

EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT A READING GROUP GUIDE

Book Synopsis

Every Good and Perfect Gift is set in Canaan, North Carolina, a place that is comfortable with tradition, including the traditional image of God. On a sultry Sunday morning when ten-year-old Maggie Davidson swoons from the heat and sees God—and God is a woman—people are quick to ascribe her vision to the fantasies of an overheated girl. But when Maggie begins to demonstrate a gift of healing, people's attitudes change.

This is a story of a family of three strong women—Naomi, Maggie's grandmother; Lilah nee Lily, Maggie's mother, and Maggie—a practical young woman raised in a house of women. It is the story of how Maggie's visions and the gift of healing change the lives of those women. They become the object of curiosity, of love, and of hate. Each of the women copes with the attention in their own way. Just as each deals with the issues of faith and understanding that those visions bring.

When Alex Barrons, a Princeton theological student, comes to study Maggie for his thesis, their relationship grows into love. After her mother's illness leads Maggie to question her gift and her faith, she sends Alex away. Focusing on her family and her studies, Maggie's own journey of faith and her mother's journey to health bring Alex back into their lives.

Every Good and Perfect Gift is a knowingly detailed account of a particular part of America—and of the wide landscape of human hearts and souls.

Discussion Questions

1. Maggie receives a gift which brings all sorts of complications to her and her family. How do you think her perception of the gift changes from the beginning to the end of the book? How about Naomi and Lilah? Do their perceptions change?
2. Names are very important to the women in the book particularly Lilah, Maggie's mother. She changed her own name when she was old enough and constantly suggests names for those around her. What significance did you see in the names chosen by and for the characters?
3. Some reviewers have criticized the book for the dichotomy of strong women/weak men? Do you feel this is true? Other than Alex, what examples of good men do you see in the book? Did you see any examples of weak women in the book?

4. Did the book challenge your traditional thinking about God? How? What traditional notions about God do you think are misinformed? (examples—patriarchal, judgmental, non-audible)
5. Why do you think the author chose the time period that she did for the book and then put such a modern thought in it?
6. Is the South, with its matriarchal culture, a unique setting for this book or could this book have been set anywhere?
7. Opinion in the Canaan Free Will Church splits over whether the healings are divine or satanic. How do you think people backgrounds determined their reactions?
8. At one point, Maggie promises herself that she'll never repeat the mistakes of her mother. How does that promise affect the course of her relationship with Alex?
9. Butte Norris, mayor of Canaan, is friend or foe to the women?
10. When Mona and Rosemary enter the lives of the women, how does each of the three—Naomi, Lilah, and Maggie—react? What do you think your reaction would be to those turn of events?
11. What do you think drives Mona to tell Maggie more about herself after the incident with Tom at the fair?
12. Brother Oscar seems to be the predecessor to some modern day televangelists. How does the focus of Brother Oscar's healing intervention shift from the time we first meet him until the end of the book?
13. The threat of violence comes when the women receive the visit from the KKK then it enters the story when a drunken Tom hits Maggie at the fair. And, finally, violence brings about the death of Mona. Only after Mona dies does Maggie come to understand that violence also took India's mother from her. Is this unusual in the lives of women?
14. Jernigan begins the book with a William Blake quote, "We are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love." Why do you think this was her choice? How does this quote relate to the story, its themes, and the characters?
15. How does the theme of knowledge versus understanding move throughout the book? What about grace?

Critical Praise

Booklist—“This is a delightful and gracefully written coming-of-age tale about three strong and resilient women: Maggie, her mother and her grandmother. (Or four, if you include God.)”

Library Journal—“Filled with endearing characters of quirky innocence, tender humor, and astonishing hope, Jernigan’s debut novel creates a world so inviting that the reader is reluctant to leave. Fans of Lorna Landvik and Billie Letts will feel as if they’ve come home.”

News and Observer—“It would be easy to describe *Every Good & Perfect Gift* in sentimental terms -- heartwarming, poignant, sweet -- for it is indeed all of these. But that would shortchange this first novel by Raleigh resident Brenda Jernigan, which achieves such qualities without being cloying or emotionally self-indulgent. It is a touchingly honest, even spiritual, story marked by originality, quirky humor and finely tuned, almost ethereal prose.”

“Brenda Jernigan has perfect pitch and a wildly original mind. This novel is compelling—a real page turner!”

Lee Smith,
Author of *Fair and Tender Ladies*