



The House of Gentle Men

By Kathy Hepinstall
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Plot Summary

Louisiana, 1941. Young men from all over America crawled through swamps in what has become known as the Louisiana Maneuvers, or the war before the war. In the surrounding towns, teenage girls swooned for the soon-to-be soldiers. At the tender age of 16, Charlotte Gravin was one such girl. And so, only two weeks after witnessing her mother die in a fire accidentally set by her brother, she wanders into the woods to find a soldier to love. She emerges from the forest degraded, defiled by three men, pregnant, and unable to speak. Nine months later, she births a son alone in the forest and abandons him to the wild. Evocative and poetic, *The House of Gentle Men* is populated by individuals who-like Charlotte-have shouldered more than their fair share of tragedy and, in its aftermath, are paralyzed by pain. There's Milo, Charlotte's brother, still seething with anger years after his adolescent pyromania resulted in his mother's death. We meet siblings Louise and Benjamin. Louise is a compulsive cleaner, and Benjamin callously exploits fragile women for his own sexual satisfaction. Both are furiously trying to fill the space left first by their mother, who physically abandoned them, and then by

their father, Mr. Olen, who is emotionally unavailable. And there is Justin, a young man racked by the guilt of a terrible moral transgression in his past. Each of these individuals-defined by their separate suffering-will find their fates strangely intertwined. All are on a path to redemption that will lead them to a mysterious house deep in the Louisiana woods, *The House of Gentle Men*. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Would you describe the tone of the novel as "fablelike"? If not, how would you describe it? If so, what narrative techniques were used to accomplish this? Was it effective?
2. *The House of Gentle Men* is rich with symbolism. Discuss the use of symbolism in the novel and cite examples.
3. Do you think that the women and men in the novel were too clearly depicted as being either victims or victimizers? Why or why not?
4. Sexual intercourse is not allowed in *The House of Gentle Men*. Are there any positive portrayals of sexual relationships? Why or why not?
5. Do you think that all sins are deserving of forgiveness? Were you surprised that Charlotte forgave Justin? Did you want her to? Did you empathize with Justin?
6. Mr. Olen founded the House of Gentle Men in order to atone for the sin of neglecting his wife. In light of this fact, why is his relationship with his daughter and son ironic?
7. Compare and contrast Milo and Charlotte's relationship with Louise and Benjamin's relationship. How did these siblings help each other to heal?
8. Were you surprised by the way the novel ended? Do you think that Justin, Charlotte, Daniel and Milo survived? Would it have been possible for them to lead a normal life together?

About the Author: Kathy Hepinstall was born in Odessa, Texas, and spent a large part of her childhood two hours from the Louisiana border, where most of her relatives reside. She lives in Austin, Texas. *The House of Gentle Men* is her first novel.