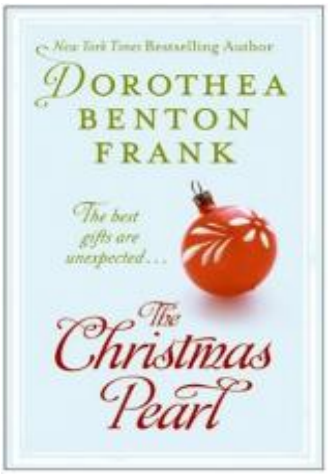
The Christmas Pearl

by Dorothea Benton Frank



About the Book

Still spry at 93, Theodora has lived long enough to see her family grow into an insufferable bunch of truculent knuckleheads. Having finally gathered the whole bickering brood together for the holidays at her South Carolina home, the grand matriarch pines wistfully for those extravagant, homey Christmases of her childhood. How she misses the tables groaning with home-cooked goodies, the over-the-top decorations, those long, lovely fireside chats with Pearl, her grandmother's beloved housekeeper and closest confidante. These days, where is the love and the joy...and the peace?

But this is, after all, a magical time. Someone very special has heard Theodora's plea --- and is about to arrive at her door with pockets full of Gullah magic and enough common sense to transform this Christmas into the miracle it's truly meant to be.

Discussion Guide

1. Ninety-three year-old Theodora is not anticipating another tense Christmas with her family. As she thinks back to the holidays of her past, she remembers one in particular --- Christmas 1920 --- as being her best. What would be your best holiday and why?

2. Theodora has an upsetting dream about her grandmother?s servant and beloved friend, Pearl: ??I realized but did not want to acknowledge that Pearl was referring to the generations of us that she and my grandmother had left behind to spiral down into a bucket of rattlesnakes. With that thought, rattlesnakes began to crawl from all the pots on the stove until they covered the floor of the kitchen. They threatened and hissed, rising and squirming. I tried to scream. No noise would come from my throat.? It?s clear from her dream she feels guilt over what her family has become. But what do you think is the symbolism behind the snakes?

3. When discussing the discord in her family, Theodora tells Pearl she wishes Barbara had a firmer hand with her

children and husband: ?The mother has to be the mother to the *whole* family.? Do you agree with her sentiment? Why do you think Barbara doesn?t stand up for herself?

4. Near the end of the novel, Barbara tells Camille, ?All anybody in this life wants beyond good health and enough money to live is love and respect.? Do you agree with her? Is there anything you?d add to her statement?

5. The book is complemented by mouthwatering recipes in the back. Which ones are you excited to try out? If you could add one special holiday recipe of your own, which one would you share and why?

6. Holiday celebrations are about tradition. What?s a typical holiday like with your family? Are there any traditions you?d like to add to your next holiday? Any you?d like to dispense with?

7. Why are the holidays such a tension-filled, fraught time of year when they are ideally supposed to be a time of thanks, gratitude and peace? What constitutes a perfect holiday for you?

8. Why do you think Pearl is such a profound influence on Theodora, more so than her own mother? If you could have one person from the past come back to visit you for one special holiday, who would it be and what would you do together?

9. Theodora, with some magical help from Pearl, helps Barbara whip her family into shape. If you had the benefit of Pearl?s magic for one day, is there anything you?d change about your family?

10. Pearl often uses her native Gullah language. Do you know anything about Gullah culture?

11. Did the period photographs sprinkled throughout add to the book?s atmosphere? The author mentions that these period photographs were loaned to her from the South Carolina Historical Society. You can learn more about them at http://www.southcarolinahistoricalsociety.org/.

Author Bio

Dorothea Benton Frank was the author of 20 bestselling novels set in the Low Country of South Carolina. She passed away on September 2, 2019 at the age of 67 following a brief struggle with leukemia.

Photo Credit: Debbie Zammit

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