first encounter Margaret Neal, a junior at Harvard, who drops out after a disastrous liaison and its unfortunate consequences. Aimless and guilt-ridden, she decides she has to get away from the East Coast altogether. For the money to buy a ticket to California, Margaret appeals to her great-aunt, Nell Kerwin, a no-nonsense ex-schoolteacher who still lives in the old family home in Syracuse where, each Thanksgiving, the members of the Kerwin clan gather for a raucous family reunion. When Nell replies to Margaretís plea, she encloses a gift?an odd yet cherished souvenir that weaves in and out of the story as a series of crucial truths about the familyís history is revealed.

Soon weíll meet Margaretís contemporaries?wild cousin Ann, practical cousin Heather?as well as Margaretís parents, Mark and Lucy, her aunt Kay, and uncle Teddy. Glimpses of the lives of Teddy and Lucyís parents give way to fuller portraits of these aunts, uncles, siblings, and spouses at varying moments in their lives.

The interlocking narratives in **Souvenir of Cold Springs** peel away layers of a larger story, uncovering the painful events that arose from one impulsive act buried deep in the past, and from the misconceptions, rationalizations, and outright lies that followed. As the story works its way backward we come to see not only how the events and values of each generation influence individual fates, but how this family, like all families, is a rich accumulation, with each generation echoing and deepening the experiences of those who came before them.

Discussion Guide

1. Is there one "heroine" of the story? Who and why?

2. Mother-daughter (and aunt-niece, as stand-ins for mother-daughter) relationships are repeatedly examined throughout the book. Compare these relationships in their both positive and negative aspects: Lucy/Margaret; Kay/Ann and Heather; Caroline/Lucy; Mary Margaret/Peggy; Alice/Peggy; Nell/Margaret. Discuss how certain mothers' ambivalence about their children is juxtaposed with other women's intense desire for children. Trace the traits of histrionics, drama, and self-denial down through Caroline to Lucy to Margaret.

3. Certainly the females of the Kerwin family are the focus of **Souvenir of Cold Springs**. But what do you make of the men who are seen only peripherally: Roddie (Margaret's boyfriend), Matthew Nicholson (Margaret's British professor), Nicky Magic (Lucy's college boyfriend), Peter, John, Ralph, Charles?

Of the men who have a more solid presence in the narrative?Jamie, Stewart, Mark, Teddy, even Mr. Fahey and Ray Ridley?are they drawn deeply enough to become complex, knowable characters, or do they fit Heather's simplified one-word descriptions of them: "Mr. Fahey: pathetic. Dad: drunk?Mark: fascist" (55)?

4. Some of the female family members are talked about far more than they are seen or heard, especially Kay and Peggy. What do you make of Kay?as a person, parent, in-law (to the Kerwins and Hamlins), wife to Richard and Teddy? Note the placement of Kay's chapter, at the exact center of the book, after numerous unflattering glimpses of her. Does it seem that she has?and uses?an opportunity to have her say or defend herself? Is she at all a sympathetic character?

As for Peggy, do you sympathize with her? How do you feel about her lies to her family members and friends? Was her life plan feasible? Is Nell's long-lived devotion to Peggy justified? Does Peggy's chapter, the final one before the book's epilogue, help to explain her motivations?

5. The majority of the sex scenes and sexual encounters in this book?including Peter exposing himself to Margaret, Jack Wentworth coming on to Nell, even Caroline and Stewart having sex while married?are negative, hurtful, full of ulterior motives, or frightening. Why do you think that is? Many lead to abortions; what do you make of this recurring theme? When and for whom is sex a positive, enjoyable act in this book?

6. Discuss the striking chapter entitled "Lucy 1952" (215), which follows one of Lucy and Teddy's childhood games of "Poor Servant Girl." What does it reveal about Lucy and Teddy's personalities, and Caroline and Stewart's marriage?

7. Alice thinks of the Kerwin house in the following manner: "this house that was once her sister's and now seemed to belong to no one, a house full of death and memories and lost souls." Earlier, when Alice closes Jamie's attic studio door, she is left with the sense of "something beautiful?of life, joyful and pulsating?shut up?behind a closed door" (247). Do you agree with Alice's sentiments? What bad and good memories does the house hold?for Lucy, Nell, Margaret, Jamie? Is it in fact the heart of the family (good or bad)?

8. Money is a concern and source of contention, inertia, and action in **Souvenir of Cold Springs**. Consider how each character thinks about and reacts to having/not having money, especially Kay, Lucy, Nell, Jamie, Caroline, Charles, and Mary Margaret.

9. Discuss religion in **Souvenir of Cold Springs** and how the Catholic faith's tenets relating to morality, sex, guilt, self-sacrifice, and death affect the lives of Mary Margaret and Caroline specifically. Is Caroline interested in becoming a nun for the wrong reasons, taking into account her relationship with Stewart and her youthful admiration of **The Canterbury Tales**

's Madame Eglantine?

10. Florey alternates the narrative focus to slowly reveal characters and actions. Which characters do you relate to the most? Which characters' chapters were the most revealing? How does having so many characters affect how you perceive the story's events?especially Caroline's death, Peggy's pregnancy, Caroline and Stewart's complex relationship? While third-person narrative is utilized throughout the novel, would you have rather experienced each section through first-person narrative?

11. Did you like having an epilogue to bring the story back to where it began? Were you satisfied with the ending? How do you think the lives of Nell, Margaret, Heather, Ann, Peter, Lucy, Mark, Teddy, and Kay turn out beyond what Nell has revealed? What do you think Margaret and Nell will do with the information they'll learn from Ray's letters to Peggy?

12. The book's epigraph (and Nell's favorite line of poetry) is "Though much is taken, much abides" (Tennyson). What have the Kerwins lost? What abides?

Author Bio

Kitty Burns Florey was born in Syracuse, New York, and lived for many years in Boston and New Haven. She now lives in Brooklyn with her husband, the painter Ron Savage. The author of eight novels including **Family Matters**, **Vigil for a Stranger**, and **Duet**, as well as numerous short stories and essays, she is also the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Critical Praise

"It would be best if you just went and read the book now. It's a shame to spoil the pleasure Florey offers in her graceful revelations?These people seem real, and their secrets seem possible, fascinating?Florey has a knack for describing women in precarious mental states, women with skewed realities, women who seem capable of making anything possible in their minds."

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