



The Sweet By and By

By Todd Johnson
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Introduction

Among the longleaf pines and family farms of eastern North Carolina, days seem to pass without incident for Margaret Clayton and Bernice Stokes until they discover each other in a friendship that will take them on the most important journey of their lives. Margaret, droll and whip smart, has a will of iron that never fails her even when her body does, while Bernice, an avid country-music fan, is rarely lucid. Irreverent and brazen at every turn, they make a formidable pair at the home where they live, breaking all the rules and ultimately changing the lives of those around them. Lorraine, their churchgoing, God-questioning nurse, both protects and provokes them while they are under her watchful eye, as her daughter, April, bright and ambitious, determinedly makes her way through medical school. Rounding out the group of unlikely and outrageous friends is Rhonda, the Bud-swilling beautician who does the ladies' hair on her day off and whose sassy talk hides a vulnerable heart, one that finally opens to love.

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Sweet By and By* is told through the first-person perspectives of five women. Aside from the chapter titles, how does the author keep each of these voices distinct and immediately recognizable? What does each unique woman bring to the story?
2. From Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July to Margaret and Bernice's escape to the Tastee Freez, holidays and food are powerful motifs in *The Sweet By and By*. What function do these motifs play in the story?
3. In Chapter 26, April claims there are only two unforgivable sins: sickness and aging. Why do you think she says this? Do you think this statement is true to the novel?
4. Several of Lorraine's chapters take place in church. How does Lorraine understand the role of God in her life, and does that change over the course of the novel?
5. What does the title *The Sweet By and By* allude to? What do you feel it means in relationship to your own life?
6. In Chapter 35, April and her mother learn the difference between "apparent" and "absolute magnitudes" of stars. What does this distinction symbolize? How do the five main characters' perceptions of themselves confirm or conflict with the other characters' depictions of them?
7. *The Sweet By and By* covers many years, often with only subtle indications that significant time has passed. What details does the author employ to implicitly convey the passage of time? Do different parts of the novel move more quickly than others, and if so, how can you tell?
8. What role does race play in the novel? Why do you think the author waits before revealing Margaret's race?
9. In Chapter 24, Lorraine, Margaret, and Rhonda read Bernice Stokes's letters to her deceased son. Lorraine says, "Don't think she didn't know, honey. There's ways of knowing that we don't know nothing about." What do you think Lorraine means here?
10. Why does Margaret insist on naming Bernice's second stuffed animal?
11. Is Margaret and Bernice's escape related to Bernice's death? Why or why not?
12. Why does Lorraine wait so long to tell April about her brother?
13. The novel is filled with uncharacteristic representations of age. In Chapter 22, Rhonda recounts how as a child, her grandmother threw away her dolls and told her, "You're grown up now . . . Let the past be the past!" A page later, she washes "Mister Benny's" hair for an aging Bernice Stokes. In one of the novel's final scenes, April takes her aging mother to the planetarium. Can you think of other passages like this? What does *The Sweet By and By* tell us about childhood, adulthood, and aging?

About the Author

Todd Johnson was born and raised in North Carolina. Following a career as a teacher and studio singer in New York City, he received a Tony Award nomination as a producer of *The Color Purple* on Broadway. He studied history at UNC-Chapel Hill and holds a master's degree from Yale Divinity School. He lives in Connecticut. This is his first novel.