

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Gigi Amateau

CLAIMING GEORGIA TATE



NOTE TO READERS:

Claiming Georgia Tate deals with timeless themes of family and friendship. Georgia Tate faces situations that are incredibly challenging for someone so young. Yet, with the help of family and friends, she emerges at the end of the novel as a survivor. Because the novel deals honestly with incest, readers should be prepared to discuss this aspect of the novel as well. This guide includes discussion questions and additional resources for readers.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Georgia Tate Jamison, twelve-year-old narrator of the novel

Ginger, Georgia's best friend

Granddaddy Tate, Georgia Tate's grandfather

Nana Tate, Georgia Tate's grandmother

Rayford Jamison, Georgia's absent father

Georgia Jamison, Georgia's absent mother

Aunt Mazel, Granddaddy's sister

Sissy, Georgia's stepmother

Marie-Bernard and J.J., a grandmother and grandson living in Georgia's apartment building in Florida

Tamika, another resident of the Florida apartment building who helps Georgia

Leroy Bennett, a former convict who rides with Georgia from Florida back home to Mississippi

SYNOPSIS

Twelve-year-old Georgia Tate Jamison's summer is one of change. It begins when her long-absent father appears and whisks her away from Granddaddy and Nana Tate's house in Mississippi to Florida. Georgia Tate's stepmother, Sissy, is not happy to have her along. Georgia Tate is not thrilled to be away from the only home and "parents" she has known. When her father sexually assaults her, she phones home and asks Nana and Granddaddy to come and get her. Georgia Tate is able to return home in time for the Fourth of July festivities. Happy to be back, she experiences a spiritual renewal witnessed by her grandparents and Aunt Mazel.

Summer back home begins to restore her sense of belonging, well-being, and safety; she thinks that maybe the summer has been salvaged after all. Then a series of events turns Georgia Tate's world from familiar to foreign, from trusting to threatening. First, her best friend, Ginger, lets a secret slip: Georgia Tate's mother is alive. Georgia Tate had always been told

that her mother had died shortly after she was born; now she discovers that her mother had instead tried to kill herself and was institutionalized. Later, she left home, abandoning Georgia Tate to the care of her grandparents. When Georgia Tate confronts her grandparents with her newfound knowledge, they are shocked and do not know how to cope with it. Before Georgia Tate and Nana can determine what to do about her discovery, Nana dies of a heart attack. After the funeral, Granddaddy tells Georgia Tate that she must now go and live with her father.

In Part Two of the novel, Georgia Tate goes to live with her father and stepmother in Florida. Georgia Tate's father forces her to dress as if she were his girlfriend and not his daughter. He touches her, abuses her sexually, and eventually rapes her. Up to this point, Georgia Tate has taken refuge in riding her bicycle, in visits to the library, and ultimately, in her relationship with Marie-Bernard and her grandson J.J., who live in the same apartment building as Georgia Tate and her father. After Georgia Tate is raped, Tamika, another resident of the apartment building, provides a refuge for Georgia Tate from her father. Georgia Tate contacts her

friend Ginger, who relates Georgia Tate's plight to her granddaddy. Georgia Tate travels back from Florida to Mississippi on a bus, where she meets Leroy Bennett. Georgia Tate and Leroy become friends. Leroy teaches Georgia Tate an important lesson about holding on to joy when things seem bleakest. Georgia Tate arrives home to begin her new life with her grandfather only to learn that he has been seriously hurt in a car accident. Georgia Tate sits beside his bed, praying that her grandfather will recover and they can be a family once again.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Before reading:

1. Discuss the possible meaning of the title. What does it mean to "claim?" How can one claim a person? Answers should be recorded so that readers can comment on them after they have read the novel. Note: a post-reading activity would be to discuss the earlier answers and how accurate they were, based now on a deeper understanding of the book.
2. The setting of this story is Mississippi in 1976. What would be going on in Georgia Tate's world at this time? Who is president? What type of music is popular? What movies might Georgia Tate go to see

in town? What headlines might be in the local papers? The Bicentennial celebration is mentioned in the novel, and this is another topic that might be explored prior to reading the book.

While reading:

3. Sensory details play an important role in this novel. Georgia Tate comments on things that have to do with sight, smell, taste, sound, and touch. As you read, note any mention of these senses. What role do the five senses play in the life of Georgia Tate and, more important, in the novel itself?
4. In chapter 8, Georgia Tate learns the truth about her mother. Pay careful attention to the letter from Georgia Tate's mother on page 79. In the letter, Georgia Tate's mother tells her that feelings can hurt only "if you let them." Is this a true statement? Can you think of a time in your own life when this statement was either true or false?
5. References to the ocean and to swimming with a school of dolphins are made throughout the book. They introduce each section of the novel, and Georgia Tate goes to her memory of the ocean when her father is abusing her. Why

are these images of the ocean so important to Georgia Tate? What do you think the dolphins and/or the ocean might symbolize?

6. How does Georgia Tate's understanding of race and racial differences evolve as the novel progresses? How does Granddaddy Tate's understanding change? Is Georgia Tate's behavior toward African Americans surprising or predictable?

After reading:

7. The book is divided into two sections, Part One and Part Two. Each section opens with a description of Georgia Tate in the water with a group of dolphins. Compare and contrast these two passages (on page 1 and page 97). How do they differ from each other? How are they the same? What do they reveal about what happens in each of the two sections?
8. Gardening, fishing, and swimming serve as metaphors for much of what happens to Georgia Tate. You might want to note any references to these activities that occur within the story. How do the descriptions of these activities extend beyond the actual activities to Georgia Tate's relationships with family and friends?

9. On page 48, Georgia Tate observes that reading "is another place where there aren't any walls, and I can go even farther away with a book than I can get on my bike." What does she mean by this statement? Have you ever had this same feeling? What book were you reading? Has it happened more than once?
10. Granddaddy states on page 92 that "it seems to me that finding the good depends on whether or not there is hope." Georgia Tate loses hope when she goes to live with her father. How does she rediscover the hope that leads her to find a way back home to Mississippi?
11. As Georgia Tate is traveling home on the bus and talking to her seat companion, Leroy Bennett, he tells her that "life is two things: it's terror and joy." How is this observation reflected in Georgia Tate's own life? What are her terrors? Her joys? How do the joys help counteract the terrors?

AN INTERVIEW WITH GIGI AMATEAU

Q. *Families and the relationships among family members are at the center of your novel. The families are not always "traditional," nor are they always without problems. How difficult is it to write a novel about nontraditional family structures such as the one Georgia Tate has?*

A. Readers ask that question a lot, especially at book clubs. The families in *Claiming Georgia Tate* are not "nontraditional" by design. It happened more organically that J.J. is being raised by a single grandmother, Ginger by a divorced mom, and even Leroy Bennett's family is nontraditional.

You know, I feel that Georgia Tate's family is very traditional in that she is being raised by two good, strong people who act as her mother and father. Nana and Granddaddy Tate have committed to raising Georgia Tate together, and they have built a very traditional family unit with extended family, church family, and a loving community to support them.

To me, the difficulty came in trying to keep Georgia Tate's voice authentic while giving her the emotional space to unravel in Jacksonville and the tools to begin healing once the abuse stopped.

Q. *People always want to know what you are doing next. What are you working on now? Do you have more than one “iron in the fire”?*

A. I am having so much fun with Candlewick Press! I’m working on two new books with Candlewick Press, both dealing with issues related to elder care. Millions of Americans today are family caregivers for elders, and often we forget that children play an important role in caregiving as well. What I might be exploring in both of my new books is the special role that kids have in valuing our elders for the entirety of who they are.

One of my new books is a young adult novel set in Alabama called *Black Warrior Medicine*. I am learning that titles and commas are my weak areas, so I expect that title will change. *Black Warrior Medicine* tells the story of a girl and her mom who move back to Alabama thinking they’re going to “fix” their frail grandmother, Ayma. Well, Ayma doesn’t really need fixing. But, she does help to fix our “sheroes” by showing them how to reconnect to the earth and to each other.

The second book we’re working on is an early-reader chapter book

with a working title of *The Gift of Fragile Bones*. This story is about living with and caring for an elder whose health is failing, and it’s told from a child’s perspective. My daughter’s devotion to my own frail grandmother was the inspiration for this story. Years ago, when my grammy (she’s eighty-seven) first moved to Richmond from Mississippi, she lived with us several times for months at a time when she needed to recover from a fall. Watching Grammy and Judith learn how to live together was amazing.

Q. *A novel like Claiming Georgia Tate is certain to strike a responsive chord in readers. I imagine that you have heard from some of them. What do they write?*

A. What surprises me most is that both male and female readers, ages thirteen to eighty-five, have responded positively to *Claiming Georgia Tate*. Many of the older readers, those in their seventies and eighties, have said that the book’s rural setting resonated with them and evoked memories of revival, small town life, and especially their grandparents. Young men and women in their teens love Tamika and Leroy Bennett. Readers of all ages have written me to say their story is similar to Georgia Tate’s story and

that reading my book helped some part of them heal. Professionals in the fields of child abuse prevention and sexual assault treatment have asked to use the book in their work, which blows me away. Some readers have found inspiration in the feminist theology and Georgia Tate’s simple expression of complex religious concepts.

OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

MISSING MAY
by Cynthia Rylant
(Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1992)
When her Aunt May dies, Summer struggles to find a way to express her grief.

LEARNING TO SWIM
by Ann Turner
(Scholastic, 2000)
This novel in verse recounts Ann’s experiences as the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a neighbor.

WHEN SHE HOLLERS
by Cynthia Voigt
(Scholastic, 1994)
Tish is abused by her stepfather until she takes steps to confront his actions and bring them to an end.

MUSIC OF THE DOLPHINS
by Karen Hesse
(Scholastic, 1996)
Mila has been raised by dolphins until she is “rescued” and forced to live among humans where she is studied like an animal.

WEBSITES

On incest and rape:

www.rainn.org
<http://incestabuse.about.com/od/teenagers>

On the civil rights movement:

www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html
www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAcivilrights.htm

DISCUSSION GUIDE



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gigi Amateau hails from Mississippi, the same state as her narrator, Georgia Tate. Like her protagonist, she loves catfish, watermelon, and rainy days. Ms. Amateau lives in Virginia with her husband and daughter. She has a degree in Urban Studies and Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University. *Claiming Georgia Tate* is her first novel.

Discussion Guide written by Teri Lesesne, who teaches young adult literature in Texas and is the author of *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time* (Stenhouse Publishers, 2003).

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE BOOK

“It’s rare and exciting to discover a talented new writer like Gigi Amateau. Her voice is captivating and original. The story of Georgia Tate is fresh, funny, honest, and brutally painful. I was hooked on the first page and couldn’t put the book down until I’d finished. Then I read it again. That’s the kind of book this is. You may close it, but you’ll never forget it.”

— JUDY BLUME

“In spite of its tough subject matter, the entire story rings true and is shot through with humor from start to finish; it’s a genuine triumph of hope over anguish. . . . Highly recommended for public and school libraries and for school counselors’ and nurses’ offices.”

— VOICE OF YOUTH ADVOCATES