

FANNIE FLAGG

THE
**WONDER
BOY
OF
WHISTLE
STOP**

BOOK CLUB KIT





A Q&A WITH AUTHOR FANNIE FLAGG

Many of your previous books also take place in small towns. What draws you to writing about settings like Whistle Stop?

I have always loved the idea of growing up in a small town, having a sense of community. A place where you feel you belong. I think my writing about small towns is an attempt to make up for something I actually never had. I grew up an only child in an apartment building in a very large city.

Which character do you relate to the most, and why? Who is the most fun to write?

The character in this book to whom I most relate would have to be Bud Threadgoode. He realizes he has a good part of his life behind him now and is beginning to wonder what to do with the time he has left, And thank heavens he finds it.

The most fun character in this book for me to write was Ruthie's mother-in-law, Martha Lee Caldwell. She made me laugh, with all her airs and pretensions. But I will say this . . . as fun as she was to write, I'm glad she wasn't my mother!

Family lines—whether the family is poor, wealthy, close, or distant—feature prominently in the book. Why is your family line important to you? How have your ancestors inspired you the way Idgie and Ruth inspired their descendants?

Well, this is an amazing question. My maternal grandmother was Leona Fortenberry. She grew up in a large family in a small railroad town right outside of Birmingham called Irondale, Alabama. Her youngest sister, my great-aunt Bess Fortenberry, grew up and ran the town's café. On several occasions when I was a child, my mother drove me out to this little town and we visited with Aunt Bess at the café. I remember how much warmth

and fun there was inside. Aunt Bess was so loved by everybody in town and was quite a character, I grew up hearing many tales about her and life at the café during the Depression. After I left Birmingham and moved to New York, I never got to see her very often, but I never forgot her.

Then years later in 1980, both my parents died quite unexpectedly within a few months of each other. I had to go back home to Birmingham to take care of some business, and for some reason, I found myself driving around town looking at places I used to live, places I used to visit, and eating the same foods I used to eat as a child. I suppose I was trying to comfort myself in some way.

Then one day I rode out to the little town of Irondale and drove by the big old Fortenberry house where my grandmother and Bess and all their brothers and sisters had grown up. Sadly, at the time, it was deserted and in total disrepair, with windows broken and the porch falling apart. After that I went across the tracks over to the old café which was still open. It was owned by someone else now, but I went in and met the new owners who had known and loved Bess as everyone had. And of course while there I had some fried green tomatoes.



That same afternoon, before I left town, I stopped by the house of a lady who had married my great-uncle Bill Fortenberry. To my surprise, she said she was glad I came by because my Aunt Bess had left me something in her will. I couldn't imagine what it could be, and why she had left it to me, when she had so many other nieces and nephews who were closer to her than I was.

To my surprise, it was a shoebox, filled with her memories: Photos of herself, her high school diploma, old menus from the café, funeral programs of the many people who had worked for her listing her as a speaker . . . all sorts of things. As I sat there and looked at it, it struck me that this was what was left of a life, one that had meant so much to so many people, all in this one shoebox. And I was still baffled. Why had Aunt Bess left me that box?

As I left to drive back to Birmingham that afternoon, and just as it was beginning to get dark, I decided to drive by the old Fortenberry house one more time. And as I did, the headlights of my car hit the upstairs windows in such a way that for a moment, it looked as though there were people inside still moving around. As though the old abandoned house had come back to life. Then it hit me. Bess wanted me to write about her and the café and the town. I believe that I got a gift from her that day: The idea for my next book, which was *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, and, as it turned out, for *The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop* as well. Thank you, Aunt Bess.

Evelyn and Ruthie declare themselves to be sisters, though they aren't technically related. Do you think we can choose our family? How is one's chosen family different from their birth family?

Oh—yes I do. I have many friends that I consider family. I have several friends whom I consider to be my younger sisters and it's so nice, because I never had real ones.

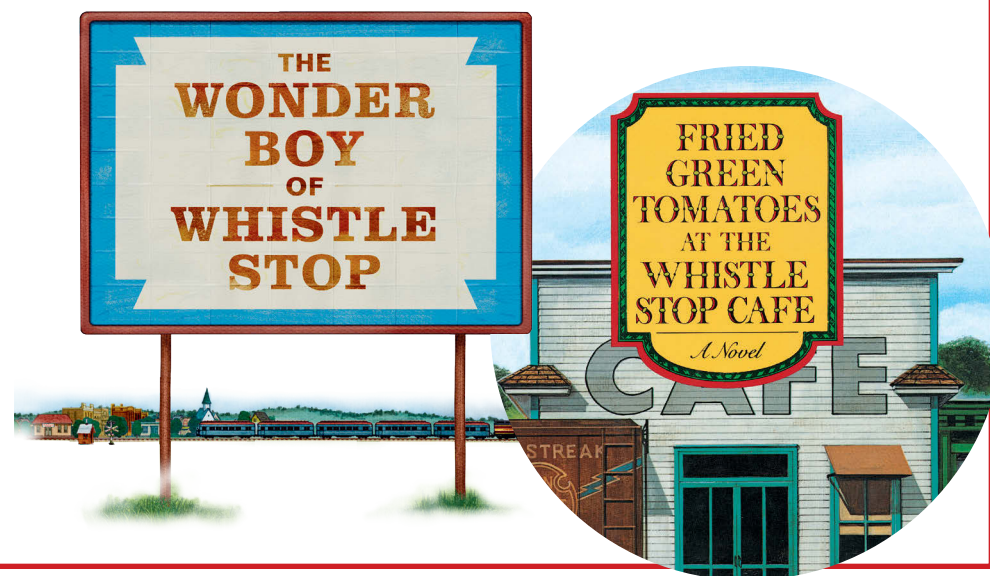
I think we do choose our family, and it is so magical when this happens. I often wonder why we are drawn to certain people right away, why we meet people we feel we have known for years. Did we know them in another life? It is so mysterious and wonderful at the same time. And the good news is that our family of choice are the ones we love, not because we are related to them, but because we

have a bond that we have formed on our own. And the other good news is we don't have to have them over for the holidays if we don't want to!

Memory seems to be a major theme in the novel—characters share memories with each other and fondly reflect on times past. How do you think we can keep memories from fading? What do you feel is the balance between cherishing old memories and actually living too much in the past?

Memories can work in strange ways. That's why it's so important to remember the good times and try not to dwell on the bad ones. In Bud Threadgoode's case, he is now living in a place where, as he says, "Nobody knew him when." He is lonesome, and I think he tries to make up for the loss of so many things by remembering the people and the places of his past. Memories can be a comfort and make you happy, or make you sad. People die, and time passes. Things change, but lucky for us, our memories of the past can be with us forever. The trick is to be grateful for all the happy memories, while letting go of the bad ones.

I think that no matter what our age, we must never give up on making new memories every day. The past is gone, but we do have right now. And, as for me, I am ready for new adventures: Like sending this book out in the world, in hopes that it might make someone smile for a little while.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are so many wonderful (and a few not-so-wonderful) characters in this novel. Which character do you relate to most, and why? Is there a character you wish you could be more like?
2. “I’ve often wondered where all those memories go after we die,” Dot Weems writes in a Christmas letter. “Are they still floating around up in the ether somewhere, or do they die with us?” Memory is a major theme in *The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop*: Characters cheer themselves up with happy memories, seek out characters who share their memories, and mourn memories that fade. Share one of your favorite memories with your discussion group—or if you’re reading solo, write it down. What do you love about it? Has the memory changed over time?
3. Martha Lee is obsessed with status and the idea of “good” (meaning wealthy) families. Have you ever been tempted to think this way? Discuss what one loses—and the wonderful people they might not ever meet—by associating only with those deemed “worthy.”
4. Ruthie asks Bud to write his life story after reading an article saying that everyone should write out a life history for their family to have in the future. Did you ever ask your parents or grandparents about their lives? If so, what stories do you remember? What stories will you pass on from your own life? For inspiration, start with something Bud wrote about: What was the greatest day you personally lived through?
5. *The Wonder Boy of Whistle Stop* shifts back and forth through time, and across multiple characters’ perspectives. What are the benefits of nonlinear storytelling like this?
6. Losing loved ones is a part of life, and so many characters experience heart-breaking loss in the book. Bud loses Peggy, Ruthie loses Brooks—you could even argue that Bud loses Whistle Stop. How does each character cope with loss differently? How have you dealt with loss in the past?
7. Sometimes, a loss causes a character to lose part of his or her identity. This happens to Bud when he loses his other half, Peggy; it happens to Ruthie when she loses her identity as a wife and mother (of young children); and it even happens to Martha Lee when she realizes she’s built her identity on a false lineage. What are some of the ways these characters rebuild their identities once they’ve been shattered? Have you ever experienced something that caused you to have to rebuild or reconsider your identity?
8. There are so many female entrepreneurs and business owners in this book, from Ruth and Idgie to Opal Butts to Evelyn Couch. What hardships did these women face in trying to live their dreams? How did they inspire the women who came after them?
9. Though they aren’t related by blood, Evelyn and Ruthie decide to declare themselves sisters. Do you think we should be able to choose our families? Who are some friends in your life who have become more like family?
10. Regret is a natural consequence of life: We simply don’t get the chance to do everything we’d like, the way Bud and Peggy never got the chance to buy a house near Idgie and retire. How do characters deal with regret? How do you deal with feelings of regret in your own life? Do you think it’s possible to avoid these feelings? Why or why not?
11. At the end of the book, kismet and connection bring the descendants of former Whistle Stop residents together as they build a new town (an “all-gal town,” as Evelyn puts it!). What role have surprising connections and strange coincidences played in your own life? In what ways does the world sometimes feel like one big small town?

SIPSEY'S

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES



Ingredients

4 medium green tomatoes
9-oz. Original Whistle Stop Fried Green Tomato Batter Mix
1 to 1 ¼ cups water
Oil for frying
Salt to taste
1 egg (optional)

Instructions

- Wash tomatoes and slice approximately ¼-inch thick. Set slices aside.
- In medium bowl, combine Batter Mix and water. Use less water for thicker crust and more water for thinner crust. (For best coating, replace some water with 1 egg.) Stir to smooth consistency.
- Heat vegetable oil in skillet to 375°F or deep fryer to 300°F. Dip tomato slices in batter, one at a time. Immediately drop each slice into hot oil and cook until brown/turning brown (to taste) on both sides. (Frying time may be slightly faster if using egg.)
- Remove slices from oil. Stand in colander over another pan to drain, or place on paper towel. Sprinkle with salt to taste.

Note: Green tomatoes should be very firm with no visible red or pink. Only green tomatoes have the proper texture for frying!

Source: WhistleStopCafe.com

ALABAMA SWEET TEA

Serves 16

Ingredients

- 2 cups sugar
- ½ gallon water
- 1 tray ice cubes
- 3 orange pekoe tea bags (family-size)
- 3 cups cold water, or as needed

Instructions

- Pour the sugar into a large pitcher. Bring water to a boil in a large pan. When the water begins to boil, remove from the heat, and place the teabags in. Let steep for 5 to 6 minutes.
- Remove tea bags, and return tea to the heat. Bring just to a boil, pour into the pitcher, and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Fill the pitcher halfway with ice, and stir until most of it melts. Then fill the pitcher the rest of the way with cold water and stir until blended.
- Optional: For extra flavor, fresh-squeezed lemon, lime, or orange juice can be added.

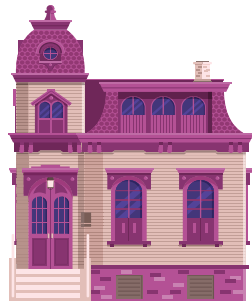


Source: AllRecipes.com

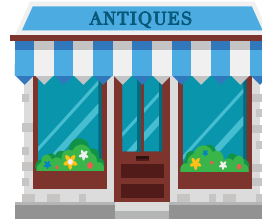
MAP OF THE NEW WHISTLE STOP



Whistle Stop Church



*Threadgoode Family
Bed & Breakfast*



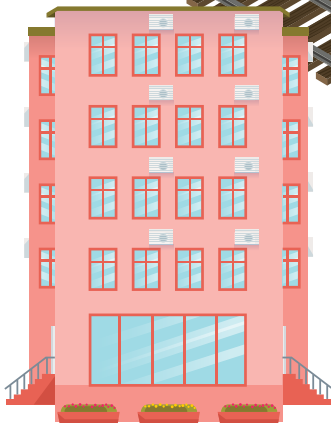
Antiques Shop



Whistle Stop Café



Busy Bea Beauty Shop



Condos at One Railroad Place



Town of Whistle Stop

Owned by: Evelyn Couch, dear friend of Ninny Threadgoode

Busy Bea Beauty Shop

Originally owned by: Opal Butts

Now owned by: Bea Wallace, granddaughter of Opal Butts

Whistle Stop Café

Originally owned by: Ruth Jamison and Idgie Threadgoode

Original chef: Sipsy Peavey

Now owned by: Ruthie Caldwell, granddaughter of Ruth Jamison

Chef: Alberta Peavey, granddaughter of Sipsy Peavey

Threadgoode Family Bed & Breakfast

Formerly: The Threadgoode family home

Now run by: Terry, Bud's former nurse

Whistle Stop Church

Original minister: Jessie Ray Scroggins

Current minister: Jessie Jean Scroggins, granddaughter of Jessie Ray Scroggins

Antiques Shop

Formerly: Dot Weems's post office

Now owned by: Martha Lee, mother-in-law of Ruthie Caldwell, and Carolyn Caldwell, great-granddaughter of Ruth Jamison

Condos at One Railroad Place

Owned by: Evelyn Couch