ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

When Southern Girls Grow Old: Three Homecomings

by Elizabeth Doak Sherman



About the Book

When Southern Girls Grow Old follows the Horton girls --- Mavis, Sammie Jo, and Elmira --- as they move into old age. Despite differences in circumstances and temperament, they face the common challenge of becoming more truly and fully their best selves as they grow older. Their stories are about retirement and friendship, hurting and healing, aging and coming to grips, being old and being young, who?s sane and who?s crazy and who?s just excited, and getting and giving love and having enough left over to forgive, if not forget.

Elizabeth Doak Sherman tells how impending old age sends these three otherwise sensible women around the bend before --- with humor and hope --- they right themselves and find their way back home. When Mavis Horton?s boss (and lover) replaces her with a younger woman, Mavis takes on a new persona, gets even, and takes a trip in search of her lost childhood. Upon celebrating her 50th wedding anniversary, Sammie Jo changes her name, her direction in life, and runs away. As a retired police dispatcher, Elmira wallpapers her house with jigsaw puzzles, falls in love with an Elvis look-alike, and follows her heart to Memphis. In the wake of such shenanigans, each woman discovers new facets of herself and new reasons for living.

Although Sherman's voice is inherently southern, the issues she raises are both universal and contemporary. Old age may appear boring to the young, but, she points out, to those actually going through it, it is new and unchartered territory. Thus, old people make up their own rules. And, if we're lucky, sooner or later the rest of us will have the opportunity to do the same.

With census figures showing a rapidly aging population, Sherman's book fills a vacuum for senior readers. Bookstore and library shelves overflow with how-to manuals offering advice on everything from managing health problems to living on a fixed income, yet there remains a scarcity of fiction about the elderly themselves and how it feels to be old. With hilarious episodes and heart-warming characters, Southern Girls seeks to fill that void.

The book is a quick read with short lively scenes and fast-paced dialogue. Divided into three parts, it makes an ideal choice for book clubs and lends itself to a series of lively discussions.

When Southern Girls Grow Old: Three Homecomings is available for sale online at Amazon.com, BookSurge.com, and through additional wholesale and retail channels worldwide.

Discussion Guide

1. What aspects of her childhood have left Mavis insecure? Upon being forced into retirement, how do these insecurities manifest themselves?

2. Who is Annabelle? Why does she reenter Mavis?s life at this time? In what ways does Annabelle play the same role for Mavis that Rotten Eddie plays for Jonathan?

3. What kind of man is Harrison? What does he have to offer Mavis? Why has she been loyal to him for so many years?

4. Why is it important for Mavis to track down the mother who abandoned her? How did the reunion affect her?

5. Why do Annabelle and Rotten Eddie leave? Do you think either one of them will return?

6. Why does Sammie Jo change her name, empty the contents of her house, and run away?

7. Describe the friendship between Sammie Jo and Hopewell. How does each woman benefit from the relationship?

8. What are Sammie Jo?s greatest fears? Are they realistic?

9. What finally convinces Sammie Jo to go home?

10. Do you think Sammie Jo succeeds in transforming herself into Samantha? If so, in what ways? If not, how does she fail?

11. Why are her jigsaw puzzles important to Elmira?**12.** In what ways do they demonstrate the characteristics she values most about herself?

12. Why does Susie Q torment Elmira? What does she hope to gain by hiding pieces of the puzzles?

13. What aspects of her true nature does Elmira reject? How has her adolescent shame about her fascination with Elvis affected her as an adult?

14. What do Elmira and Jerome have to offer one another? Is their relationship based on love or infatuation?

15. How does Elmira benefit from Jerome?s presence in her life? When he leaves, why does she say she doesn?t want to find him?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Doak Sherman is a former newspaper reporter, TV writer, editor and media liaison at Vanderbilt University, magazine editor and book publisher at the American Association for State & Local History, and creative director at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. A native Tennessean, she is now retired and living in Hoover, Ala.

Critical Praise

"Three strong Southern female cousins learn that just because we grow old, we don?t have to stop growing. Mavis Horton thought part of her life was over when she retired. But when her girlhood friend Annabelle shows up, the onetime bookkeeper finds her life --- and her expectations --- turned upside down. First, Annabelle convinces the staid Alabamian to trade in her equally staid Camry for a new red Volkswagen Beetle. Then she starts on her hair and figure. Before Mavis knows it, she?s getting some payback on her former employer and longtime lover, in the form of a jewelry heist. Meanwhile, Sammie Jo Horton hits the wall at her 50th anniversary party. That?s when she decides to change her name to Samantha, leaving behind that ?tacky old, country-sounding nickname.? Next, it?s the old furniture that has to go, all of it, and while her husband is on a golf trip, she empties their entire house on the front lawn before taking off herself. For Elmira Horton, the catalyst is an itinerant roofer who moves in to fix a hole in her roof and manages to replace Elvis, just briefly, in her heart. By the time the three Horton cousins reunite, they?ve all confronted their demons and moved on in this engaging and optimistic read. Together, these three related stories create the kind of leisurely, conversational novel that has fallen out of favor in recent years. It?s a pity, because Sherman has a good ear for details and for the regionalisms that distinguish these Alabama natives --- it?s obvious in characters remarking over a giant Grand Canyon ?thousand piecer? jigsaw puzzle or folksy wisdom like, ?grief *is* a lot like the earache.? Although this lengthy novel could have been trimmed, it would be a pity to lose such specifics, or the quirky characters who treat each other with a heaping handful of affection. Detailed interconnected stories focus on the redeeming qualities of lifelong relationships."

When Southern Girls Grow Old: Three Homecomings
by Elizabeth Doak Sherman

Publication Date: September 29, 2008
Paperback: 444 pages
Publisher: BookSurge Publishing
ISBN-10: 1439209871
ISBN-13: 9781439209875