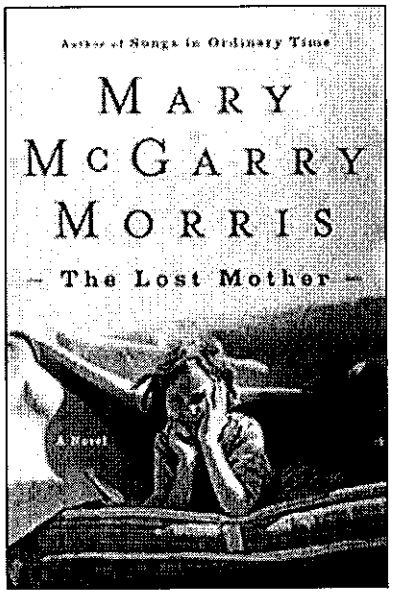
A NEW BOOK...

The Lost Mother

The Great Depression was a test of the common man's force of will, with survival dependent upon circumstances, strength of character, strength of family, and oftentimes sheer luck. It also inspired some of the greatest American literature ever written. Now, through the unflinching eyes of eight-year-old Margaret and her eleven-year-old brother Thomas, bestselling novelist Mary McGarry Morris tells the story of one ordinary family's journey through this extraordinary time in her brilliant new novel, *The Lost Mother*.



Like so many others during Depression-era America, Thomas and Margaret Talcott have endured more than any child should. Their father, Henry, can't find steady work, and they've lost their home and are now living in a tent. Yet to them, nothing is more devastating than their mother's absence. Unable to cope with the demands of a taciturn husband and two young children, the beautiful and mysterious Irene has simply walked away from her life. Now Henry, Margaret, and Thomas are struggling to hold on to the last thing of value they still possess: each other.

Their struggle, however, becomes increasingly difficult. The weather turns cold, Margaret and Thomas are sent to school shivering and wet in "miserable shoes," and life in the tent is no longer possible. Henry swallows his pride, and the family goes to stay with his longtime friend Gladys and her father Old Bibeau. But Old Bibeau has never forgiven Henry for marrying Irene instead of Gladys, and his unrestrained resentment makes life there intolerable. Henry then takes the children to stay with their Aunt Lena, a drunk and dysfunctional woman, as he desperately looks for work, sinking deeper and deeper into a morass of frustration and despair. The final blow comes when he is unjustly arrested and the children are, unwittingly, taken in by his accusers, Mr. and Mrs. Farley.

The Farleys are a wealthy couple who have everything except the one thing they want most of all--a "normal" child. Mrs. Farley will go to any lengths to create a "real" family and provide companionship for her only son, Jesse-boy, who is sickly and unable to walk. Margaret and Thomas now have all the creature comforts they've been lacking, yet they are both miserable. And soon Jesse-boy's abusive behavior drives the children away to search for their mother. But when they find her, it becomes clear that Irene's new life leaves no room for her children.

With their father still in jail and Irene unable and unwilling to be a mother again, the children are sent to an orphanage. Life at St. Elizabeth's is grim, and one day it looks as if their fear of permanent separation might come true. But at last someone steps in to give the children the sense of family they so desperately need.

With *The Lost Mother*, her sixth novel, Mary McGarry Morris once again proves herself to be a master storyteller, weaving a haunting and unforgettable tale about one ordinary family's struggle to survive in extraordinary times.

Excerpt | Reading Group Guide | Reviews

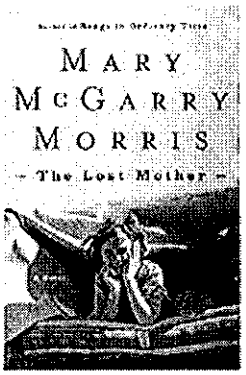
As the author of several novels, Mary McGarry Morris has received considerable attention from critics and readers, as well as from prestigious awards panels. Her books are noted for their depictions of mentally and emotionally impaired individuals who have difficulty coping with an inhospitable world. As *New York Times Book Review* contributor Alice McDermott put it, "Morris does not devise plots, but traps: steel-toothed, inescapable traps of circumstance and personality against which her characters struggle... and then fail." Ultimately, Morris suggests that these individuals are incapable of surviving their surroundings. Her books typically conclude with violent murders, death apparently being all that is left for characters who have exhausted their other possibilities.

Such grim subjects seem odd coming from Morris, a mother of five children who, following college, went on to live what *Los Angeles Times* writer Elizabeth Mehren described as a "stunningly balanced life." The disorder Morris depicts in her books may stem, in part, from her own childhood. Her parents separated when she was very young and, though her father continued to live separately, he, along with Morris and her mother, moved to Rutland, Vermont, when the author was six years old. It was in Rutland that Morris came to know the small New England communities that she features in her novels. When her mother and stepfather began employing retarded and emotionally disturbed men in their restaurant, she was exposed to another important influence. As she once told *People* magazine writer Kim Hubbard, her mother "believed everyone deserved a chance." The author would later manifest the same concern for society's outsiders by featuring mentally handicapped individuals in her fiction.

After marrying, Morris settled in Andover, Massachusetts, and was soon involved with raising a family and writing. Not surprisingly, her family obligations often took her away from her fiction and poetry. "With five children there couldn't be a set schedule for much," she told *Washington Post* writer Judith Weinraub. "It was always hard to find the time." Morris's writing regimen was also interrupted when she took a job as a social worker in order to help pay the children's college tuition. Consequently, her early attempts at novels remained unfinished, and the work that would eventually prove successful was painfully slow in coming. Her first novel, *Vanished,* took nearly eight years to write, and was then rejected twenty-seven times by publishers and agents. Without a publication to substantiate her abilities, Morris kept her writing a secret from everyone but her family. Despite this isolation, she continued to work on her fiction. "Writing was just *in* me," she told Weinraub. "I even began to think I probably would never be published. And I was accepting of that."

Reading Group Guide

The Lost Mother
by Mary McGarry Morris



List Price: $23.95
Pages: 256
Format: Hardcover
ISBN: 0670033898
Publisher: Viking Adult

Buy this book from Amazon.com
Canadian Readers: Buy this book from Amazon.ca

About This Book

Since the publication of her astonishing debut, **Vanished**, Mary McGarry Morris has been compared with John Steinbeck and Carson McCullers and widely praised as "a superb storyteller" (*The Washington Post*) and "one of our finest American writers" (*The Miami Herald*). Now, in her sixth novel, Morris has achieved new heights with her riveting chronicle of the Talcotts, a family in rural Vermont during the Great Depression.

Abandoned by his beautiful wife, Irene, Henry and their two young children, Thomas and Margaret, spend that summer in a tent on the edge of Black Pond. Henry, an itinerant butcher, struggles to provide for them, but often must leave them alone as he travels the county in search of work. And while Henry loves his children deeply, he is devastated by their mother's desertion. He has not told them why she left or if she'll return. When Mrs. Phyllis Farley, a prosperous neighbor, begins to woo the children as companions for her strange, housebound son, Henry must weigh an unusual proposition, the consequences of which may cost him everything. Powerfully imagined and intensely felt, **The Lost Mother** is a haunting masterwork and McGarry Morris's strongest novel to date.

top of the page

top of the page

top of the page

Discussion Questions

1. Irene Jalley seemed to start out with a lot of ambitious plans for her future --- for instance to get her business college correspondence certificate and get a job --- but "she had fallen in love with Henry" (p. 5). Why do you think she decided to give up all her plans and get married? Do you think this was the right choice for her? Are women still faced with these same kinds of choices (and consequences) today?

2. What do you think Irene's real reasons are for walking out on her children? "I knew if I stayed something terrible would happen," Irene says to Thomas. What does she think will happen? What is Irene so afraid of?

3. When Thomas and Margaret arrive at the Farley house, Thomas says he felt "as if he were being pressed back by a great force that would consume his sister just as it had his mother" (p. 75). What do you think Thomas means by this? What "force" is he talking about?

4. On page 31, Margaret says, "When I have little kids I'll never leave them alone." At that young age, she's already bound and determined not to repeat her mother's mistakes, and she seems to succeed by the end of the novel. In life, however, many people do in fact continue destructive patterns within a family. Why do you think Margaret is able to overcome her past? Does this prove that family history doesn't necessarily have to repeat itself? And if it does, how do we keep ourselves from making the same mistakes as our parents?

5. Gladys is one of the most benevolent characters in the book. Despite being "betrayed" by Henry she seems to hold no grudges against him or his children and never speaks ill of Irene, even when given a chance. Why do you think Gladys is able to be so forgiving? At the end of the novel, Margaret refers to Gladys as "a good mother." Consider what that means and the significance of her role in the novel.

6. We are told by Mrs. Farley (p. 20) that her husband offered Henry the chance to stay on the land as a tenant, but that Henry had "chosen pride over family." Was this the right choice? Is it ever worthwhile to sacrifice one's pride and principles? What choices does Henry make that you agree/disagree with? Could Henry have done anything differently so that things might not have turned out as dire for his family?

7. On page 188, McGarry Morris writes about "that moment of revelation when all is understood though nothing is known." What does Thomas understand at that moment?

8. Irene has been successful at hiding Margaret and Thomas from Mr. Dexter until the day Mr. Dexter inadvertently discovers them at the house. At that

point (p. 213), Irene suddenly proclaims to Mr. Dexter, "They're my children. They're mine." This is the one and only time she acknowledges her children as her own. Why do you think she claims them at that particular moment?

9. In a way, the novel is about unmet expectations --- Gladys wants Henry, Henry wants his wife back and a job, Margaret and Thomas want their mother and father together and a happy home life, the Farleys want "normal" children; and Irene wants a more prosperous and orderly life. What does our seemingly unending desire for what we don't have say about human nature? Do you believe we are destined always to wish for things we don't have?

10. Not only do Thomas and Margaret have to endure their mother's absence, but society in general treats them quite harshly. Do you think we're more sensitive now, in the twenty-first century, to the needs and feelings of children? How has the way we parent today changed at all since time of the Depression? Do you think we are more (or less) enlightened?

top of the page

Critical Praise

"Character-driven stories of such excellence are all too rare. The characters of **The Lost Mother** will stay in readers' minds for a long time."

—**Bookreporter.com**

"Morris's nearly flawless prose is mesmerizing."

—*Booklist*

"Never one to shy away from the messy and bleak, Morris unflinchingly illuminates the bitter existence of neglected children and their inspiring resilience, once again proving herself a storyteller of great compassion, insight, and depth."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"**The Lost Mother** paints a nuanced portrait of small-town life . . . Morris's characters are finely drawn, her dialogue rings true, and the epic sweep of her storytelling draws apt comparison to Dickens and Steinbeck."

—*The Orlando Sentinel*

"An absorbing and wonderful book."

—*The Boston Globe*

"A vivid portrait of an underreported world."

—*The Chicago Tribune*

"A perfectly lovely book about perfectly awful things . . . **The Lost Mother** is the quietest, subtlest novel that ever kept me up into the small hours of the night, unable to look away."
—*The Washington Post*

Privacy Policy | Contact Us | Advertising | About Us

© Copyright 2001-2007, ReadingGroupGuides.com. All rights reserved.

Author Interview

Q: It is interesting to note that, in the past, you have been compared to John Steinbeck, whose *The Grapes Of Wrath* is probably the most famous piece of literature about the Depression, and now you have written a novel taking place during the same time period. Did you draw upon *The Grapes of Wrath* or any other works either for research or inspiration? Did you set out to write a novel about the Depression, or was it the characters that served as your take-off point for *The Lost Mother*?

MMM: My most enjoyable research for **The Lost Mother** was reacquainting myself with stories I'd first heard in childhood, personal accounts of life during the Depression. Inspiration was easy because it was during those same years that my grandmother abandoned her husband and three children. The day she left, she brought her four-year-old daughter and youngest child, my mother, to a friend's house, then, dressed in her very best clothes, my grandmother climbed into a taxi and rode away forever. The image of that little girl watching from the window as her mother deserted her would come to me whenever there was sorrow in my mother's life. Forgiving by nature, my mother tried to understand what had happened, but because she felt such love and fierce loyalty to her own children, her mother's actions remained a painful, troubling mystery. Growing up, I was keenly aware of the loss my mother felt as well as the great love and admiration she had for her father, a quiet country man who raised his three children alone in those desperate times, often working day and night to support them.

I had read **The Grapes of Wrath** years ago as a student, but decided not to reread it until I had finished writing **The Lost Mother**. With that second reading I was deeply touched by the novel's power and Steinbeck's great achievement in depicting the triumph of the human spirit in spite of cruelty, unimaginable loss, and degradation. The Depression was the necessary setting for the story, but the characters were the true genesis of **The Lost Mother**. They've been in my thoughts for years, wanting their story told. One summer day I sat down to continue work on a novel I'd been writing for some time when a young boy's voice broke through onto the paper, and I was off and running, trying to keep up with Thomas Talcott.

Q: You've rendered Margaret and Thomas's experience, as well as their relationship to one another, so beautifully and convincingly. Would you talk about the difference between writing with a "child's eye" as opposed to an adult's view of the world?

MMM: A child's view of the world works especially well when a writer is trying to get at the heart of a puzzling story. Particularly in this case with a woman's unfathomable abandonment of her family, the child as narrator came naturally. Children are always asking why; then why again, why to every answer, which is precisely fiction's purpose, posing a question for which there is no one correct answer. It is from such doubt and uncertainty that greater truths are often revealed, and even more insightful questions raised. Children are so forthright and persistent because they haven't yet learned how damaging the truth can sometimes be. While an adult perspective allows a bigger picture to be seen, a child's perspective is that knee-high puzzlement of secrets and evasions that can give a story its emotional energy.

Q: In addition to being so likable, Margaret and Thomas are also very easy to identify with and seem quite ordinary apart from their circumstances, especially compared to characters in your previous novels, many of whom have been described as "on the fringe" or even "somewhat unusual." Would you talk a bit about how you see Margaret and Thomas and how they compare with your previous characters?

MMM: I'm often as amused as bewildered to hear characters from my previous novels described as "on the fringe" or "somewhat unusual." It is always surprising to be asked if I know "people like that." Of course I do; we all do. I see them as aspects of all of us. The shy confusion of Aubrey Wallace in Vanished. A Dangerous Woman's Martha Horgan, painfully aware of how out of step she is with everyone around her. **Songs In Ordinary Time**'s Marie Fermoyle, a loving mother, so desperate for her family's success that she can be their harshest critic. The wild young woman in **Fiona Range** made all the more headstrong and reckless by her father's unacknowledged paternity. In **A Hole In The Universe** the determinedly unrelieved guilt of Gordon Loomis, a good and decent man in spite of his participation in a long ago-murder.

Perhaps in **The Lost Mother** Margaret and Thomas Talcott will be considered "on the fringe" because with their mother's rejection and their father's hardships they too have lost their place in society's view of what a normal life is. What continues to fascinate me is how close to the fringe we all are, as close to the bounds of normalcy as to the fringe of chaos, disruption, aberration, and loss.

Q: It seems at almost every turn that someone is being mean or deceitful to the Talcotts. Is it the Depression that makes some of your characters act in an uncharitable manner or is it something deeper? Would Irene have walked out on her children during prosperous times?

MMM: Once the bulwark of family protection is removed all children become vulnerable to life's cruelties. This is true in any time and place, and was especially so during the Depression years. If some people were mean to the Talcott children, there were also people who were kind and as charitable as their circumstances would allow. Also, there was not the same veneration of children then as there is today. Children were expected to know their place, which usually meant unquestioning obedience and deference to adults. In more prosperous times, Irene Talcott might have had more choices. But for a woman of her temperament there probably still would have been some form of abandonment, if not physically, then surely emotionally. And in some ways that emotional abandonment can be far more damaging because it is so insidious.

Q: It is a poignant irony that Mrs. Farley smothers her son with love to the point where Jesse-boy can't stand it, while Margaret and Henry are desperate for their absent mother's love. Although these two examples are quite extreme, do you think it's possible to strike just the right balance, so that both parent and child are happy, or is this discordance an inevitable part of the child-parent dynamic? Do you think it's possible to love a child too much? Does Irene love her children?

MMM: By its very nature and in its healthiest aspects, the child-parent relationship entails discordance, conflict, struggle. I don't think it is ever possible to love a child too much. Oftentimes, however, the worst parenting is done in the name of love. And that can run the gamut from excessive permissiveness to abuse. Mrs. Farley's love for her son, Jesse-boy, keeps him an invalid. It is the worst kind of love, voracious and so protective that it is restricting, all-possessive, and, of necessity, controlling. What Mrs. Farley loves above all else is being needed. Irene Talcott's love for her children is almost the opposite of Mrs. Farley's, colder and more rational. Irene no longer wants to be needed. In a sense she is afraid of her children, because she fears all that motherhood can demand, loss, sacrifice, the repression of her own goals and yearnings.

Q: Abandonment is an issue you've visited several times before; for instance, in your book Fiona Range, the character of Fiona believes she was abandoned by her young mother. As a mother yourself, could you ever imagine a circumstance where you could have walked away from your own children? Are there circumstances under which walking away could be an acceptable option? As mothers, do we ever get to put ourselves first, or is sacrificing some of our own happiness an inevitable part of the role?

MMM: I wrote this book precisely because the idea of abandoning one's children seems such an unnatural thing for a mother to do. And yet it happens more often than we realize. Emotional abandonment is the most inexplicable of all. It is one thing to walk away when there are issues of poverty, addiction, or abuse, but to stop caring is the hardest to comprehend. All parenting requires sacrifice, especially motherhood. Because love is the giving over of one's self to another, there must be sacrifice or else the love is depthless and self-serving.

Q: What are you working on now?

MMM: I am working on a play and another novel.

• Click here now to buy this book from Amazon.
Excerpted from **The Lost Mother** © Copyright 2007 by Mary McGarry Morris. Reprinted with permission by Viking Adult. All rights reserved.

Farmington Community Library

Literature Resource Center

HOME | Title Search | Keyword Search | Authors by Type | Advanced Search | Literary-Historical Timeline | Authors on the Highway | Encyclopedia of Literature | Gale Literary Index

Search for Author: morris mary Search Clear Form

Print E-mail
Mark this document
Current Results

Biographies | Literary Criticism, Articles, & Work Overviews | Bibliographies | Additional Resources | Literary-Historical Timeline

Document 1 of 2

Mary (Joan) McGarry Morris

1943-

Also known as: Mary (Joan) McGarry Morris, Mary Joan McGarry Morris, Mary McGarry Morris

Entry updated: 08/10/2005
Birth Place: Meriden, Connecticut

Awards
Career
Further Readings About the Author
Media Adaptations
Personal Information
Sidelights
Source Citation
Writings by the Author

Personal Information: Born 1943, in Meriden, CT; daughter of John and Margaret (Chiriaco) McGarry; married Michael Morris (an attorney), 1962; children: Mary Margaret, Sarah, Melissa, Michael, Amy. **Education:** Attended University of Vermont, 1960-62, and University of Massachusetts, 1962-63. **Addresses:** Home: Andover, MA. Agent: Naggar Literary Agency, 216 E. 75th St., New York, NY 10021.

Occupation: Writer

Career: Massachusetts Department of Welfare, Lawrence, financial assistance social worker, 1980-86; writer.

Awards: National Book Award nomination, 1988, and PEN/ Faulkner Award nomination, 1989, both for *Vanished.*

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *Vanished,* Viking (New York, NY), 1988.
- *A Dangerous Woman,* Viking (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Songs in Ordinary Time,* Viking (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Fiona Range,* Viking (New York, NY), 2000.
- *A Hole in the Universe,* Viking (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Lost Mother,* Viking (New York, NY), 2005.

Also contributor of book reviews to periodicals, including *New York Times Book Review.*

Media Adaptations: *A Dangerous Woman* was adapted as a feature film starring Deborah Winger.

"Sidelights"

As the author of several novels, Mary McGarry Morris has received considerable attention from critics and readers, as well as from prestigious awards panels. Her books are noted for their depictions of mentally and emotionally impaired individuals who have difficulty coping with an inhospitable world. As *New York Times Book Review* contributor Alice McDermott put it, "Morris does not devise plots, but traps: steel-toothed, inescapable traps of circumstance and personality against which her characters struggle... and then fail." Ultimately, Morris suggests that these individuals are incapable of surviving their surroundings. Her books typically conclude with violent murders, death apparently being all that is left for characters who have exhausted their other possibilities.

Such grim subjects seem odd coming from Morris, a mother of five children who, following college, went on to live what *Los Angeles Times* writer Elizabeth Mehren described as a "stunningly balanced life." The disorder Morris depicts in her books may stem, in part, from her own childhood. Her parents separated when she was very young and, though her father continued to live separately, he, along with Morris and her mother, moved to Rutland, Vermont, when the author was six years old. It was in Rutland that Morris came to know the small New England communities that she features in her novels. When her mother and stepfather began employing retarded and emotionally disturbed men in their restaurant, she was exposed to another important influence. As she once told *People* magazine writer Kim Hubbard, her mother "believed everyone deserved a chance." The author would later manifest the same concern for society's outsiders by featuring mentally

handicapped individuals in her fiction.

After marrying, Morris settled in Andover, Massachusetts, and was soon involved with raising a family and writing. Not surprisingly, her family obligations often took her away from her fiction and poetry. "With five children there couldn't be a set schedule for much," she told *Washington Post* writer Judith Weinraub. "It was always hard to find the time." Morris's writing regimen was also interrupted when she took a job as a social worker in order to help pay the children's college tuition. Consequently, her early attempts at novels remained unfinished, and the work that would eventually prove successful was painfully slow in coming. Her first novel, *Vanished,* took nearly eight years to write, and was then rejected twenty-seven times by publishers and agents. Without a publication to substantiate her abilities, Morris kept her writing a secret from everyone but her family. Despite this isolation, she continued to work on her fiction. "Writing was just *in* me," she told Weinraub. "I even began to think I probably would never be published. And I was accepting of that."

In 1986 Morris finally achieved a partial affirmation of her talents when she placed *Vanished* with noted literary agent Jean V. Naggar; two years later it was published. *Vanished* centers on Aubrey Wallace, a man whose socialization is so severely limited, most consider him retarded. Though he is functional to a certain degree--he has a job, a wife, and children--Aubrey is unquestioning and utterly passive. These qualities lead to trouble when Aubrey crosses paths with Dotty Johnson, a disturbed teenager who has recently killed her sexually abusive father. Dotty attempts to steal Aubrey's pickup, and Aubrey jumps into the cab. Unable to take any action to stop her, Aubrey just rides along, and this beginning is typical of their time together. Whatever Dotty wants, she takes, and whatever Aubrey encounters, he accepts. The next day Dotty kidnaps a baby, and the child becomes part of the roving, maladjusted family, crisscrossing the country from Massachusetts to Florida. They survive by finding work as migrant laborers, by stealing, and by prostitution. Five years after the kidnaping, they move in with a violent ex-convict named Jiggy Huller and his family. When Huller discovers the truth about the kidnaping, he hatches a plan to collect a 25,000 dollar reward for the child that ultimately brings about the novel's bloody conclusion.

Several critics commented that Morris's style and technique in *Vanished* are of an exceptionally high caliber for a first novelist. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Harry Crews noted that "her language is precise, concrete, and sensual. Her eye for telling detail is good, and her ear for the way people talk is tone-perfect." Opinions were divided, however, regarding Morris's handling of the novel's story elements. Some critics suggested that her emotionally charged topics--rape, murder, incest, kidnaping, prostitution, and adultery--run the risk of overwhelming the rest of the book. Richard Eder, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* found that the novel, unable to transform its negative subject matter into a meaningful message, "sinks into its chamber of horrors." *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani also focused on the novel's preoccupation with ugly and sinister elements, but reached a different judgment. "Melodramatic as these events sound," Kakutani wrote, "they are presented with such authority by Ms. Morris that they hum with both the authenticity of real life and the mythic power of fable. This is a startling and powerful debut."

A Dangerous Woman, Morris's second novel, features another emotionally impaired protagonist, Martha Horgan, who is in many ways the counterpart to Aubrey Wallace in *Vanished.* Like Aubrey, Martha Horgan is an outcast, characterized as disturbed by the residents of her Vermont town. She is plagued by physical tics and is unable to interact with others in a mature manner. Sometimes her brutal honesty offends those around her; sometimes she explodes into childish rages. At other times, however, Martha almost becomes a functioning part of her community. Early in the book she gets a job at a dry cleaners and earns a degree of independence. She moves out of her aunt's home and forges a tenuous friendship with a coworker, Birdy. These gains are lost, however, due in part to Martha's insistence on exposing Birdy's lover as a thief. Martha's honesty costs her both the job and the friendship, and she is forced to return to her Aunt Frances's home. There an alcoholic handyman employed by Aunt Frances takes Martha as a temporary lover, then abandons her in favor of Frances. When she is forced to leave her aunt's home, Martha has few options, and tragedy is imminent.

Morris chose to relay much of the novel's action through Martha's disturbed perceptions, and this unconventional approach impressed several reviewers. Richard Eder of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* wrote that *A Dangerous Woman* "is powerfully and dangerously written. To cast a blinding light on her protagonist, Morris has sacrificed subtleties or shadings. The balance of the outsider as both victim and helpless instigator is difficult to maintain." Jaimy Gordon, writing in the *Washington Post,* maintained that some of the story elements--including Martha's near rape at the age of sixteen--are unnecessary. Gordon also criticized some occasionally clumsy prose in the novel, but praised Morris's "remarkable portrait of a disturbed woman." This judgment was echoed by *Vogue* contributor Michael Upchurch, who emphasized the author's ability to "draw the reader so completely into Martha's world that it becomes impossible not to sympathize with her."

New York Times Book Review contributor Alice McDermott, comparing Morris's two novels, summarized: " *A Dangerous Woman* is not, finally, as convincing or as compelling... as was Ms. Morris's first book, nor is the prose quite so striking." Despite these reservations, the critic commended the powerful vision Morris puts forth in both of the novels. "The bleakness of her landscape remains pervasive," McDermott wrote. "This makes all the more remarkable those instants of frail light--a simple man's love for a child, a lost woman's recollection of affection--that she so deftly, so briefly, calls forth from the darkness."

Morris proved with her first two novels that she "can depict society's outsiders--people with bleak presents and no futures--with rare understanding and compassion," noted a *Publishers Weekly* critic. Her third novel, *Songs in Ordinary Time* evidences this as well. The novel revolves around the Fermoyles, a family living in a small town in Vermont in 1960. Marie Fermoyle has struggled for years to support and raise her three children despite the lack of support from her alcoholic ex-husband. Enter Omar Duvall, a con man who convinces Marie to invest in one of his scams. The novel involves numerous subplots involving various friends and neighbors who "each in his or her own way is necessary to the town's ecosystem," commented Vanessa V. Friedman in *Entertainment Weekly.*

Critical reviews of *Songs in Ordinary Time* were mixed. "This novel becomes more powerful as one reads, building to a heart stopping denouement," noted a critic for

Publishers Weekly. Michiko Kakutani, on the other hand, wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that the author's protagonists "lack the emotional chiaroscuro that Ms. Morris has lavished on her creations in the past." However, in *USA Today* Susan Kelly argued that *Songs in Ordinary Time* is "beautifully written." Kelly observed, "There is grace and poetry in Morris's prose. She opens the door to these people's souls, showing all their fears and flaws without making them seem ridiculous or unworthy."

In Morris's 2000 novel, *Fiona Range,* the title character is "smart, beautiful, and haunted by a past she cannot live down," according to Carolyn Kubisz in *Booklist.* Abandoned by her unwed mother as a baby, Fiona was raised by her aunt and uncle. Her relationships roll along, disaster after disaster. After her cousin Elizabeth returns from New York City with her fiancé, Fiona ends up sleeping both with him and with one of Elizabeth's former boyfriends. "Fiona knows she needs to reclaim her life, but each step she takes is closer to the abyss," found Harriet Klausner in *BookBrowser.*

Critics were again largely positive in their assessment of *Fiona Range.* "How these characters interact, what they say, and what they hide, makes for entertaining, suspenseful reading," opined Yvette Weller Olson in *Library Journal.* Olson found the work "compelling and satisfying." A *Publishers Weekly* critic's review was mixed, maintaining that the plot tends to "go in circles" and that Fiona's self-destructive nature distances the character from reader sympathy. Nonetheless, the critic went on to praise the "sustained tension in the narrative," and found that "the denouement packs a thriller's excitement." Kubisz found the narrative "slow moving at times," but concluded that Morris's ending, "with its twist of plot and hidden secrets revealed, makes this a worthy read."

In *A Hole in the Universe* Morris tells the story of outcast Gordon Loomis, who comes home after serving a twenty-five-year sentence for a murder he may not have committed. Struggling to cope with life outside prison, the gloomy Gordon just wants to be left alone; instead, he must fend off the intrusive attention of people. He spurns his brother's help in finding him a job, and feels helpless when the spinsterish Delores wants to help him become the "normal" man he wants to be. He tries to avoid the needy teenage daughter of the junkie across the street. Unfortunately, Gordon is unable to keep his life at a safe distance for long. His basic integrity draws him toward the people he seeks to protect, even though he is punished for his good deeds. When new accusations whirl around Gordon for a second crime he did not commit, the tale moves to its fitful conclusion and Gordon emerges as the novel's pathetic but winning hero.

Reviews of *A Hole in the Universe* were predominately enthusiastic. *Booklist* contributor Deborah Donovan found Morris's "empathy for Gordon... palpable, leaving the reader in awe of her uncanny ability to capture and convey each personality's unique essence." *New York Times* contributor John Hartl was more reserved in his assessment, writing, "What keeps this borderline potboiler simmering is the sense that the characters really are evolving." On the other hand, *Boston Globe* reviewer Caroline Leavitt applauded the novel's "topnotch suspense" and "expert plotting that make Morris such a superb storyteller," and was especially impressed with the author's inclusion of those "small heroics that resonate and break your heart."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist,* July, 1995, Donna Seaman, review of *Songs in Ordinary Time,* p. 1860; February 15, 2000, Carolyn Kubisz, review of *Fiona Range,* p. 1052; February 1, 2004, Deborah Donovan, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. 993.

- *Chicago Tribune,* March 7, 2004, Jessica Treadway, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. 4.

- *Detroit Free Press,* February 3, 1991.

- *Entertainment Weekly,* July 28, 1995, Vanessa V. Friedman, review of *Songs in Ordinary Time,* p. 57.

- *Library Journal,* March 15, 2000, Yvette Weller Olson, review of *Fiona Range,* p. 128.

- *Los Angeles Times,* March 7, 1991, pp. E1, E6.

- *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* June 26, 1988, p. 3; January 20, 1991; April 25, 2004, Francie Lin, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. 6.

- *Newsweek,* April 8, 1991, David Gates, review of *A Dangerous Woman,* pp. 61, 63.

- *New York,* January 14, 1991, Rhoda Koenig, review of *A Dangerous Woman,* p. 67.

- *New Yorker,* August 8, 1988, pp. 84-85.

- *New York Times,* June 4, 1988, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Vanished,* p. 14.

- *New York Times Book Review,* July 3, 1988, Harry Crews, "On the Lam with Dotty," p. 5; January 13, 1991, Alice McDermott, "The Loneliness of an Ogre," p. 9; August 4, 1995, Michiko Kakutani, review of *Songs in Ordinary Time;* March 21, 2004, John Hartl, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. 16.

- *People,* April 15, 1991, Kim Hubbard, review of *A Dangerous Woman,* pp. 93-94.

- *Publishers Weekly,* May 15, 1995, review of *Songs in Ordinary Times,* p. 53; March 13, 2000, review of *Fiona Range,* p. 59; January 26, 2004, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. 227.

- *Time,* July 4, 1988, review of *Vanished,* p. 71; January 28, 1991, Mary Carlson, review of *A Dangerous Woman,* pp. 89-90.

- *USA Today,* December 2, 1999, Susan Kelly, "*Songs* No Ordinary Novel"; May 10, 2000, Susan Kelly, "Teen Never Feels at Home in *Range.*"
- *Vogue,* January, 1991, pp. 112-113.
- *Washington Post,* January 8, 1991; March 26, 1991, p. B1, B4; March 7, 2004, Caroline Leavitt, review of *A Hole in the Universe,* p. T6.

ONLINE

- *BookBrowser.com,* http: //www.bookbrowser.com/ (May, 2000), Harriet Klausner, review of *Fiona Range.**

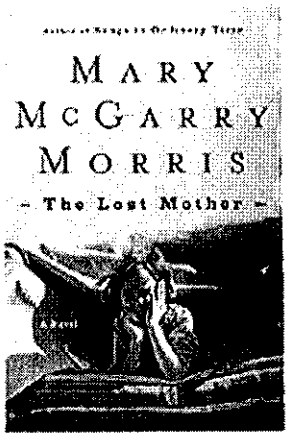
Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Home | Help | Search Tips | Research Guide | Gale Databases | Contact Gale | Comments

Copyright and Terms of Use

ReadingGroupGuides.com
Find Thousands of Reading Group Guides



Buy from amazon.com

More About This Book amazon.com

Click here to find more Mary McGarry Morris on Audible.com.

Reading Group Guides

SONGS IN ORDINARY TIME

A HOLE IN THE UNIVERSE

FIONA RANGE

THE LOST MOTHER

Review

THE LOST MOTHER

Mary McGarry Morris
Viking
Historical Fiction
ISBN: 0670033898

• Reading Group Guide

Mary McGarry Morris is particularly good at portraying the many small humiliations that add up to rage in the heart of a poor child. In her new novel, THE LOST MOTHER, Thomas and his plucky little sister, Margaret, struggle to cope with their mother's abandonment. Meanwhile, the Great Depression is dragging on and the Talcotts' father, already devastated by his wife's departure, gets more and more desperate.

Henry Talcott is a butcher in rural Vermont. He travels from farm to farm slaughtering animals as needed. Unfortunately, in hard times, these animals are not replaced and he quickly runs out of ways to support his children. His neighbors and his vanished wife's family step in to help, but they are all disastrous choices in their own ways.

The children learn brutal lessons about trust and fairness, and as their sense of peril increases, they become determined to find their beloved mother. When they do so and realize that the difficult economic times are not the only reason for their mother's departure, they lapse into real crisis. It is no wonder that Thomas can no longer control his temper whereas Margaret's eagerness to please develops into a cynical survival skill. The lowest point for the children would seem to be their stay in the orphanage, but they really hit rock bottom when they learn who committed them and why.

Ms. Morris's characters are heartbreaking in their casual cruelty and the children are especially well-depicted, neither oversweet in their pathos nor unbelievably wise beyond their years. It's impossible to read of their tribulations and not want to reach into the pages and help them. The adults have a broad range of faults and foibles: they are cheats and alcoholics, hypocrites and users, blind, mean, powerless, and self-deluded, sharing only their

unreliability. None of these traits is as unpardonable as Henry's crimes of being poor and unable to hide how hard he is struggling. The two faces of small-town life are well-represented, and readers from this milieu may wince to see them portrayed so accurately.

Character-driven stories of such excellence are all too rare. The characters of THE LOST MOTHER will stay in readers' minds for a long time.

--- Reviewed by Colleen Quinn (CQuinn9368@yahoo.com)

• Click here now to buy this book from Amazon.

© Copyright 1996-2007, Bookreporter.com. All rights reserved.

Back to top.

© Copyright 1996-2007, Bookreporter.com. All rights reserved.
The Book Report, Inc. • 250 West 57th Street • Suite 1228 • New York, NY • 10107

THE LOST MOTHER

by Mary McGarry Morris

| U.S. $23.95

INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression was a test of the common man's force of will, with survival dependent upon circumstances, strength of character, strength of family, and oftentimes sheer luck. It also inspired some of the greatest American literature ever written. Now, through the unflinching eyes of eight-year-old Margaret and her eleven-year-old brother Thomas, bestselling novelist Mary McGarry Morris tells the story of one ordinary family's journey through this extraordinary time in her brilliant new novel, **The Lost Mother**.

Like so many others during Depression-era America, Thomas and Margaret Talcott have endured more than any child should. Their father, Henry, can't find steady work, and they've lost their home and are now living in a tent. Yet to them, nothing is more devastating than their mother's absence. Unable to cope with the demands of a taciturn husband and two young children, the beautiful and mysterious Irene has simply walked away from her life. Now Henry, Margaret, and Thomas are struggling to hold on to the last thing of value they still possess: each other.

Their struggle, however, becomes increasingly difficult. The weather turns cold, Margaret and Thomas are sent to school shivering and wet in "miserable shoes," and life in the tent is no longer possible. Henry swallows his pride, and the family goes to stay with his longtime friend Gladys and her father Old Bibeau. But Old Bibeau has never forgiven Henry for marrying Irene instead of Gladys, and his unrestrained resentment makes life there intolerable. Henry then takes the children to stay with their Aunt Lena, a drunk and dysfunctional woman, as he desperately looks for work, sinking deeper and deeper into a morass of frustration and despair. The final blow comes when he is unjustly arrested and the children are, unwittingly, taken in by his accusers, Mr. and Mrs. Farley.

The Farleys are a wealthy couple who have everything except the one thing they want most of all—a "normal" child. Mrs. Farley will go to any lengths to create a "real" family and provide companionship for her only son, Jesse-boy, who is sickly and unable to walk. Margaret and Thomas now have all the creature comforts they've been lacking, yet they are both miserable. And soon Jesse-boy's abusive behavior drives the children away to search for their mother. But when they find her, it becomes clear that Irene's new life leaves no room for her children.

With their father still in jail and Irene unable and unwilling to be a mother again, the children are sent to an orphanage. Life at St. Elizabeth's is grim, and one day it looks as if their fear of permanent separation might come true. But at last someone steps in to give the children the sense of family they so desperately need.

With **The Lost Mother**, her sixth novel, Mary McGarry Morris once again proves herself to be a master storyteller, weaving a haunting and unforgettable tale about one ordinary family's struggle to survive in extraordinary times.

Questions for "A Lost Mother" by Mary McGarry Morris

Question:
What does having Thomas as narrator do for this novel?

Author: A child's view of the world works especially well when a writer is trying to get at the heart of a puzzling story. Particularly in this case with a woman's unfathomable abandonment of her family, the child as narrator came naturally. Children are always asking why; then why again, why to every answer, which is precisely fiction's purpose, posing a question for which there is no one correct answer. It is from such doubt and uncertainty that greater truths are often revealed, and even more insightful questions raised. Children are so forthright and persistent because they haven't yet learned how damaging the truth can sometimes be. While an adult perspective allows a bigger picture to be seen, **a child's perspective is that knee-high puzzlement of secrets and evasions that can give a story its emotional energy.**

Question:
Does the Depression make some of the characters act in an uncharitable manner or is it something deeper? Would Irene have walked out on her children during prosperous times?

Author: Once the bulwark of family protection is removed all children become vulnerable to life's cruelties. <This was especially so in the Depression (probably due to the paucity of resources effecting generosity).> Also, there was not the same veneration of children then as there is today. <Children then were to be seen and not heard and were probably not considered to have rights.>

In a more prosperous time Irene might have had more choices. But for a woman of her temperament, there probably still would have been some form of abandonment, if not physically, then surely emotionally. Irene no longer wants to be needed. In a sense she is afraid of her children, because she fears all that motherhood can demand: loss, sacrifice, the repression of her own goals and yearnings.

I wrote this book precisely because the idea of abandoning one's children seems such an unnatural thing for a mother to do. And yet it happens more often than we realize. Emotional abandonment is the most inexplicable of all. It is one thing to walk away when there are issues of poverty, addiction or abuse, but to stop cring is the hardest to comprehend. …Because love is the giving over of one's self to another, there must be sacrifice or else the love is depthless and self-serving.

Nancy's <Mrs. Farley's obsessive attention to her son, Jesse-boy, probably has deeper roots than the circumstances of the depression. And the same is true about Mr. Farley's desire to own everything and cheapness of spirit and meanness to Henry.

3. When Thomas and Margaret arrive at the Farley house, Thomas says he felt "as if he were being pressed back by a great force that would consume his sister just as it had his mother" (p. 75). What do you think Thomas means by this? What "force" is he talking about?

4. On page 31, Margaret says, "When I have little kids I'll never leave them alone." At that young age, she's already bound and determined not to repeat her mother's mistakes, and she seems to succeed by the end of the novel. In life, however, many people do in fact continue destructive patterns within a family. Why do you think Margaret is able to overcome her past? Does this prove that family history doesn't necessarily have to repeat itself? And if it does, how do we keep ourselves from making the same mistakes as our parents?

5. Gladys is one of the most benevolent characters in the book. Despite being "betrayed" by Henry she seems to hold no grudges against him or his children and never speaks ill of Irene, even when given a chance. Why do you think Gladys is able to be so forgiving? At the end of the novel, Margaret refers to Gladys as "a good mother." Consider what that means and the significance of her role in the novel.

6. We are told by Mrs. Farley (p. 20) that her husband offered Henry the chance to stay on the land as a tenant, but that Henry had "chosen pride over family." Was this the right choice? Is it ever worthwhile to sacrifice one's pride and principles? What choices does Henry make that you agree/disagree with? Could Henry have done anything differently so that things might not have turned out as dire for his family?

7. On page 188, McGarry Morris writes about "that moment of revelation when all is understood though nothing is known." What does Thomas understand at that moment?
"...don't have much time...? Mr. Dexter said...A door closed. Let's go down (Marg)...T: "No, listen." M: "What's that?" T: "something I don't know.' He dangled over the must mattress, straining to hear the not unfamiliar rhythmic struggle that was more vibration now than sound to his blood-pulsing ears. ...Voices gone, all sound ceased. Something cold and dagger-sharp hung in the air. If he moved it would destroy everything. There was only uneasiness, that moment of revelation....Yes. Of Course. But What? The violation was too vst. It changed everything.

8. Irene has been successful at hiding Margaret and Thomas from Mr. Dexter until the day Mr. Dexter inadvertently discovers them at the house. At that point (p. 213), Irene suddenly proclaims to Mr. Dexter, "They're my children. They're mine." This is the one and only time she acknowledges her children as her own. Why do you think she claims them at that particular moment? I'm sorry she said. Sorry for what, Thomas wondered. For not telling she had children or simply for having these children, poor ragamuffins that they were.

9. In a way, the novel is about unmet expectations --- Gladys wants Henry, Henry wants his wife back and a job, Margaret and Thomas want their mother and father together and a happy home life, the Farleys want "normal" children; and Irene wants a more prosperous and orderly life. What does our seemingly unending desire for what we don't have say about human nature? Do you believe we are destined always to wish for things we don't have?

10. Not only do Thomas and Margaret have to endure their mother's absence, but society in general treats them quite harshly. Do you think we're more sensitive now, in the twenty-first century, to the needs and feelings of children? How has the way we parent today changed at all since time of the Depression? Do you think we are more (or less) enlightened?

Question: Are Thomas's feelings and actions towards his sister, Margaret what we would consider normal.

p. 1117 The only reason Thomas had come back was Margaret. He couldn't leave her alone here. (Farley's)

p. 41 (In the tent) M: Mrs. F. whispered to M. that "she loved me and that Jesse-boy did too." He said for me to be his sister". Thomas: You're my sister! (which SNAPPED WITH THE FIRE OF HIS FATHER'S QUICK ANGER. M: I know but you could be his brother too. T: Margareat! We're THIS family. You don't want to leave Daddy, do you. The letter: This was for Margaret's sake. Swas was so eaisyly swayed.

p. 92. Setting: At Lena's house outside when Henry took the children there for her to care for. "Yeah, and it's all your fault.!" Thomas poked her leg hard, then she yelped , cried wanting her mother back. Why did she go away, she wept into her hands. "Because of you" he spat. "Because you're a mean bad girl and she couldn't stand being near you anymore. Nobody can. You always ruin everything for everybody.

p. 102. Setting: Marg. needing to go to the bathroom and being locked out. Thomas keeps her on the swing after she tells him she needs to use the bathroom. "And how could he enjoy her misery this much and still hate his aunt and uncle for not letting her in. Was he just as mean as everyone else? Poor little kid. It wasn't her fault for taking the kitten or even his for telling his mother he hated her the morning she left.. It was Jame's fault. James for dying. James for having been born.

p. 260. Setting: In the orphanage office, with the Farley's and the Sister Mary Sebastian. Thomas has just learned Margaret is to be adopted by the Farley's. Margaret doesn't want to go. The Sister says "You have to, dear." Thomas: No, she doesn't. Not if she doesn't want to. She can stay with me. She's supposed to. I'm her brother.!" No Don't make her go there. Please! She hates it there!"

p. 269 That Marg. would always be more mine than hers.

Question: How is Thomas left feeling as he realizes what his mother has done?

p. 267 – 268. Thomas is thinking: Such beauty. In my mother's case was it a curse? A waste? I think so, but I can't be sure because I never saw mymother again. Or wanted to.

p. 269 – "But you (Margaret) never brought me up, right? (On Margaret's visit to her mother's home) I said, feeling the old edge, the cold, hard barrier rising.

p. 270. Margaret saying that her father still loved her Th: How do you forget your mother. . . still the longing . . . In the marrow . . . In the years

p. 272: At the funeral, when Margaret discovers that Thomas had sent flowers all these years. Thomas thinking...But the selfish truth was, for at least one day a year, I had found a way of making my mother remember me, think about me, and maybe even miss me as much as I have always missed her. Evn as an old man now there are still moments when I feel that 12-year-old boy's emptiness deep in my heart. Part of me will always be that distrustful child, alone, afrain, and sometimes angry for no reason that I can explain.

Also, explores Thomas's desperate need for his mother's love and her rescue (of T + M)

p. 272 remorse

Thomas's feelings re: Irene

p. p. 41 In fat, he took it out and in front of Margaret wrote exactly that in a boldly underlined postscript. PLEASE COME RIGHT AWAY. The blunt force of the capitalized letters filled him with an urgency he had not felt until that moment, with Margaret so close at his side that her beath raised not just the hairs on his arm but the realization that it was up to him. He had to get his mother back before something terreible happened. p. 210 wanted leap up and hug her, ... Thinks Irene wants them to stay.
p. 272 (Emptiness p. 257 - Their mother was coming.
270 the longing

Realization of bad things happening:
p. 92 going to lena's. "Oh no! Margaret watched their father trudge up the path then pause on the op step. Don't she gasped, willing him back t o the truck.
p. 238 T. He was beginning to understand how hard a world this was, how cruel people could be, no just old Bibeau. and the Farley.s

p. 109 (Mrs. Farley giving Lena money. "Where are we going? T asked. Easer as he was to get out of here, he knew his father wouldn't be pleased. Don't you worry now young man. From now on everything's going to be all right. I promis. Even Margaret could tell that something had just happened. something very bad.

Other's kindnesses:

the nun p 231. She smiled and retuned his hand, placing it in his lap because he had forgotten that it was his, so unaccustomed was he to the touch of another.

Thomas's anger: p. 237: No It was really sister may marioun you wer hitting for not letting you see your sister. and that lady on the farm. and that terrible old man. and your other, she's another one you'd like to sock, now wouldn't you. …

>

http://us.penguingroup.com/static/rguides/us/lost_mother.html

Book Clubs/Reading Guides

THE LOST MOTHER
by Mary McGarry Morris

ABOUT MARY MCGARRY MORRIS

Mary McGarry Morris is the author of **Vanished**, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award; **A Dangerous Woman**, which was chosen by **Time** as of of the five best novels of 1991; **Songs in Ordinary Time**, an Oprah's Book Club Selection and national bestseller, and the critically acclaimed **Fiona Range** and **A Hole in the Universe.** She lives in Andover, Massachussetts.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY MCGARRY MORRIS

It is interesting to note that, in the past, you have been compared to John Steinbeck, whose The Grapes Of Wrath is probably the most famous piece of literature about the Depression, and now you have written a novel taking place during the same time period. Did you draw upon The Grapes of Wrath or any other works either for research or inspiration? Did you set out to write a novel about the Depression, or was it the characters that served as your take-off point for The Lost Mother?

My most enjoyable research for **The Lost Mother** was reacquainting myself with stories I'd first heard in childhood, personal accounts of life during the Depression. Inspiration was easy because it was during those same years that my grandmother abandoned her husband and three children. The day she left, she brought her four-year-old daughter and youngest child, my mother, to a friend's house, then, dressed in her very best clothes, my grandmother climbed into a taxi and rode away forever. The image of that little girl watching from the window as her mother deserted her would come to me whenever there was sorrow in my mother's life. Forgiving by nature, my mother tried to understand what had happened, but because she felt such love and fierce loyalty to her own children, her mother's actions remained a painful, troubling mystery. Growing up, I was keenly aware of the loss my mother felt as well as the great love and admiration she had for her father, a quiet country man who raised his three children alone in those desperate times, often working day and night to support them.

I had read **The Grapes of Wrath** years ago as a student, but decided not to reread it until I had finished writing **The Lost Mother**. With that second reading I was deeply touched by the novel's power and Steinbeck's great achievement in depicting the triumph of the human spirit in spite of cruelty, unimaginable loss, and degradation. The Depression was the necessary setting for the story, but the characters were the true genesis of **The Lost Mother**. They've been in my thoughts for years, wanting their story told. One summer day I sat down to continue work on a novel I'd been writing for some time when a young boy's voice broke through onto the paper, and I was off and running, trying to keep up with

Thomas Talcott.

You've rendered Margaret and Thomas's experience, as well as their relationship to one another, so beautifully and convincingly. Would you talk about the difference between writing with a "child's eye" as opposed to an adult's view of the world?

A child's view of the world works especially well when a writer is trying to get at the heart of a puzzling story. Particularly in this case with a woman's unfathomable abandonment of her family, the child as narrator came naturally. Children are always asking why; then why again, why to every answer, which is precisely fiction's purpose, posing a question for which there is no one correct answer. It is from such doubt and uncertainty that greater truths are often revealed, and even more insightful questions raised. Children are so forthright and persistent because they haven't yet learned how damaging the truth can sometimes be. While an adult perspective allows a bigger picture to be seen, a child's perspective is that knee-high puzzlement of secrets and evasions that can give a story its emotional energy.

In addition to being so likable, Margaret and Thomas are also very easy to identify with and seem quite ordinary apart from their circumstances, especially compared to characters in your previous novels, many of whom have been described as "on the fringe" or even "somewhat unusual." Would you talk a bit about how you see Margaret and Thomas and how they compare with your previous characters?

I'm often as amused as bewildered to hear characters from my previous novels described as "on the fringe" or "somewhat unusual." It is always surprising to be asked if I know "people like that." Of course I do; we all do. I see them as aspects of all of us. The shy confusion of Aubrey Wallace in Vanished. A Dangerous Woman's Martha Horgan, painfully aware of how out of step she is with everyone around her. **Songs In Ordinary Time**'s Marie Fermoyle, a loving mother, so desperate for her family's success that she can be their harshest critic. The wild young woman in **Fiona Range** made all the more headstrong and reckless by her father's unacknowledged paternity. In **A Hole In The Universe** the determinedly unrelieved guilt of Gordon Loomis, a good and decent man in spite of his participation in a long ago-murder.

Perhaps in **The Lost Mother** Margaret and Thomas Talcott will be considered "on the fringe" because with their mother's rejection and their father's hardships they too have lost their place in society's view of what a normal life is. What continues to fascinate me is how close to the fringe we all are, as close to the bounds of normalcy as to the fringe of chaos, disruption, aberration, and loss.

It seems at almost every turn that someone is being mean or deceitful to the Talcotts. Is it the Depression that makes some of your characters act in an uncharitable manner or is it something deeper? Would Irene have walked out on her children during prosperous times?

Once the bulwark of family protection is removed all children become vulnerable to life's cruelties. This is true in any time and place, and was especially so during the Depression years. If some people were mean to the Talcott children, there were also people who were kind and as charitable as their circumstances would allow. Also, there was not the same veneration of children then as there is today. Children were expected to know their place, which usually meant unquestioning obedience and deference to adults. In more prosperous times, Irene Talcott might have had more choices. But for a woman of her temperament there probably still would have been some form of abandonment, if not physically, then surely emotionally. And in some ways that emotional abandonment can be far more damaging because it is so insidious.

It is a poignant irony that Mrs. Farley smothers her son with love to the point where Jesse-boy can't stand it, while Margaret and Henry are desperate for their absent mother's love. Although these two examples are quite extreme, do you think it's possible to strike just the right balance, so that both parent and child are happy, or is this discordance an inevitable part of the child-parent dynamic? Do you think it's possible to love

a child too much? Does Irene love her children?

By its very nature and in its healthiest aspects, the child-parent relationship entails discordance, conflict, struggle. I don't think it is ever possible to love a child too much. Oftentimes, however, the worst parenting is done in the name of love. And that can run the gamut from excessive permissiveness to abuse. Mrs. Farley's love for her son, Jesse-boy, keeps him an invalid. It is the worst kind of love, voracious and so protective that it is restricting, all-possessive, and, of necessity, controlling. What Mrs. Farley loves above all else is being needed. Irene Talcott's love for her children is almost the opposite of Mrs. Farley's, colder and more rational. Irene no longer wants to be needed. In a sense she is afraid of her children, because she fears all that motherhood can demand, loss, sacrifice, the repression of her own goals and yearnings.

Abandonment is an issue you've visited several times before; for instance, in your book Fiona Range, the character of Fiona believes she was abandoned by her young mother. As a mother yourself, could you ever imagine a circumstance where you could have walked away from your own children? Are there circumstances under which walking away could be an acceptable option? As mothers, do we ever get to put ourselves first, or is sacrificing some of our own happiness an inevitable part of the role?

I wrote this book precisely because the idea of abandoning one's children seems such an unnatural thing for a mother to do. And yet it happens more often than we realize. Emotional abandonment is the most inexplicable of all. It is one thing to walk away when there are issues of poverty, addiction, or abuse, but to stop caring is the hardest to comprehend. All parenting requires sacrifice, especially motherhood. Because love is the giving over of one's self to another, there must be sacrifice or else the love is depthless and self-serving.

The Lost Mother is your sixth novel. Do you see your work as forming an arc or progression of some kind? Do the issues you write about correspond in any way to what's currently happening in your life, or have they changed with the different stages of your life?

No, I don't see any particular pattern in my work, though I'm told others do. Because my primary interest and focus is always character, that has been the engine for every novel. Each character has his/her own story, and if specific issues are raised, examined, they are organic to the work and not the driving force.

What are you working on now?

I am working on a play and another novel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Irene Jalley seemed to start out with a lot of ambitious plans for her future—for instance to get her business college correspondence certificate and get a job—but "she had fallen in love with Henry" (p. 5). Why do you think she decided to give up all her plans and get married? Do you think this was the right choice for her? Are women still faced with these same kinds of choices (and consequences) today?
2. What do you think Irene's real reasons are for walking out on her children? "I knew if I stayed something terrible would happen," Irene says to Thomas. What does she think will happen? What is Irene so afraid of?
3. When Thomas and Margaret arrive at the Farley house, Thomas says he felt "as if he were being pressed back by a great force that would consume his sister just as it had his mother" (p. 75). What do you think Thomas means by this? What "force" is he talking about?
4. On page 31, Margaret says, "When I have little kids I'll never leave them alone." At that young age, she's already bound and determined not to repeat her mother's mistakes, and she seems to succeed by the end of

the novel. In life, however, many people do in fact continue destructive patterns within a family. Why do you think Margaret is able to overcome her past? Does this prove that family history doesn't necessarily have to repeat itself? And if it does, how do we keep ourselves from making the same mistakes as our parents?

5. Gladys is one of the most benevolent characters in the book. Despite being "betrayed" by Henry she seems to hold no grudges against him or his children and never speaks ill of Irene, even when given a chance. Why do you think Gladys is able to be so forgiving? At the end of the novel, Margaret refers to Gladys as "a good mother." Consider what that means and the significance of her role in the novel.
6. We are told by Mrs. Farley (p. 20) that her husband offered Henry the chance to stay on the land as a tenant, but that Henry had "chosen pride over family." Was this the right choice? Is it ever worthwhile to sacrifice one's pride and principles? What choices does Henry make that you agree/disagree with? Could Henry have done anything differently so that things might not have turned out as dire for his family?
7. On page 188, McGarry Morris writes about "that moment of revelation when all is understood though nothing is known." What does Thomas understand at that moment?
8. Irene has been successful at hiding Margaret and Thomas from Mr. Dexter until the day Mr. Dexter inadvertently discovers them at the house. At that point (p. 213), Irene suddenly proclaims to Mr. Dexter, "They're my children. They're mine." This is the one and only time she acknowledges her children as her own. Why do you think she claims them at that particular moment?
9. In a way, the novel is about unmet expectations—Gladys wants Henry, Henry wants his wife back and a job, Margaret and Thomas want their mother and father together and a happy home life, the Farleys want "normal" children; and Irene wants a more prosperous and orderly life. What does our seemingly unending desire for what we don't have say about human nature? Do you believe we are destined always to wish for things we don't have?
10. Not only do Thomas and Margaret have to endure their mother's absence, but society in general treats them quite harshly. Do you think we're more sensitive now, in the twenty-first century, to the needs and feelings of children? How has the way we parent today changed at all since time of the Depression? Do you think we are more (or less) enlightened?

ABOUT MARY MCGARRY MORRIS

Mary McGarry Morris is the author of **Vanished**, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award; **A Dangerous Woman**, which was chosen by **Time** as of of the five best novels of 1991; **Songs in Ordinary Time**, an Oprah's Book Club Selection and national bestseller, and the critically acclaimed **Fiona Range** and **A Hole in the Universe**. She lives in Andover, Massachussetts.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY MCGARRY MORRIS

It is interesting to note that, in the past, you have been compared to John Steinbeck, whose The Grapes Of Wrath is probably the most famous piece of literature about the Depression, and now you have written a novel taking place during the same time period. Did you draw upon The Grapes of Wrath or any other works either for research or inspiration? Did you set out to write a novel about the Depression, or was it the characters that served as your take-off point for The Lost Mother?

My most enjoyable research for **The Lost Mother** was reacquainting myself with stories I'd first heard in childhood, personal accounts of life during the Depression. Inspiration was easy because it was during those same years that my grandmother abandoned her husband and three children. The day she left, she brought her four-year-old daughter and youngest child, my mother, to a friend's house, then, dressed in her very best clothes, my grandmother climbed into a taxi and rode away forever. The image of that little girl watching from the window as her mother deserted her would come to me whenever there was sorrow in my mother's life. Forgiving by nature, my mother tried to understand what had happened, but because she felt such love and fierce loyalty to her own children, her mother's actions remained a painful, troubling mystery. Growing up, I was keenly aware of the loss my mother felt as well as the great love and admiration she had for her father, a quiet country man who raised his three children alone in those desperate times, often working day and night to support them.

I had read **The Grapes of Wrath** years ago as a student, but decided not to reread it until I had finished writing **The Lost Mother**. With that second reading I was deeply touched by the novel's power and Steinbeck's great achievement in depicting the triumph of the human spirit in spite of cruelty, unimaginable loss, and degradation. The Depression was the necessary setting for the story, but the characters were the true genesis of **The Lost Mother**. They've been in my thoughts for years, wanting their story told. One summer day I sat down to continue work on a novel I'd been writing for some time when a young boy's voice broke through onto the paper, and I was off and running, trying to keep up with Thomas Talcott.

You've rendered Margaret and Thomas's experience, as well as their relationship to one another, so beautifully and convincingly. Would you talk about the difference between writing with a "child's eye" as opposed to an adult's view of the world?

A child's view of the world works especially well when a writer is trying to get at the heart of a puzzling story. Particularly in this case with a woman's unfathomable abandonment of her family, the child as narrator came naturally. Children are always asking why; then why again, why to every answer, which is precisely fiction's purpose, posing a question for which there is no one correct answer. It is from such doubt and uncertainty that greater truths are often revealed, and even more insightful questions raised. Children are so forthright and persistent because they haven't yet learned how damaging the truth can sometimes be. While an adult perspective allows a bigger picture to be seen, a child's perspective is that knee-high puzzlement of secrets and evasions that can give a story its emotional energy.

In addition to being so likable, Margaret and Thomas are also very easy to identify with and seem quite ordinary apart from their circumstances, especially compared to characters in your previous novels, many of

whom have been described as "on the fringe" or even "somewhat unusual." Would you talk a bit about how you see Margaret and Thomas and how they compare with your previous characters?

I'm often as amused as bewildered to hear characters from my previous novels described as "on the fringe" or "somewhat unusual." It is always surprising to be asked if I know "people like that." Of course I do; we all do. I see them as aspects of all of us. The shy confusion of Aubrey Wallace in Vanished. A Dangerous Woman's Martha Horgan, painfully aware of how out of step she is with everyone around her. **Songs In Ordinary Time**'s Marie Fermoyle, a loving mother, so desperate for her family's success that she can be their harshest critic. The wild young woman in **Fiona Range** made all the more headstrong and reckless by her father's unacknowledged paternity. In **A Hole In The Universe** the determinedly unrelieved guilt of Gordon Loomis, a good and decent man in spite of his participation in a long ago-murder.

Perhaps in **The Lost Mother** Margaret and Thomas Talcott will be considered "on the fringe" because with their mother's rejection and their father's hardships they too have lost their place in society's view of what a normal life is. What continues to fascinate me is how close to the fringe we all are, as close to the bounds of normalcy as to the fringe of chaos, disruption, aberration, and loss.

It seems at almost every turn that someone is being mean or deceitful to the Talcotts. Is it the Depression that makes some of your characters act in an uncharitable manner or is it something deeper? Would Irene have walked out on her children during prosperous times?

Once the bulwark of family protection is removed all children become vulnerable to life's cruelties. This is true in any time and place, and was especially so during the Depression years. If some people were mean to the Talcott children, there were also people who were kind and as charitable as their circumstances would allow. Also, there was not the same veneration of children then as there is today. Children were expected to know their place, which usually meant unquestioning obedience and deference to adults. In more prosperous times, Irene Talcott might have had more choices. But for a woman of her temperament there probably still would have been some form of abandonment, if not physically, then surely emotionally. And in some ways that emotional abandonment can be far more damaging because it is so insidious.

It is a poignant irony that Mrs. Farley smothers her son with love to the point where Jesse-boy can't stand it, while Margaret and Henry are desperate for their absent mother's love. Although these two examples are quite extreme, do you think it's possible to strike just the right balance, so that both parent and child are happy, or is this discordance an inevitable part of the child-parent dynamic? Do you think it's possible to love a child too much? Does Irene love her children?

By its very nature and in its healthiest aspects, the child-parent relationship entails discordance, conflict, struggle. I don't think it is ever possible to love a child too much. Oftentimes, however, the worst parenting is done in the name of love. And that can run the gamut from excessive permissiveness to abuse. Mrs. Farley's love for her son, Jesse-boy, keeps him an invalid. It is the worst kind of love, voracious and so protective that it is restricting, all-possessive, and, of necessity, controlling. What Mrs. Farley loves above all else is being needed. Irene Talcott's love for her children is almost the opposite of Mrs. Farley's, colder and more rational. Irene no longer wants to be needed. In a sense she is afraid of her children, because she fears all that motherhood can demand, loss, sacrifice, the repression of her own goals and yearnings.

Abandonment is an issue you've visited several times before; for instance, in your book Fiona Range, the character of Fiona believes she was abandoned by her young mother. As a mother yourself, could you ever imagine a circumstance where you could have walked away from your own children? Are there circumstances under which walking away could be an acceptable option? As mothers, do we ever get to put ourselves first, or is sacrificing some of our own happiness an inevitable part of the role?

I wrote this book precisely because the idea of abandoning one's children seems such an unnatural thing for a mother to do. And yet it happens more often than we realize. Emotional abandonment is the most inexplicable of all. It is one thing to walk away when there are issues of poverty, addiction, or abuse, but to stop caring is the hardest to comprehend. All parenting requires sacrifice, especially motherhood. Because love is the giving over of one's self to another, there must be sacrifice or else the love is depthless and self-serving.

The Lost Mother is your sixth novel. Do you see your work as forming an arc or progression of some kind? Do the issues you write about correspond in any way to what's currently happening in your life, or have they changed with the different stages of your life?

No, I don't see any particular pattern in my work, though I'm told others do. Because my primary interest and focus is always character, that has been the engine for every novel. Each character has his/her own story, and if specific issues are raised, examined, they are organic to the work and not the driving force.

The Great Depression was a test of the common man's force of will, with survival dependent upon circumstances, strength of character, strength of family, and oftentimes sheer luck. It also inspired some of the greatest American literature ever written. Now, through the unflinching eyes of eight-year-old Margaret and her eleven-year-old brother Thomas, bestselling novelist Mary McGarry Morris tells the story of one ordinary family's journey through this extraordinary time in her brilliant new novel, **The Lost Mother**