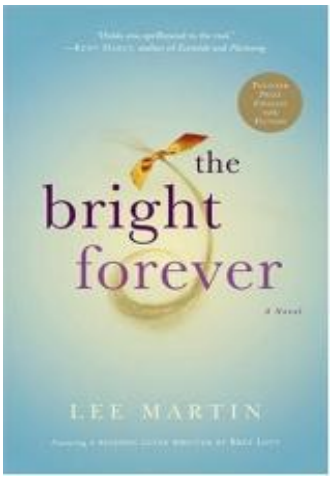
The Bright Forever

by Lee Martin



About the Book

On an evening like any other, nine-year-old Katie Mackey, daughter of the most affluent family in a small town on the plains of Indiana, sets out on her bicycle to return some library books.

This simple act is at the heart of **The Bright Forever**, a suspenseful, deeply affecting novel about the choices people make that change their lives forever. Keeping fact, speculation, and contradiction playing off one another as the details unfold, author Lee Martin creates a fast-paced story that is as gripping as it is richly human. His beautiful, clear-eyed prose builds to an extremely nuanced portrayal of the complicated give and take among people struggling to maintain their humanity in the shadow of a loss.

Reminiscent of books such as **The Little Friend** and **The Lovely Bones**, but most memorable for its own perceptions and power, **The Bright Forever** is a compelling and emotional tale about the human need to know even the hardest truth.

A Featured Alternate of the Literary Guild, Doubleday Book Club, and Book-of-the-Month Club.

Discussion Guide

1. As each character begins to tell his or her part of the story, we see that they all have vivid flashes of memory about that fateful day-a smell, a taste, a feeling, the way that the evening sky looked, the sound of Katie's voice. Beyond setting the scene for the reader, how do these images help you form a picture of who these people are? What are some examples from the book of other events that are remembered in this kind of tactile detail? Are there any events from your own life that you remember in this way?

2. What do you make of the relationship between Clare and Raymond? Why do you think she is afraid that people will find her foolish? Why does she refuse to acknowledge his guilt for so long? What do these two give to each other, and

why do you think that those around them are made so uncomfortable by it?

3. Henry Dees says his fixation with Katie comes from the fatherly love he feels for her. Do you agree with this view, or do you think there is something more sinister at play in his mind? Is Henry a harmless eccentric, or a man at war with his own inner nature? He knows that his adoration for the child is somehow wrong, so why is he powerless to stop it?

4. Throughout the novel, we see the purple martins come and go, and both Henry and Clare feel a particular love for and connection with them. Why do you think this is? What is it about the birds that each of them loves? Is it the same for both? And what do the hawks represent in this context?

5. What do you think Raymond sees in Henry that makes him seek him out as a friend? Is he simply taking advantage of someone that he can see right away is weak, or does he truly mean to be a friend to him? And why does Henry befriend Raymond, even letting himself be taken advantage of?

6. Discuss the character of Junior Mackey. Of what significance is the list Gilley finds of his life goals (all achieved, to the letter) and his senior quote in the high school yearbook: "The measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out"? How is Gilley his father's son, and in what ways does his character diverge from his father's? How would you measure Junior's character when all is said and done?

7. Does Henry really want to help Katie and her family? If so, why does he only reveal bits of information at a time, and never the whole story as he knows it? Do you see it as a failing on his part that he is so afraid to tell what he knows? How does the complex relationship between love for another and hatred for himself play out in his actions?

8. Many of the characters in this novel speak of love at one point or another. What are the kinds of love we see in The Bright Forever, and how does the idea of love motivate these people? In the end, which love resonates the most for you?

9. How significant do you find the setting of this novel to be? Could it just as easily have occurred in earlier or later decades? Elsewhere in the country? Would it have the same impact? Why do you think Martin chose to place the action when and where he did?

10. Why does Tom Evers never pursue an investigation of what happened to Raymond Wright?

11. Throughout the novel, there is the looming question of guilt in the matter of what happened to Katie Mackey. Where do you think the blame lies? To what degree are Henry, Raymond, Clare, Gilley, Mr. and Mrs. Mackey, and even the townspeople responsible? Is there one single unforgivable act that someone commits that seals her fate, or does a combination of coincidences, actions, and inactions lead to her death?

12. What do you find to be the most significant moment in the novel, in terms of the character of Henry Dees? Is there a place where you can see that he has learned from the tragedy that he played such a large part in? Or are you left with the impression that he simply continues his life on the same path of inaction, fear, and shame?

13. What does the title The Bright Forever mean to you? What is the "bright forever" the song refers to, in the context of this story?

Author Bio

Lee Martin is the author of such novels as THE BRIGHT FOREVER, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. His writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Harper?s*, *Ms Magazine*, *The Georgia Review* and *The Kenyon Review*, and his work has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays* and *The Best American Mystery Stories*. His books have been widely translated and won many awards, including a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers award. He teaches in the MFA Program at The Ohio State University.

Critical Praise

"I read **The Bright Forever** in one sitting. I couldn't put it down. Part **Mystic River**, part **Winesburg, Ohio**, this harrowing and beautiful book is one of the most powerful novels I've read in years and heralds the breakout of a remarkable talent."

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