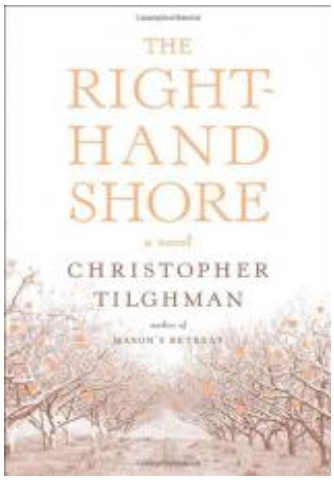
The Right-Hand Shore

by Christopher Tilghman



About the Book

It?s been more than a decade since Christopher Tilghman burst onto the scene with his critically acclaimed national bestseller, **Mason?s Retreat.** In that stunning debut novel, Tilghman told the captivating story of a family?s attempt to reclaim their wrecked ancestral estate on the eve of World War II. Now Tilghman returns to the lush Maryland landscape of the Retreat, enchanting us once again with his evocative storytelling and deeply felt explorations of the complex ties that bind us to our families and to the land. In **The Right-Hand Shore**, Tilghman traces the rich history of the Masons from their slaveholding past up to 1920 and the moment when Miss Mary Bayly learns she is dying and seeks a suitable heir for the land that has left her feeling both doomed and blessed.

Responding to Miss Mary?s invitation to meet, Edward Mason, the closest relation Miss Mary can find, is unprepared for the stories that will forever bind him to ancestors he never knew and to beautiful acres he has never seen before. He hears of Miss Mary?s grandfather brutally selling all his slaves in 1857 in order to avoid possible reprisals after Emancipation. He hears of the doomed efforts by her father, Wyatt Bayly, to establish a vast peach orchard. He learns of Abel Terrell, son of free blacks, who became head orchardist. And he hears of a fractured, warring household torn apart by race and class --- all because of innocent young forbidden love. His visit concludes with revelations that will haunt him with self-doubt, laying the path for a homecoming nearly twenty years later.

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of **The Right-Hand Shore**. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this masterly novel about the hold of family, the devastating legacy of slavery, and, ultimately, the possibility of redemption.

Discussion Guide

1. What were your first impressions of Mary? How did your perception of her shift as you watched her life unfold?

2. When Ophelia?s father decides to unburden himself of the risks of slaveholding, he divides his slaves into two groups. He manumits the ones he keeps, but he doesn?t tell them; they continue serving him, not knowing they are free. He sells off the others at a discounted price to ?the weasel-faced man from Virginia.? How do the Duke?s actions shape future generations of servants who work at the Retreat?

3. How does Ophelia?s life with Wyatt compare to Mary?s life as a single woman? How do both women contend with the preference for sons as heirs?

4. What does Randall and Thomas?s friendship teach their families about race, and about the limits of devotion? How do Una and Abel try to prepare their children for the world beyond the Retreat?

5. What do Mary?s years in France represent to her? What does Ophelia want her to grasp about the importance of ancestry and the ties between Europe and America?

6. While many of the Masons are expected to go through artificial courtship rituals resulting in marriage, Thomas and Beal find genuine love in secrecy. Yet Randall doesn?t believe it?s possible for them to have a mutually loving relationship; he thinks his sister will be exploited, just as Tabitha was exploited by Wyatt. How are Thomas and Beal able to prove Randall wrong, creating a true partnership in a society that doesn?t view them as equals?

7. What role does Catholicism play in the lives of the Masons, socially and spiritually?

8. How does Maryland?s history as a Civil War border state echo throughout the characters? lives? How are the Masons affected by living in a state that did not join the Confederacy?

9. Discuss the novel?s title. What are the symbolic and literal differences between the Retreat and the realm of Baltimore to its west?

10. We learn early in the novel (or by reading **Mason?s Retreat**) that the Retreat will fall into decline after Mary?s death, with no one having ?the slightest interest in saving it.? Discuss the Retreat as if it were a character. Do you see it as a place of solace, or a place of destruction? Is it a good friend to those who inhabit it?

11. What is the significance of Mary?s decision to convert the Retreat into a dairy farm?

12. Are the Frenches liberated or confined by the fact that they are not the Retreat?s owners? In their minds, what is their place in the Masons? world?

13. The author describes Mary?s adolescent attraction to Beal, and her later decision to break off her engagement to Oswald. What freedom does she find in solitude? What ?family? does she create for herself later in life?

14. How did you interpret the closing conversation between Edward and Mary? Who, ultimately, is to blame for the murder? What was the effect of the preceding scene, in which Mary accidentally injures Robert Junior?

15. Discuss other works by Christopher Tilghman that you have read. How do the events revealed in **The Right-Hand Shore** shape Edward?s experience in **Mason?s Retreat**? What does Tilghman?s other fiction help us understand about

the nature of families?

Author Bio

Christopher Tilghman is the author of two short-story collections, **In a Father?s Place** and **The Way People Run**, and two novels, **Mason?s Retreat** and **Roads of the Heart**.Currently the director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Virginia, he lives with his wife, the writer Caroline Preston, in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Critical Praise

"Christopher Tilghman is a novelist?s novelist in that he can hold the years in his head and then deal them out in a layered story so achingly gracious and incisive that it becomes for a week in a reader?s house the very reason for the chair, the lamp. Offered in Tilghman?s astonishing prose, the story of this place --- focusing on two families, two races, the history of a peach orchard, and a love that is both natural and forbidden --- is a reader?s deep pleasure. The story flows inexorably through the insistent harm of the period, which is brought to such life that we see it is really our own. This is a big, wonderful novel."

? Ron Carlson, author of **The Signal** and **Five Skies**

"This is bold storytelling --- a man spends a day listening to tales of the past that become an eloquent set of voices sailing through his imagination and into an intimate history of a place called Mason?s Retreat. It?s a wonderful novel, unfolded in elegant and precise language."

? Bobbie Ann Mason, author of **Shiloh**

"A rare achievement. Christopher Tilghman?s vision of the American past --- and particularly of individuals caught in the tidal sweep of history --- is dazzling in its precision and clarity."

? Charles Frazier, winner of the National Book Award for **Cold Mountain**

The Right-Hand Shore
by Christopher Tilghman

Publication Date: April 24, 2012
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 368 pages
Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
ISBN-10: 0374203482
ISBN-13: 9780374203481