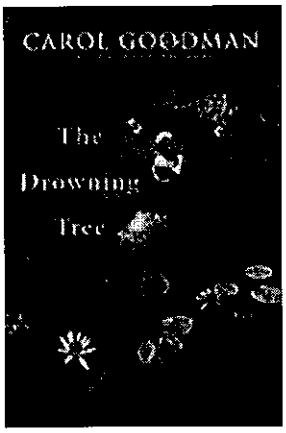

Review

THE DROWNING TREE

Carol Goodman
Ballantine Books
Suspense
ISBN: 0345462114

Carol Goodman's third novel, THE DROWNING TREE, is an extraordinarily intellectual murder mystery packaged in the nineteenth century gothic tradition, cum historical novel, cum homage to the classics. It is imbued with the magical spirit found in Greek mythology and is a statement on how the past is really forever with us.

She alludes to ancient icons and mythic beings that is then contrasted on a contemporary canvas, painted in a rainbow of striated colors, that reflects the moods and personalities of the characters. Goodman brings universally panoramic themes to this book, which is as much an exploration of art forms, be it sculpture, painting, writing or glass blowing as it is a study of the human condition. She discusses the subtleness of creativity, the human need to belong, the evils of greed, the sadness that accompanies human anomalies and traumatic events such as madness, suicide and murder. Nevertheless, she is very erudite in the masterful way she ties those themes to the most time-honored traditions of literary endeavors: to take readers to a place where different kinds of love animates the characters who lead to their redemption.

At the heart of the novel is a stained-glass window whose subject is an enigmatic woman limned in the spirit of Tennyson's "Lady of Shallot." That poem is the story of unrequited love; the Lady is doomed to her room and her loom...where she can only weave one scene over and over, a backward landscape, which is reflected in the mirror she faces. When she finally decides to break this spell she is doomed to death. Goodman did not choose this famous story and its depictions in the art of the Pre-Raphaelites by chance. She uses it as an allegory for her whole novel and imbues the work with other famous, recognizable literary allusions and actual texts.

The story begins at a seminar facilitated by Christine Webb, an alumna of a small private college located in upstate New York. She is a well-known and highly respected art historian whose reputation as a brilliant researcher brings her to the fifteenth

reunion of the class of 1987, which had elected to restore the Lady window as their class gift. "The window was designed by Augustus Penrose, founder of the Rose Glass Works and Penrose College, in 1922 for the twentieth anniversary of the founding and it depicts Augustus's beloved wife, Eugenie." Eugenie created The Women's Craft League for the wives and daughters of the men who worked in her husband's factory.

Christine tells her audience that the Lady in the Window is more than merely a celebration of the medieval craftswoman. What Christine always wondered was "why she is looking away from the window and why she has such a rapturous expression on her face. Her expression suggests some kind of revelation. Who is [the female] weaver supposed to be? Remember that Augustus rarely painted his beloved Eugenie just as *Eugenie*. As the Pre-Raphaelite painters he admired had before him, Augustus often chose to depict his model in the guise of a figure from literature." Christine continues: " 'He painted Eugenie as Daphne turning into a laurel as she flees from Apollo --- ' The Drowning Tree fades and is replaced with the more familiar image of the running girl sprouting leaves from her fingertips ... Christine clicks through one picture after another, naming each mythological or literary figure as the image appears and fades. She goes so quickly that the faces begin to blur ... until we are left with the impression of one face --- one woman appearing in many guises ... glowing like the face in the stained glass window."

Juno McKay is the narrator and leading lady of THE DROWNING TREE; she is also the person responsible for getting Christine the grant that allowed her to research the Lady window, which led her to explore the Penrose family secrets. Naturally, this makes Christine Webb the catalyst for the events that unfold in this fascinating tale. Before she concludes her lecture, she solemnly makes her way through the history of the period in which the Lady window was created. In her lecture she has identified "the subject of the window as The Lady of Shallot [which meant she had to bring] up Eugenie's sister, Clare." But no one has any way of foreseeing the firestorm of violence this information will unleash, because what she learned could paint August Penrose, his work, his family and his heirs in an unflattering light. But in the context of academic freedom could that exposure of historical truths possibly lead to murder? Or was it really suicide? Was only one dead victim discovered in the wake of the reunion? Was that death a homicide? Who are the really insane people who populate this novel?

Madness is so pervasive in the lives of the characters that readers won't be surprised to learn that Briarwood, an insane asylum, stands tall on the highest hill on the Penrose property, uphill from the school. Clare was sent there soon after Augustus Penrose married her sister Eugenie. Clare had the tower room at the top of the structure and lived her life out in the confines of the mental institution. Her sister Eugenie never saw her again. Juno's husband was committed there thirteen years ago. Neil has spent all of his time at Briarwood in the same lonely tower in which Clare lived out her life. Juno never visited him.

Goodman shows great compassion in her treatment of the

nineteenth century's "madwoman in the attic" and is as sensitive when telling the sad tale of Juno's husband's commitment. Another of the palpable symbols that runs through the novel is water in many of its forms from mist to rain and from bottled to baths and from frozen to baths. A river runs through the site and is the medium on and in where much of the action takes place. The body of water serves many purposes: a death trap, a romantic stream, a place to kayak, a landmark that was recreated hundreds of times by many Hudson Valley artists.

In Juno's senior year at Penrose College she became pregnant and married Neil. She was asked to leave school and did so very quietly. The couple was very much in love and very happy for some years. They had a daughter named Beatrice and both parents worked at their art. But after Neil was institutionalized Juno was forced to move in with her father, and things were very rough for a long time. But now, fifteen years later, Juno, Beatrice and Mr. McKay are getting along well. Beatrice is in school and spends most of her time on the river. The adults are busy with the glass business they run. Juno has channeled her artistic talents into the restoration and creation of stained art glass. The methods she uses are in the spirit of Tiffany and August Penrose.

Carol Goodman strikes each chord in THE DROWNING TREE with perfect pitch. The ambiance that informs the entire novel is achieved through her spirited discussion of the historical elements as well as the contemporary events. Her characters are so well limned and her pristine attention to detail raises this novel to lofty heights, the plot and the prose carefully honed. THE LAKE OF DEAD LANGUAGES and THE SEDUCTION OF WATER were a foreshadowing of Goodman's flexibility as a writer and offered just a glimpse of her enormous talent. With this new novel, she has given fans and new readers a remarkable book that will resonate with them for a long time.

--- Reviewed by Barbara Lipkien Gershenbaum

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The Drowning Tree
A Novel

Written by Carol Goodman

Category: Fiction; Fiction - Literary; Fiction - Suspense
Publisher: Ballantine Books
Format: Trade Paperback, 384 pages
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AUTHOR Q & A

A Conversation with Carol Goodman

Jennifer Morgan Gray is a writer and editor who lives in Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Morgan Gray: Was there a particular character, image, or idea that inspired you to begin writing *The Drowning Tree*? Did you begin with the vision of a character, a relationship, or, perhaps, a painting?

Carol Goodman: Several years before I started *The Drowning Tree,* I saw a friend off at Grand Central Station and had the thought, "What if I put her on this train and she never arrives at her destination?" (I'm full of these kinds of morbid musings, unfortunately.) Then, sometime after that, I attended a lecture on the Elena Cornaro window at Vassar, and I pictured two women, one giving a lecture on a stained-glass window, and then the other, seeing her off at the train, getting that last glimpse of her friend in the window and then never seeing her (alive) again. That's the image I started with.

JMG: The title, *The Drowning Tree,* could mean many different things, from the literal painting that takes center stage in the book to the more metaphorical. How did you choose this title to grace the book? Were there any other titles that you considered and then abandoned?

CG: The title was originally *The Lady in the Window,* because that was the central image I started with: the lady in the stained-glass window and Christine seen by Juno through the train window. As I worked on the book, though, the imagery of Ovid's myths seemed more central to the story I was telling. I especially became attached to the image of the weeping beech tree, so I made up a faux-Ovidian myth to incorporate the weeping beech, and then thought it had a nice ring to it as a title. I like a title that could mean several things, so the fact that "the drowning tree" could refer to the painting or the myth and that the phrase itself was ambiguous (Is the tree drowning? Is it a place where people drown?) made it appealing as well.

JMG: You frame *The Drowning Tree* with one of Juno's dreams. Why did you decide to begin the novel in this way? As Neil "had become obsessed with his dreams" (p. 90), how do Juno and the other characters follow suit, being consumed with dreams in both the literal and the figurative sense—the imagined paths and dashed hopes of their lives?

CG: I didn't write the prologue with Juno's dream until the book was finished. The first chapter starts the way it does because, as I mentioned above, that's the image I started with: a woman putting her friend on a train. But when I looked back I realized that the novel becomes as much a story of Juno and Neil as of Juno and Christine (or perhaps the triangle described by the three of them), and I came up with the idea of starting with Juno's dream. That Juno has been dreaming about Neil is important, both because of the significance Neil attached to dreams in their relationship and because it shows how Juno is still so haunted by her love for Neil.

On a more personal note, I spent years having vivid dreams about someone I loved and had lost, and because this person had believed in "astral projection," I always had the eerie feeling that he was actually visiting me in my dreams. Curiously, I stopped having those dreams once I finished writing *The Drowning Tree.*

JMG: In the book's opening pages, Juno remarks that Christine "chose me to be her best friend" (p. 6). How does this instant attention from Christine affect Juno? Does Juno have agency in choosing Christine as a friend, as well, or is she a more passive participant in that relationship? What would draw each woman to the other?

CG: I've always been interested in the idea of one person choosing another. It goes back to the medieval dichotomy between lover and beloved. Juno is validated in some vital way by Christine's attention, but I think it also clouds her vision of Christine. In other words, Juno sees Christine as this vital life force that is very appealing, but she doesn't fully see how vulnerable Christine is—how much Christine needs her as much as Juno needs her.

JMG: Christine's lecture on a painting featuring the Lady in the Window drives the plot of the book. What about the speech is so shocking and revelatory to those around her? What about the painting is so compelling to Christine? To her audience?

CG: Like many institutions, Penrose College has idealized its founder, Eugenie Penrose, and so the community is understandably unhappy at Christine's suggestion that the window depicts not Eugenie but her sister, Clare. For Christine, though, the Lady in the Window has always been a benevolent presence, a sort of guardian angel. The possibility that she was actually a woman who had gone mad and been institutionalized would be especially disturbing to Christine given her fears about her own mental stability. Each character projects his or her own set of values on the figure of the Lady.

JMG: You write about art in an extremely vivid, tactile way. Did you find it difficult to evoke the paintings that form the core of this book with words? Were there any visual "crutches" you used, like already-existing paintings or sketches?

CG: I'm a frustrated artist and so I get a secret thrill out of describing works of art that I would like to be able to create myself. So, actually, describing the paintings is mostly fun for me. I looked at a great deal of Pre-Raphaelite art (like Christine I covered the walls of my college dorm room with reproductions of Pre-Raphaelite paintings) and read books on the Pre-Raphaelites to get ideas for the "invented paintings" described. It was fun to imagine how artists might have treated different myths—

and even to invent one of the myths. Probably the single most important artist whose work I drew from was J. W. Waterhouse. I have a copy of his *Ophelia* hanging above my desk even now.

JMG: The river is a living, breathing character in the novel, and I was struck with how the blueprint of the book itself mirrors a river—constantly churning with possibilities that engulf the reader. Was this intentional on your part as you were writing? How do you view the river as a living, breathing character in the book?

CG: I think it's become second nature to me by now to use the landscape to mirror the moods of my characters, and certainly the Hudson presented itself as a rich, moving canvas. When I started this book I thought that for once I'd stay away from water imagery, but then I read about the construction of Dia: Beacon [museum] and decided I wanted Juno to live in an old factory on the Hudson. Then I took a little kayaking trip on the Hudson, and I was so awed by the sensation of being out on the river in that little boat (which I found every bit as terrifying as Juno did) that I knew that experience would be the visceral center of the book—that feeling of being swept up in something larger than oneself.

JMG: The story of Augustus, Eugenie, and Clare emerges from Christine's research and, most vividly, from Eugenie's journals. Why did you choose to construct the book so that Juno reads about the Penroses in Eugenie's own words?

CG: I got the idea of the hidden journal pages from a stained-glass restorer who told me that medieval workmen sometimes stuffed papers into the crevices of frames. I just loved the idea of finding a hidden manuscript—sort of like a message in a bottle. Once Juno had those papers I had to create Eugenie's voice, which seemed as good a way of telling the past story as any. I often end up using some kind of "text within a text," like the sections of the mother's fantasy novel in *The Seduction of Water* or Jane's old journal entries in *The Lake of Dead Languages*. I don't know why. It appeals to me in a very primal way, the way finding a hidden treasure map is exciting for a child.

JMG: Christine and Neil seem to share some striking similarities—from their larger-than-life personalities to their predisposition toward addictive behaviors and mental illness. Why, then, does Juno become the object of Neil's affection? What about her is so compelling to both Neil and Christine? With that affection for her best friend in mind, why would Christine embark on an affair with Neil many years later?

CG: Funny, I've thought more about why Juno would be drawn to them than vice versa, because, I suppose, I've found myself drawn to people like Neil and Christine many times in my life—people who are charismatic and larger than life. I never wondered why they would be drawn to someone like me—someone who tends to be a little quieter and shyer. I suppose Neil and Christine might have been attracted to her relative stability. As for why Christine has the affair with Neil—I think there was always an attraction simmering below the surface, and Christine is, I think, a person who might act impetuously. It's part of her charm, but also one of her flaws.

JMG: You present the specter of mental illness as haunting the entire town of Rosedale. What does the physical entity Briarwood represent to

its residents, both terrible and worthy? How are the approaches of Neil and Christine toward mental illness similar? How are they different?

CG: I liked the idea of the physical presence of Briarwood looming over the countryside as some gothic specter of madness. I hoped it would echo the way many of the characters feel haunted by mental illness, either in their family history or in the recesses of their own personalities. The main difference between Neil and Christine is that Neil is obviously much more impaired by mental illness. Also, as an artist, he's afraid that medicating his ailment will also destroy his art. Christine, on the other hand, has spent most of her adult life trying to self-medicate.

JMG: Art and mythology—and their interweaving nature—play paramount roles in the book. Do you have a particular background or interest in either of those disciplines, or did you research them as you were writing? Was there one myth that came to mind in particular as you were crafting the novel?

CG: Art and classical mythology are both subjects I studied in college and that I've continued to read about and take classes in. Since my first novel I've tried to incorporate mythology or fairy tales into the story. In *The Drowning Tree* I decided to focus on the mythology that was most often used by the Pre-Raphaelites, including classical mythology, fairy tales, Arthurian legends, and Romantic poetry. Instead of focusing on one myth, I wanted to use a corpus of myths that would seem to populate the whole fictional world in the book.

JMG: You explore the mother-daughter relationship in different ways here, from Juno's positive rapport with Bea and her loving if short-lived relationship with her mother, to Christine's difficult time with her mother. How does Juno evolve as a mother as the book continues? What kind of mother might Christine have made?

CG: Juno recognizes during the book that although she lost her own mother early she had the advantage of that early support. I may have been reflecting on my own mother's experience. She lost her mother when she was quite young, but she's always maintained that her early childhood experience of a warm and loving family gave her an inner security that saw her through that trauma. As a mother, I believe that that early sense of being loved is the most valuable thing you can give a child. I think that by the end of the book Juno is able to look at Bea and realize that Bea has that inner strength and that whatever they have to go through together—the pain of losing Neil, for instance—they'll be able to endure.

I can't predict what sort of mother Christine would have been. Although scarred by her upbringing, she's clearly capable of loving and that, I think, is half the battle.

JMG: Juno remarks that Penrose inhabits a place apart from the rest of the town and the world. How does the uneasy relationship between the town and the school affect both communities? Was the school based on any college in particular?

CG: I suppose it's inevitable that Penrose resembles my own alma mater, Vassar, in some ways, although I pictured it rather differently. Certainly Vassar has the same sense of being an idealized enclave set

apart from the working-class town outside its gates, and it does have the Elena Cornaro (first woman doctorate!) window in the library. However, I picture Penrose as smaller and younger than Vassar and more artistic and socialist in its origins. Maybe a little more like Sarah Lawrence. I pictured its setting something like Mount Saint Vincent's. Ultimately, though, it's a product of my imagination.

JMG: In his eulogy, Gavin characterizes Christine as "too relentless in her search for the truth" (p. 123). How true is this assessment? What else motivates her scholarship on the paintings and at Penrose? How do other characters in the novel also search for truth?

CG: Well, Gavin sees it that way because the truths that Christine was trying to uncover were uncomfortable for him. I see Christine as a person who speaks her mind even when it makes others around her uncomfortable. This is a trait I admire, but which I think I sometimes lack. I'm more the sort of person who second-guesses and worries endlessly about how my words will affect other people. I'm probably more like Juno, who, at the start of the novel, has avoided really facing what happened to Neil. By the end of the novel she's developed a bit more gumption—something I'm always striving to acquire more of myself.

JMG: Like other novels that you've written, including *The Seduction of Water* and *The Lake of Dead Languages, The Drowning Tree* is at once a literary novel and a mystery. What about thrillers and mysteries entices you? Does the compulsion to solve a puzzle drive you while you're writing? While starting the book, did you know that Christine's death would be a motivating factor for the action that transpires—and did you know who killed her?

CG: I like reading mysteries, although my favorite mysteries tend to be quirky, cross-genre ones. The puzzles that interest me the most are puzzles of character—why people are the way they are, how they got that way. When I start a book I start with a character whom I don't completely understand—someone who's in a situation that I find intriguing. What I want to know is how she got into this mess and how's she going to get out of it. I think it's exciting to combine this sort of personal dilemma with a wider, far-reaching mystery—something where the consequences of not finding out the solution are dire. So I knew that Christine's death would be the event that sets everything into motion. I had a good idea who killed her. But I wasn't sure how Juno would find this out or how it would change her life.

JMG: How did you pick Juno's name? Did you also choose the name Christine—reminiscent of an important figure in Christian faith—on purpose?

CG: Usually I have an elaborate rationale for a character's name, but in this case I knew I wanted something mythological and I just liked the sound of Juno!

Christine does study early Christian icons, but I didn't mean for her to symbolize any abstract value. Again the name just sounded right to me. It might have had something to do with the connection between crystal and glass. Her last name is more significant. Webb—like the web that the Lady of Shalott weaves on her loom.

JMG: There's a tension that exists between the romantic artist—Neil—and the science-steeped doctor, Dr. Horace. Both of these individuals, however, grapple with madness and do so in very different ways. What parallels were you interested in drawing between these two different mind-sets and ways of approaching life?

CG: Well, I'd hate to have Dr. Horace taken as an embodiment of science or medicine, since I've certainly known many commendable men and women in those fields. In fact, in researching this book I talked to several psychologists who were extremely helpful and compassionate, and the genetic counselor who answered all my questions about genetic testing (after she told me that I didn't have the breast cancer gene) was one of the nicest people I've ever met. Dr. Horace, though, falls victim to the danger of thinking that you can medicate every problem, while Neil has been perhaps too resistant to the benefits of medication. The conflict interests me because of the proliferation of psychopharmaceuticals in our society.
I often find myself suspicious of the quickness with which doctors prescribe drugs like Prozac or Ritalin, but I've also always tried to keep an open mind about the benefits of such drugs.

JMG: What, ultimately, do you think Juno realizes about love? How has her attitude changed—if at all—from her youthful perceptions? How do her feelings about Neil differ from those she harbors toward Kyle? What about Detective Falco strikes a chord in her heart?

CG: A theme that runs through much of my writing is the idea of an early lost love and whether it's possible to get over that loss—will anyone else ever be able to take the place of that person? When the novel begins, Juno hasn't been able to move on from the breakup of her marriage with Neil. She uses her responsibilities to Bea as an excuse to keep herself emotionally sealed off. She's unable to connect to Kyle, for instance. Daniel Falco is the first man since Neil who breaks through that protective covering,
I think, perhaps, because he's the first person to really see her suffering.

JMG: Neil makes the ultimate sacrifice at the end of the novel, saving Juno's life but losing his own in the process. Why does he do so? What did Juno, in turn, sacrifice for her ex-husband?

CG: I think Neil saves Juno's life because he loves her. Juno tries to save him, as well, and might well have drowned if she hadn't imagined right at the end that she saw Neil transformed into a seabird coming toward her over the water. I'd like to think that that vision is also Neil's way of saving her.

JMG: Are there any creative rituals or processes you follow when you're writing? Anything in particular you did for this book?

CG: I wouldn't necessarily call it ritual so much as a routine and research. I walk a few miles every morning before writing, and then I always write my drafts in long hand in black-and-white marble notebooks. I used the notebooks before I wrote *The Lake of Dead Languages,* but once I used them as a plot element in that book I became superstitiously attached to them. I also try to surround myself with images from the world I'm writing about, so I found copies of Pre-Raphaelite paintings to hang over my desk. I visited the Cloisters

several times in the course of writing the book and walked in the Ramble in Central Park and looked at a lot of stained glass. I even took a class in making stained glass—and discovered that I'm really bad at it!

JMG: What can your readers expect to see next from you?

CG: I've just finished the first draft of a novel set in an artists' colony on the edge of the Adirondacks. Half of the book takes place in the nineteenth century and concerns a medium who visits the estate (before it becomes an artists' colony) and performs a séance there. The book has more of a supernatural element than I've ever used before. And yes, it has water, but here the water is all underground in the springs that feed the estate's elaborate fountains, and they have, in the present part of the story, dried up. I had great fun learning about nineteenth-century mediums and planning the formal Italianate garden.

Hooked on Books are glad to have persevered with Carol Goodman's densely plotted, cerebral mystery The Drowning Tree. Harriet Dennys writes

Secrets and lies

The past may be a foreign country, but for the characters trapped in Carol Goodman's *The Drowning Tree*, it feels scarily like the next-door village, as long-buried secrets surface to cause madness, betrayal and murder in the present day.

Set around the campus of Penrose College in the US, the intrigue centres on the drowning of Juno McKay's best friend Christine Webb, who disappears after making a series of revelations that relate to the Penrose family's dark history. Juno was once almost drowned by her husband Neil before he was sent to the asylum at the top of the hill; she subsequently discovers that Christine has been conducting a long-standing affair with Neil (while he was sectioned) and died while carrying his unborn child.

Hooked on Books' main difficulty with Goodman's intellectual third novel was its complicated, improbable plot involving four main strands, and its constant references to Freud, Greek mythology and the classics; Goodman, who taught Latin, assumes a great deal of prior knowledge. Some readers also felt that there was insufficient dialogue, and described what interchange there was between characters as stilted and unnatural.

But despite these perceived weaknesses, the group persevered because "the book is so complex and interesting, and because you want to sort at least one mystery out", according to spokeswoman Anne Jowett. She says: "We probably would have appreciated the book better if we had all been classics scholars, but it didn't detract from our enjoyment: overall, we gave *The Drowning Tree* 8.5 out of 10 and are planning to read more mysteries by the same author."

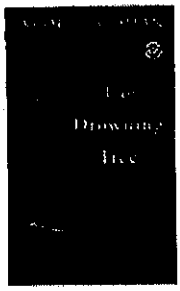
Vivid descriptions (Arrow)

Most of the group thought that Goodman's flowing writing style was "absolutely fantastic", reserving particular praise for the scenes set by water and her vivid descriptions of the stained glass window, which was painted so clearly that the readers were "almost able to see it". Every reader also remarked on the author's great skill in beginning and ending the book.

Hooked on Books, who have all had teenage daughters at some point in their lives, were able to identify most closely with the character of Juno as a mother trying to bring up a difficult adolescent alone; they discussed at length whether she was right or not to let Bea go on the kayaking trip down the river. The group also enjoyed Goodman's cameo characters: the "subtle" Detective Falco and Penrose's "absolutely vampiric" secretary Fay Morgan.

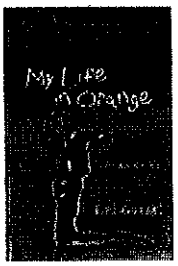
Since *The Drowning Tree* is concerned with the past, its ending, although unresolved, was thought to be satisfying as the reader is free to use their own imagination to construct a future for Juno and Detective Falco. Jowett says: "The love-story ending works because after all the airy-fairy mythology that leaves you breathless, it is comforting to get back to normality and to know that Juno has managed to pull through."

Gilman may eventually grow weary of picking up the phone: Since the release of her memoir (which *Kirkus* called "deliriously, levitatingly funny"), it has been gaining popularity with reading groups. Enough book club members now show up consistently at Gilman's signings that she hands out cards with her e-mail address on request. "I tell them, 'If you have any questions, here's how you can reach me.' " The feedback Gilman has received is consistent: People relate to her stories, even when the stories are completely different from their own experiences. Says Keri Friedman, senior publicist at Warner: "Susan talks about everything from posing as a lesbian to visiting a concentration camp to meeting Mick Jagger, providing an endless stream of both serious and lighthearted topics for readers to discuss."
Discussion Guide: Online



THE DROWNING TREE
Carol Goodman
Ballantine
December 2004
0-345-46212-2

There's more to this tale of a murder investigation on a college campus in the Hudson Valley than just the usual mystery tropes. "She's a literary writer who happens to write books that fit into a mystery or thriller structure, so it gives them this incredible page-turner feel," says editor Linda Marrao. "Plus," she adds, there's "this fabulous literary quality that leaves its visual images burned in your brain." *Kirkus* agreed, calling it a "cerebral mystery." At the story's heart are the narrator's relationships with her teenaged daughter, her town (where she was raised and went to college) and the missing woman. The murky past of the college founder, the dangerous impulses of the narrator's ex-husband, the police detective—all move hauntingly through the atmospheric landscape of the once-grand Hudson Valley. She also explores single parenthood and the place of art in the world; a stained-glass window that reveals secrets from the turn of the century is a narrative centerpiece. A group in search of stylish thrills, expressed through captivating imagery that more than matches the pace, need look no further than *The Drowning Tree*.
Discussion Guide: In-Book & Online

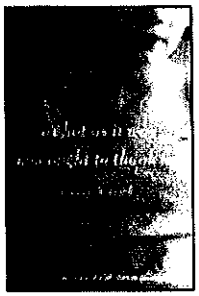


MY LIFE IN ORANGE: Growing Up with the Guru
Tim Guest
Harvest/Harcourt
February 2005
0-15-603106-X

"Fascinating." That's how Nancy Bass, co-owner of New York's Strand bookstore, describes Guest's memoir of growing up in a commune. *Kirkus* called the book a "rightly disturbing record of malignant child neglect by people who sought a heaven, but made a hell." When Guest was only a toddler, his mother encountered the notorious Indian guru Bhagwan Rajneesh; when he was four, she moved herself and her son to an ashram outside of Bombay. In addition to India, the family lived in communes in London, Devon, India, Oregon and Germany. While the adults cast off all social constraints and indulged in limitless sex and drugs (until their guru became obsessed with AIDS), their children struggled to care for themselves and each other. The author and his mother eventually left the community when Guest was in his teens, after the Bhagwan was revealed to be a lot more worldly than his followers had suspected. Topics for discussion are rife: the nature of parent-child relationships, concepts of responsibility, the place of religion in everyday life, the often dangerous influence exerted by a charismatic leader and the consequences thereof, and the way in which children understand their surroundings and create their own social structure.
Discussion Guide: Online

EMPIRE RISING
Thomas Kelly
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
February 2005
0-374-14781-7

The construction of the Empire State Building in 1930 forms the background for what *Kirkus* called a "savage urban melodrama": it's extraordinary "white-hot" historical fiction that bursts out of its genre. "Here's a book that's being tagged as a thriller and that you'd want to read on the airplane—it's that thrilling—but it's real literature," says Paul Elie, Kelly's editor at FSG. As we said, Kelly's third is a "knowledgeable, vigorously detailed portrayal of big-city political and fiscal skullduggery and corruption, featuring a generous host of brawling characters." There's an IRA terrorist who's both an ironworker and a boxer, a Tammany Hall insider, and the woman who loves them both, Grace Masterson, who lives on a houseboat in the East River and sketches the Empire State Building as it rises above the city. "There are talking points on every page," Elie says—American history, the Great Depression, women's roles in that era and the Empire State Building itself as a symbol of America. Another plus for reading groups: "This is not overstuffed historical fiction; it's under 400 pages," says Elie. "It's epic fiction but it's very compact."
Discussion Guide: Online



AS HOT AS IT WAS YOU OUGHT TO THANK ME
Nanci Kincaid
Back Bay/Little, Brown
February 2005
0-316-00914-8

Though the title of this heartfelt coming-of-age tale won't exactly roll off your tongue, discussing the textured story of 13-year-old Berry Jackson—whose life is rocked by a hurricane that washes away the majority of her small Florida town and upends her oddball family in the process—will prove much easier. Set in a stifling summer heatwave in a decade vaguely sandwiched between the '50s and '60s, and featuring a young heroine reminiscent of the precocious Scout Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Kincaid's story is filled with powerful imagery and told in a wonderfully colloquial voice. As *Kirkus* said, it "never fails to engage," is rich with quirky characters and perfect for reading groups looking for literary-minded material that is also accessible. According to Kincaid's editor, Judy Clain: "This is a classic book about faith and redemption, and it's highly literary but told in a very simple way."
Discussion Guide: In-Book & Online

boston.com

THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

BOOK REVIEW

The Boston Globe

In `The Drowning Tree,' a quirky mystery is buoyed by humanity

By Judith Maas, Globe Correspondent | August 26, 2004

Like many whose youthful dreams have gone awry, Juno McKay, the narrator-heroine of Carol Goodman's third novel, "The Drowning Tree," does not relish the prospect of attending her college reunion.

Juno's troubles, however, are extreme. Once an aspiring painter, she became pregnant and dropped out of college to get married; Neil, her husband, later tried to drown her, and their child has been institutionalized ever since.

Still caught up in her dreams and memories of Neil, Juno resists new romantic involvements and devotes herself to her teenage daughter and to her work in her family's glassmaking factory.

What draws Juno to her 15th reunion is the chance to hear her best friend, Christine, an art historian, discuss her research on a magnificent stained-glass window, designed by college founder Augustus Penrose and depicting his wife, Eugenie. Christine's lecture stuns the audience when she argues that the image on the window is actually that of Clare, Eugenie's mad half sister, and thus raises tantalizing questions about the Penrose family, supposedly good and proper Victorians.

Spending time with Christine after the lecture, Juno finds her tense and troubled. Within days, Juno and her daughter discover Christine's drugged and drowned body while kayaking on the Hudson, near the Penrose family estate.

And that's just for starters in this colorful, intricate tale. Juno's quest to learn what happened to Christine takes her on a wondrous expedition: She glimpses into the turbulent lives and emotions of Augustus, Eugenie, and Clare; investigates goings-on at the local mental hospital where she reconnects with Neil; and remembers her college days, when she, Christine, and Neil were fellow artists and daredevils. Questions within questions arise; surprising links emerge between past and present.

Though rightly billed as a thriller, "The Drowning Tree" is best read in the study rather than at the beach. Goodman's main characters are passionate artists and scholars for whom living and creativity are inseparable; their thoughts, work, and conversation are sprinkled with allusions to classical mythology, Dante, Ovid, the pre-Raphaelite painters, and the poetry of Tennyson.

Goodman also brings to the narrative her trademark meticulous attention to mood and atmosphere. She eschews swift, plain storytelling and instead, employing abundant water imagery, invests her settings with an ominous but magical quality: For example, Christine's body is discovered in a pool covered with water lilies from which bizarre statuary arises. A decaying mansion overlooks the scene.

Goodman's approach is risky: The parallel Victorian and contemporary stories verge on melodrama; the characters might have come across as arty and affected; and the busyness and density of the plot could have become ends in themselves. Yet the novel succeeds as something more than an entertaining soap opera or a clever jigsaw puzzle. Like the characters in the art and literature they so love, Juno, Christine, and Neil seek healing and renewal. Each has reasons to hide from the world. Christine's interpretation of the figure in the stained-glass window, a woman at a loom, becomes an expression of the journeys they take.

Drawing on Tennyson's Arthurian poem "The Lady of Shalott," which tells of a lady weaver condemned to a life of confinement, Christine examines the moment when the lady rebels against her cloistered existence and looks away from her loom and directly at Sir Lancelot. In Christine's view, Tennyson has portrayed an awakening, a gathering of strength and courage, even in the face of death.

Juno, Christine, and Neil engage our interest because, like the lady at the loom, they are not passive and resigned. Though the high hopes of their college years have fallen apart, they try to build new lives.

Goodman thus immerses readers in a fun and quirky mystery and at the same time explores universal themes of loss

and disappointment and the redeeming possibilities of creativity, friendship, and work.

Christine sees the lady at the loom as "you and me," as a person struggling to face the demands of the world with all the risks and hardships involved. The same can be said of the novel's main characters, and so we root for them as they make their way through the strange and dangerous surroundings Goodman has conjured up. ■

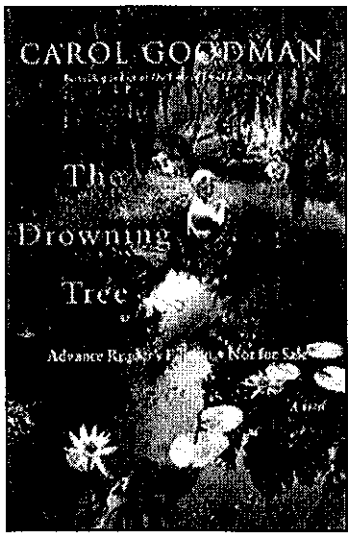
deseretnews.com

Deseret Morning News, Sunday, August 15, 2004

Drowning Tree tells a tale of tragic love

By Lindsie Taylor
Deseret Morning News

THE DROWNING TREE, by Carol Goodman, Ballantine Books, 284 pages, $24.95.



For the third time, Carol Goodman returns to New York's Hudson Valley to weave a mystery spanning a century and the lives of four women.

As with her first two novels, "The Lake of Dead Languages" and "The Seduction of Water," this book also follows the unraveling of the enigmatic mystery of a woman's life and her connection to water. In this case, the lives of two woman, Eugenie Penrose and her sister Clare, are as much a part of the mystery as the narrator, Juno McKay, and her best friend Christine Webb.

When Juno grudgingly appears at her 15-year Penrose College reunion, she arrives late to Christine's lecture about the ominous stained-glass window that overlooks part of the college's library. Called the "Lady in the Window," the piece places the woman in a scene from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott." The stained-glass artwork was created by college founder Augustus Penrose, Eugenie's husband. Juno, a second-generation stained-glass artist, is to restore it following the reunion's festivities.

From her research, Christine offers a new theory about the window — that the woman in the piece is not Eugenie, as originally assumed, but her sister Clare. She also offers her ideas as to why Augustus would paint the medieval scene with Clare rather than his wife, as he usually did in his art. Audience members and college officials are shocked, and that outrage is only the beginning of a complex series of events that prompt Juno to find out why.

A few days after the lecture, Christine is found drowned in a nearby river, hung upside down in an upturned kayak. With unanswered questions, Juno attends the funeral, cleans out her friend's apartment and finds that Christine had not been totally honest with her during their short visit after the lecture.

Somehow, Christine had been in contact with Juno's estranged and mentally unstable husband who lives in a nearby institution. Juno also finds Eugenie's diary, with a couple of pages ripped out. Combined with more of Eugenie's diary notes, found by Juno in the crevices of the "Lady in the Window," Juno starts to piece together the events, which lead to possible murder

With a low-key narrative style that still keeps up a fast-paced rhythm, Goodman weaves together tales of tragic love and forgotten promises with the intrigue of art history and stained-glass art. Greek mythological metaphors and image-driven descriptions heighten the already complex and compelling story. Plot twists, dead-ends, shaky motives and a strong sense of humanity permeate this story, and make for an enlightening, sumptuous read.

Carol Goodman

FROM THE AUTHOR

Photo © (c) Brian Velenchenko

Author Essay:

The Bones of the Story

Tracing the genesis of a novel after you've written it can be a little like reconstructing a skeleton from millennia-old bones that have been scattered over great distances. I'm pretty sure, though, that this book started with the single image of a mother telling a bedtime story to her daughter. It was certainly a familiar image since, for the last ten or so years, I had ended each night by reading to my daughter for at least an hour. I chose, more often than not, fairy tales both because she seemed to like them and because I have always loved them. Back in graduate school, I'd written a paper called "From Old Wives to Warrior Princesses" on the presence of fairy tales in contemporary fiction. I've always admired writers, such as Angela Carter, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Hoffman, who integrate elements of fairy tales into their fiction and I'm a big fan of Marina Warner's study of fairy tales, *From the Beast to the Blonde*. Ultimately, though, the image of a mother telling stories to her daughter had a more intimate source: the stories my mother told me.

Instead of fairy tales, though, my mother brought me up on stories of her Irish-Catholic childhood growing up in Depression-era Brooklyn and moving to Coney Island as a young woman on the eve of World War II. In many ways these stories were as exotic and remote to me as fairy tales. Ice was delivered to their cold-water flat in Bay Ridge by a horse-drawn cart and oatmeal was cooked on a wood-burning stove. To a child growing up in a pre-fab development in suburban Pennsylvania, my mother's descriptions of pre-war Brooklyn sounded as quaint as Hansel and Gretel's cottage. There was that same sense of cheerful and thrifty poverty. Dinner was sometimes bread and hot milk with sugar because that was all they had, but still her father prepared it as if it were a delicacy. Although they were poor, they never took charity and were proud and grateful when my grandfather got a job digging ditches for the WPA. My mother had only one white shirt to wear with her Catholic school uniform, but her mother washed and bleached and starched and ironed it every day so that "it could have stood up on its own" and looked every bit as good as anyone else's.

My mother's stories were filled with characters as colorful as any fairy tale's. Her aunt Nanny was a Burlesque dancer

who dressed like a gypsy and was once arrested in New Haven for slapping a woman who turned out to be the police chief's girlfriend. When my mother and her parents went to the jail to bail her out my mother was so horrified to see her beloved, beautiful aunt in a crude cell with an exposed toilet that she burst into tears. The police chief bent down and told her that he would let her aunt out, "if she sang a little song and danced a little dance." My mother always stressed at this point in the story--no matter how many times I had heard it--that she was a painfully shy child and nothing could have been more frightening to her than to perform in front of a strange adult. But she did. And her Aunt Nanny was freed. Later we both conjectured that there must have been some exchange of money as well, but still, it was as good a Rapunzel story as I ever heard.

Like any genuine fairy tale, my mother's childhood was rife with darkness and tragedy. She had a younger brother--Martin, but everyone called him Pet because when he was born my mother jealously referred to him as the family "pet"--who died.
"What of?" I asked, horrified, but also peculiarly drawn. In my safe post-vaccine, post-antibiotic 1950's world I'd never known of a child to die. In my mother's world, her own baby brother had died.
"I was never sure," my mother told me at first, "but I overheard the doctors say it had something to do with his head."

Over years of telling this story it eventually came out that my mother blamed herself for Pet's death because he had fallen while she was babysitting him (she was under ten when it happened--later she gave this as a reason for never letting young children baby-sit,) but in later years she guessed that the reference to his "head" might have had something to do with meningitis. Unfortunately, my mother never shared with her parents the fact that she held herself accountable for Pet's death. She thought they were generous and forgiving for never bringing it up or holding it against her.

I think it was only by telling Pet's story over and over again that my mother was finally able to let go of that guilt. At first the details of the story emerged as I grew old enough to understand them, but then they also grew as she understood them in the telling. My mother was making sense of her life by telling it to me. I can think of no better introduction to the writing process than witnessing that kind of storytelling, even though it was sometimes unsettling to hear what she had to say.

Listening to my mother's stories, I was entranced by the other world she had lived in, but I also suffered a peculiar sense of displacement. It's always a bit of a shock to realize that your parents had an existence outside their role as caretaker to you. It is that foreignness which makes the Selkie story so disturbing because it suggests the possibility that the mother can leave--which, in fact, she

does. Nothing is more frightening to a child than a parent's disappearance (death itself seems like an abandonment to a child) and my mother had that experience as well.

Like the human daughter in the Selkie story my mother lost her mother young, when she was seventeen and her mother was only forty-four. She was with her in that tenement kitchen when she suddenly collapsed. A blood clot, leftover from a childhood bout of rheumatic fever, had flown to her brain, killing her instantly. In the aftermath, my mother moved to Coney Island--only miles away from Bay Ridge, but a completely different world. For one thing, she had never met a Jewish person. One of her favorite stories is how she overheard a woman asking a deli owner for "sour cream" and laughed because she thought it was a joke. Coney Island in the forties was also filled with gangsters and heroine addicts. For a pretty, young girl on her own (my mother was and is quite beautiful--shopkeepers, once she stopped laughing at their sour cream, called her *Shaineh maidel,* 'pretty girl' in Yiddish,) it would have been easy to fall in with the wrong crowd. Many beautiful young girls (according to my mother Coney Island in the forties possessed an unusual percentage of beautiful girls) who were not so discriminating as my mother became prostitutes and drug addicts. These cautionary tales, which my mother favored as I entered my tumultuous adolescence, always ended with the pretty young girls losing their looks and their teeth. It was exciting to learn that my mother had known the legendary "Kiss-of-Death" girl, but also daunting to hear these teeth-loss stories as I headed out on a date. It sounded like an old-fashioned curse for bad behavior along the lines of the red-hot iron shoes Snow White's stepmother is forced to dance in until she dies.

Although I might have begun to suspect the instructive nature of some of my mother's tales, I knew even then that I was lucky that I got to keep hearing them and watch the ongoing process of my mother making sense of her life. What, I wondered, would it have been like if I only had the stories? That's Iris's situation in *The Seduction of Water.* All she has left of her mother is her stories from which she must reconstruct her mother's life and begin to construct her own story. The stories are her inheritance, her talisman.

There's a kind of fairy tale in which a young girl whose mother has died is protected by some charm or animal familiar representing the lost mother. In "Yeh-hsien," a Chinese version of Cinderella, the mother's spirit inhabits a magic carp which befriends and comforts Yeh-hsien. When the evil stepmother kills the carp, its very bones continue to protect the girl. This somewhat gruesome device of protective bones also appears in Grimms' "Aschenputtel," in which a hazel sapling that grows out of the mother's buried bones literally shelters the orphan girl, and in the Scottish tale, "Rashin Coatie," in which the dead mother inhabits a red calf and continues to watch over her daughter even after the calf is slaughtered.

Instead of bones, Iris's mother bequeaths to her stories. The Selkie story embraces the fear of losing a mother but also promises that a mother's love is an enduring legacy. The fantasy tales contain—encoded—her own childhood tale of loss and resurrection. However, most importantly, she passes on to Iris the ability and willingness to reveal and explore herself through storytelling. It's what my mother gave to me through a lifetime of storytelling: the ability to make sense out of one's own life and, out of that sense, craft the best life. An inheritance every bit as valuable as good bones and a sound set of teeth.

Photo © (c) Brian Velenchenko

The Drowning Tree
Carol Goodman

Reader's Guide:

1. Why do you think Goodman chose glass as the medium for Juno's restoration work and much of the artwork discussed in the novel—the Lady window in particular? How is the metaphor of glass carried through the novel?

2. Juno attributes some of Neil's artistic brilliance to his mental illness. Do you think that the age-old association between madness and creativity is valid? Why would such a connection exist?

3. When Juno encounters Christine's lifeless body in the Wicomico, she initially mistakes it for her own reflection. To what extent is Juno's fascination with Christine a fascination with herself? What are the similarities and differences between the two women?

4. Christine tells Juno that what she fears most is going insane. What part did this fear play in her eventual downfall? Do you think fear alone is enough to drive a healthy person insane?

5. It is said many times that Bea is remarkably mature for her age. Do you think that dealing with difficult circumstances in childhood breeds early maturity? Can you think of specific incidents or situations in your life that forced you to grow up?

6. Juno speculates that despite her criticism and disapproval of Christine, Ruth Webb still loved her daughter. Mothers and daughters have notoriously complex relationships, but do you think that it's possible for a mother *not* to love her daughter in some way?

7. While in the Cloisters museum during college, Christine asks Juno why she thinks Dante has to go all the way into hell to find his way again? Why do you think this question so fascinates Christine?

8. So many characters in *The Drowning Tree* are preoccupied with their search for the truth. Do you think it's always best to know the truth in every situation? Can you think of instances from your own life when you would have preferred to be left in ignorance?

9. When considering the charmed though restrictive childhood of Gavin Penrose, Juno asks herself, "How can you ever really tell if people are happy?" Are there definitive marks of a "happy" person? Are there any characters in *The Drowning Tree* whom you would classify as happy people?

10. Juno writes that, in the early days of her relationship with Neil, Christine's presence steadied the young couple like the third leg of a tripod. Do you think Christine was a necessary presence in Juno and Neil's relationship? What did she do to strengthen their bond, and what did she do to cripple it?

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11. Do you think that Juno's comparison of her love triangle with Neil and Christine to the relationship between Augustus Penrose and the Barovier sisters is an apt one? What makes the two trios different, and what parallels match up?

12. Almost every family has its own version of the boogeyman who comes to get naughty children. The constant threat in the Webb household was that if you didn't behave yourself you'd "end up uphill." What do you think the threats parents use with their children reveal about the parent? Was there a boogeyman in your household?

13. Where, if anywhere, do you think the moral responsibility lies for the death of the boy in Kyle's Colorado kayaking accident? Have you ever felt responsible for something that wasn't necessarily your fault?

14. The first chapter of *The Drowning Tree* begins with the lines "I was late for Christine's lecture. I almost didn't go." In the last pages of the novel, Goodman repeats, "I was late for the lecture. I almost didn't go." Why do you think the novel is framed with these lines? How do actions almost not done alter the twists and turns of the plot?

15. While Beatrice is away on a kayaking trip, Juno certainly has a tumultuous few weeks. If you were in Juno's shoes, how much of the story would you reveal to your teenage daughter?

16. Do you think that there is "love which absolves no one beloved from loving"? Or do you agree with Juno and Falco's interpretation that once someone is loved they are bound to love another, though not necessarily the person who first admired them?

17. Why do you think Augustus Penrose and Neil Buchwald both preferred to paint their beloveds as characters from mythology, rather than simply paint them as themselves? Would you find such a portrayal of yourself flattering or disempowering?

18. Juno is amazed that Gavin's assistant, Faye, has a prophylactic mastectomy. It seems to her like a dramatic measure to take for prevention alone. What do you think? Is Faye's decision admirable, or do you think it was an overreaction on her part?

19. Why did Christine so desperately want to believe that her family was somehow related to the Penroses? Have you ever struggled, as Christine did, to belong to a world so vastly different from your own?

20. Did you think Juno and Neil would eventually get back together? Would *The Drowning Tree* have had a happy ending, in your opinion, if Neil had survived and they did continue with a romantic relationship?

About the Author:

Carol Goodman is the author of *The Seduction of Water* and *The Lake of Dead Languages*. Her work has appeared in such journals as *The Greensboro Review*, *Literal Latté*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and *Other Voices*. After graduating from Vassar College, where she majored in Latin, she taught Latin for several years in Austin, Texas. She then received an M.F.A. in fiction from the New School University. Goodman currently teaches writing in New York City. She lives on Long Island.

Author Q & A

Jennifer Morgan Gray is a writer and editor who lives in Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Morgan Gray: Was there a particular character, image, or idea that inspired you to begin writing The Drowning Tree? Did you begin with the vision of a character, a relationship, or, perhaps, a painting?

Carol Goodman: Several years before I started The Drowning Tree, I saw a friend off at Grand Central Station and had the thought, "What if I put her on this train and she never arrives at her destination?" (I'm full of these kinds of morbid musings, unfortunately.) Then, sometime after that, I attended a lecture on the Elena Cornaro window at Vassar, and I pictured two women, one giving a lecture on a stained-glass window, and then the other, seeing her off at the train, getting that last glimpse of her friend in the window and then never seeing her (alive) again. That's the image I started with.