

The Book That Matters Most – Ann Hood

About the Author:

Birth—1956

- Where—West Warwick, Rhode Island, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Rhode Island; graduate studies New York University
- Awards—Pushcart Prize (twice); Best American Spiritual Writing Award; Paul Bowles Prize for Short Fiction
- Currently—lives in Providence, Rhode Island

Ann Hood is an American novelist and short story writer; she has also written nonfiction. The author of more than a dozen books, her essays and short stories have appeared in many journals and magazines, including the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Tin House*. Hood is a regular contributor to the *New York Times* "Home Economics" column.

Hood is the winner of a number of awards: Paul Bowles Prize for Short Fiction, two Pushcart Prizes, and a Best American Spiritual Writing Award. She is a faculty member in the MFA in Creative Writing program at The New School in New York City. She lives in Providence with her husband and their children.

Early Years

Hood was born in West Warwick, Rhode Island and earned her BA in English from the University of Rhode Island. After college she worked for the now-defunct airlines TWA as a flight attendant, living in Boston and Saint Louis and later moving to New York City. She attended graduate school at New York University, studying American Literature.

Hood began writing her first novel *Somewhere Off The Coast Of Maine* in 1983 while working as a flight attendant—and while attending graduate school—writing whenever she could during train rides to JFK airport or in the galleys of the airplane while passengers slept. During a furlough from the airline, she worked at the Spring Street Bookstore in Soho and Tony Roma's while writing *Somewhere Off The Coast Of Maine*.

Like much of her work, the novel draws upon her own life. Hood says the book began as a series of short stories about three women who went to college together in the 1960s. A year earlier, her older brother, Skip, died in a freak accident and Hood was struggling with how to cope with the loss. At a writer's conference, Hood was convinced by the writer Nicholas Delbanco that she was really writing a novel, and from there she began to connect the stories. The book was published in 1987.

Hood's flight attendant career ended in 1986 when TWA went on strike and the flight attendants found themselves soon "replaced." With more time to devote to writing, her stories and essays began to appear in *Mademoiselle*, *Redbook*, *Story*, *Self*, *Glamour*, *New Woman*, among others.

Personal life

Hood lives with her husband, businessman Lorne Adrain, her teenage son Sam and her daughter Annabelle in Providence, Rhode Island.

On April 18, 2002, Hood's five-year-old daughter, Grace, died from a virulent form of strep. For two years Hood found herself unable to write or even read. She took solace in learning to knit and in knitting groups. She gradually made her way back to her craft, writing short essays about Grace and grief.

To make sense of her own grief, in fall of 2004 Hood began to write her novel *The Knitting Circle*, about a woman whose five-year-old daughter dies from meningitis. The woman joins a knitting group of others also struggling to heal from loss. Hood's best-selling memoir *Comfort: A Journey Through Grief* chronicles her own struggle after her daughter's sudden death. That memoir was named one of the top ten non-fiction books of 2008 by *Entertainment Weekly* and was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice.

The summer after Grace died, Hood and Adrain decided to adopt a child and in 2005 traveled to China,

where they adopted Annabelle. Hood's experience adopting in China became the inspiration for her 2010 novel *The Red Thread*, which follows a woman struggling with the accidental death of her young daughter. The woman, Maya Lange, begins an adoption agency for Chinese babies.

Work

Hood's short story "Total Cave Darkness," about an alcoholic woman who runs away with a Protestant minister nine years younger than she is, appeared in the *Paris Review* in 2000. It is also the opening story in her collection of stories *An Ornithologist's Guide To Life*. The title story of that collection appeared in *Glimmer Train* in 2004 and revolves around a young girl who slowly discovers her mother is having an affair with their neighbor. Her stories have also appeared in *Tin House*, *Ploughshares*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Story*, *Five Points*, and others.

In addition to *Somewhere Off The Coast of Maine*, *The Knitting Circle*, and *The Red Thread*, Hood has written seven other novels: *The Obituary Writer* (2013) *Waiting To Vanish* (1988), *Three-Legged Horse* (1989), *Something Blue* (1991), *Places To Stay The Night* (1993), *The Properties of Water*(Doubleday), and *Ruby* (1998).

Hood, in addition to her memoir, has written an addition work of nonfiction: *Do Not Go Gentle: My Search For Miracles in a Cynical Time* (1999) follows Hood's travels to Chimayo, New Mexico in search of a miracle cure for her father's lung cancer. The dirt at El Santuario de Chimayo, a Roman Catholic church, is believed to have healing properties and thousands flock to the site each year. Her father's tumor did disappear, but he later died from complications from chemotherapy. Hood initially wrote about this experience in an essay for *Doubletake* magazine. That essay went on to win a Pushcart Prize. Hood's editor at Picador urged her to turn it into a book. (*Adapted from Wikipedia.*)

Reviews:

Hood's novel is rich with pleasures, and will no doubt launch a thousand book club discussions.

USA Today

Hood examines the push and pull between mothers and grown children and the transformative power of fiction.

People

Great novelists can envelop you in relatable plot lines that make you feel like you're part of the story. That's what Ann Hood, author of the much beloved *The Knitting Circle*, does in her latest.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

[A] moving, intricate story about loss, healing, and the value of critical thinking.... This is a gripping, multifaceted novel about recovering from different kinds of loss and the healing that comes from a powerful story.

Publishers Weekly

While some [readers] might become intrigued..., they also deserve a more developed, sharpened plot than this far-fetched, somewhat preposterous novel provides.... [S]ure to divide readers—between those who are captivated and those who desire a more detailed story line. —*Andrea Tarr, Corona P.L., CA*

Library Journal

Hood...has a knack for dramatic revelation...because she is so skilled at knowing what to leave out. Whether or not they think of themselves as bookish, readers of all stripes will enjoy cycling through these characters' lives and discovering their shared, mysterious past.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions:

1. Ava's reason for joining a book club is for "the comfort of people who wanted nothing more than to sit together and talk about books." Does that sum up your own reasons for joining (or perhaps forming) your own club? Do you have other reasons (other than the wine)?
2. Aside from her broken marriage, what other emotional baggage does Ava carry with her? How do some members of the group dredge up her feelings of inadequacy?
3. If your club decided to choose the books that matter most to each of you, what books might show up on the list?
4. What about the books on Ava's club's list—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Gatsby*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Mockingbird*, among others? Anne Hood extracts something pertinent to Ava out of each book. Talk about some of those relevant points: which do you find most insightful? Do any resonate with your own life? Do you find some of them simplistic or shallow, perhaps even schmaltzy?
5. Ava is flummoxed by the assignment. "She couldn't remember the last book she'd read that mattered at all. In fact, she purposely chose books that didn't matter." Why do you think she ignored books that had any significance to her?
6. Discuss *From Clare to Here*, the (fictional) book that Ava finally settles on. What does it mean to Ava, and what does the fact that she chose it reveal about her?
7. The author juxtaposes Ava's improving situation with her daughter Maggie's descent into addiction. What does the author gradually reveal about Maggie? Why is Maggie the way she is?
8. *The Book That Matters Most* makes the case for the power of literature to transform us. In what way is Ava transformed? Has a book ever transformed you? If so, in what way?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)