



Bound South

For Discussion

1. *Bound South* is told from the first-person perspective of three different characters: Louise, Caroline, and Missy. Why do you think the author chose to give voice to multiple characters? How did hearing from each woman shape your understanding of the novel? Did you believe all three women to be reliable narrators? Why or why not? Of the twenty-two chapters in the novel, Louise narrates thirteen. Ultimately, is this her story? Discuss why or why not.
2. In chapter one, Louise tells us that her Sunday school class once discussed “how it is internalized racism that makes us scared of those who are—in fact—quite often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged” (page 14). What is internalized racism? In what ways has Louise Parker internalized racist thinking? In what ways has she resisted racist thinking? Do you think that Louise’s attitudes about race and class are particular to the South? What are Caroline’s attitudes about race and class? What are Missy’s?
3. Describe the relationship between Louise and Caroline. How does their dynamic change as Caroline grows older? Do you know of mother-daughter relationships like the one between Caroline and Louise? Do you think this type of relationship

is specific to mothers and their daughters? If so, why? What was Louise's relationship like with her own mother? What is Missy's relationship like with hers?

4. After meeting Louise, Deidre (Caroline's friend) declares that Caroline and Louise are "two of a kind" (page 200). And later (on page 267), John Henry says to his daughter, "You are so much like your mother." Do you agree with Deidre's and John Henry's assessments? Why or why not? In what ways does Caroline become more like her mother as she grows up? In what ways does she become less like her mother?
5. In the book's beginning, Caroline is a sexy, caustic teenager who runs away to San Francisco with her high school theater teacher. By the book's end, she is a more subdued, divorced Christian woman planning to teach in urban public schools. In what ways does the trajectory of Caroline's life surprise you? Why do you think Louise, who battled wills with Caroline throughout her childhood, wishes that as an adult Caroline "would say 'to Hell with duty!' and try to find her way to the spotlight again" (page 331)? Do you share Louise's wish that Caroline return to a more "selfish" self?
6. In the final chapter of the novel, Louise tells us "it saddens me that [Caroline] gave up acting, or at least pursuing some kind of art. And I regret that at each critical stage in her life it was a man who got in her way" (page 330). Do you agree with Louise that Caroline's pursuit of art has been crippled by her various romances? In what ways did Caroline's romances change her for the better, and in what ways did they hurt her? How did her romantic relationships seem to alter her personality? What character traits did she maintain throughout her varied relationships?

7. Why do you think Missy stole the clay bird from Louise's collection (page 54)? Did it surprise you that Missy stole the bird, considering her strong religious convictions?
8. After Missy's mother, Faye, discovers that Missy has stolen the bird, she tells Louise Parker, "That girl is going to get the belt" (page 66). Louise tells us that she "wanted to suggest some other form of punishment but I had to remind myself that that was not my place, that people from other cultures and classes handle things differently" (page 66). What do you think about Louise's reticence on this matter? When is it acceptable to interfere with the way someone raises his or her child? When is it not acceptable? Do you believe that there are certain child-rearing practices that are indisputably better than others? In what ways does socioeconomic class affect child-rearing practices?
9. What was your reaction to *Every Woman Has Some Jesus in Her*, the Earl LeTouche painting of Jesus in a ball gown that hangs in Louise and John Henry's home? How do your own feelings about religion factor into your reaction to this piece of folk art?
10. Tiny, Louise's best friend, is an avowed Christian, a staunch Republican, and in possession of a dominant personality; Louise is openly agnostic, a yellow-dog Democrat, and accepting of the fact that "Tiny's will has always been stronger than mine" (page 69). Yet Louise and Tiny are lifelong friends. Why do you think their relationship has remained so strong despite their significant differences in personality and worldview? What are some of the factors that allow them to remain so close? How do you think their friendship will be altered by Tiny's divorce and move to Sea Island?

11. Louise still thinks wistfully about her brief college romance with Ben Ascher. What do you think Louise's adult life would have been like had she married him? Do you think a marriage between Ben Ascher and Louise would have worked out?
12. While talking with Tiny (page 156), Louise says, "Sometimes I wish John Henry would cheat on me and then we could just get a divorce." Why do you think Louise felt such dissatisfaction in her marriage? Were you surprised that she and John Henry were still married by the novel's end? In what ways did their relationship change over the course of the novel?
13. Discuss the role of religion in the novel. Which character's religious beliefs—or lack thereof—resonate most strongly with your own? In what ways does religion unite the different characters? In what ways does religion divide them? By the novel's end, both Missy and Caroline identify themselves as Christians. Do you believe that Missy would recognize Caroline as a Christian? Would Caroline recognize Missy as one? What do you think of the way the novel treats the subject of Christianity? What do you think of the way the novel treats Judaism?
14. Were you surprised by John Henry's reaction to Charles after Charles told him that he was gay? Why or why not? Were you surprised by Louise's reaction to Charles's news? Why or why not? If you had a son who came out to you, how do you think you might respond? Would it make a difference whether it was your son or your daughter who was gay?

15. After John Henry tells the story of the intense fight he had with his brother the last time he saw him alive, Louise says, “Perhaps I should hate my husband for the story he has told me, but I don’t. I feel—I feel sad for him and sad for Wallace. . . . What has holding this in done to [John Henry’s] spirit all of these years?” (page 289). In what ways did Louise’s response to John Henry’s story surprise you? Do you think that Louise and John Henry might have had a happier earlier marriage had Wallace not killed himself? In what ways did Charles’s coming out ultimately improve John Henry and Louise’s relationship?
16. When Missy and Charles first watched *Salt of the Earth*, did you believe that Pastor Praise was really Missy’s dad? Why or why not? Why do you think Missy is so focused on finding her father, even though he has been gone for so many years? In what way is Missy’s relationship to Jesus connected to her relationship with her missing father?
17. Why do you think Charles was so interested in the Christian soap opera, *Salt of the Earth*?
18. While watching him chat with Carol, the receptionist at Luke Meadow’s church, Missy feels frustrated with Charles. “He’s acting like he really likes [Carol], but the truth is he is just amused by her. Probably, he thinks she is ‘hilarious.’ She’s just one more funny thing to entertain him. Just like Daddy’s show. Probably even just like me” (page 221). Do you agree with Missy’s evaluation of Charles? Do you believe that Charles legitimately liked Missy? Why do you think he agreed to drive her to North Carolina? Why do you think he returned to Atlanta without her once their plans didn’t go as expected? By the novel’s end, what are your feelings toward Charles?

19. In chapter sixteen, Louise writes two letters responding to Caroline's request to hear about her engagement story. Why do you think that Louise decides to send the abridged, sugared letter, instead of the more honest and difficult one? How might it have affected Caroline to be told the truth about her parents' courtship and engagement? Which letter would you have sent were you in Louise's place? Do you believe that parents have an obligation to be completely honest about their lives with their children after the children reach a certain age? Why or why not?

20. After Nanny Rose's funeral, Caroline tells the story of Nanny Rose swallowing a porcelain raspberry rather than admitting that she had mistaken it for a real one. And Louise's mother, Amelia, also of Nanny Rose's generation, advised Louise "to keep up with the little things, to say your *ma'ams* and *sirs*, to write your thank-you cards on time, so that people would feel generous toward you when the big things happen that you can't control" (page 124). In what ways do you agree with Nanny Rose and Amelia that appearances really do matter? In what ways has "keeping up appearances" limited the life choices of the characters in *Bound South*?

21. Do you think that *Bound South* has a happy ending? Why or why not?

A Conversation with Susan Rebecca White

When you sat down to write *Bound South*, did you know that you were going to have three different women narrating it, each from the first-person point of view? Do you think of one particular woman as the protagonist, or do the three women share this role? You obviously care about all of your characters, but are you especially attached to a particular one?

I did not initially plan on having all three women narrate *Bound South* from the first-person point of view. In fact, initially I opened each section of the book with a story told from third-person point of view. But my editor convinced me, rightly, that the occasional switch to the third person was jarring, and that it was important to let the women of the book narrate their stories completely.

It's interesting to think back on my process of writing this novel. The first piece I wrote was about Missy stealing Louise Parker's clay bird. I wrote that in graduate school as a stand-alone short story, but when I was finished with it I still had Missy's voice in my head, and I wanted to write more about her and find out what happened to her dad. (I tend to find out what happens to my characters through the process of writing their stories, letting my subconscious mind do all of the work.) And then one day I wrote a piece called "Louise Parker Speaks," and there was Louise, just as alive as could be, springing up from the page. And of course writing about Louise led me to writing about Caroline, because Caroline needed to have her say. And so, piece by piece, the book came together.

In my mind Louise is the major protagonist, as she is the one who is directly connected to almost all of the characters in the story. And while I love Caroline, I have to say that both Missy and Louise hold a special place in my heart. They are both just so vulnerable and yet resilient.

You were born and raised in Atlanta, where *Bound South* takes place. How did your personal relationship with Atlanta find its way into the novel? Do you consider yourself a Southern author?

I'll start with the second question: I didn't really think of myself as a Southern author until after I wrote *Bound South*, and then I realized that yes, indeed, the South has shaped me, and my understanding of the South helps my writing. Here's what I mean: When I was in college in the Northeast, and then later when I was living in San Francisco, I wrote a lot of stories, but they weren't really place-specific, unless you consider a bar in either New York or San Francisco a specific place. And then I got to graduate school and I realized that a lot of writers set their stories in urban bars. I remember thinking: *I am not going to write another story that takes place in a bar or on a date.* Not because such stories are inherently bad, but because I realized I didn't really have anything new or interesting to say on the subject, whereas other writers do. And I guess it was around that time that I also realized that while plenty of other authors could write about New York or California better than I could, I really, really knew Atlanta, or at least one slice of it, and I should try writing about it. And that led me to Missy and Louise, who I think are both products of their environment—Caroline, a little less so, perhaps, though in the end she finds she can't escape feeling real nostalgia for the South.

I wrote much of *Bound South* while living away from Atlanta, and my yearnings for home made their way into the book. For example, Caroline is always trying out recipes from *The Gift of Southern Cooking*, and of course that was the cookbook I turned to every time I felt homesick. Even Missy and RD's love affair with Chick-fil-A sandwiches was a reflection of my own cravings.

Writing about Atlanta also allowed me to explore different parts of the city whenever I returned home to visit my parents. It's quite feasible that a woman like Louise Parker would live in

Ansley Park, but I also situated her there because I really like that neighborhood, and I thought it was fun to research its architecture and history, and to walk its streets whenever I was in town.

After living away from Atlanta for more than a decade, you are now living there once again. What is it like to have returned to your hometown as an adult? Do you believe the saying “You can never go home again” to be true?

It’s complicated being back, and I have to admit there are times when I think longingly of San Francisco. Part of that is because by the time I returned to Atlanta I was fully an adult, so living in Atlanta came with all of these adult responsibilities, like owning an old house that seems to be in constant need of repair—not that to be an adult one has to own an old house, but I certainly took that route.

In this city, I feel very known, which is a mixed blessing. I can’t tell you how often I run into people who knew me when I was a little girl. It’s lovely, to an extent, but I do think nostalgically of the blank slate I had in San Francisco—how I could create whatever identity I wanted for myself because no one there knew me as a kid.

That said, I do live in a different—and decidedly more progressive—neighborhood than the one I grew up in. I’m married and involved in my community, both in girly ways (I’m in a gourmet group and a book club) and in more overtly political ways. For the most part, my adult life in Atlanta does not mirror the world that I grew up in—although I definitely spend more time here at furniture stores than I ever did in San Francisco! But in an effort to recruit more ex-pats to return home, I am always telling friends who have moved away that there are “lots of Atlantas,” and that almost everyone can find some sort of a niche here.

During your twenties you lived in San Francisco, where part of the novel takes place. How was living in San Francisco different from living in Atlanta? Had you been born and raised in San Francisco, do you think you would have written a novel like *Bound South*?

Hmm, I probably would not have written a novel like *Bound South* had I grown up in San Francisco. Hopefully I would still be a writer, but my leading lady would most likely have been cut from a different cloth than Louise. In fact, I am currently working on a novel where one of the characters is born in Atlanta but moves to San Francisco at a young age. The move changes her entirely. That said, San Francisco and Atlanta share some qualities: neither city has terrible winters, people in both places tend to be fairly friendly, and each town has amazing restaurants. And neighborhood really matters in both places—where you live says a lot about who you are, or at least people will make a lot of assumptions about you based on the neighborhood you live in.

The city of San Francisco does seem to dedicate more energy toward preserving and beautifying public spaces, whereas in Atlanta the focus is definitely on private space (read: one's home and garden).

Besides being a writer, what other jobs have you held?

I'll start with the most ridiculous. For two days I was an associate at a high-tech PR firm in Silicon Valley. I guess you have to know me to grasp the absurdity. I am about the least high-tech person on the planet: I don't get cable, I don't text, I have no idea what a BlackBerry even does. After the PR firm, I started cleaning houses. My job as a housekeeper was equally absurd, mainly because I'm allergic to dust and just about as allergic to doing housework. But my friend and I came up with a cute name, "The Mop Squad" (which I'm sure has been used by cleaning services before). We made funny posters featuring photos of us holding

feather dusters like weapons, à la Charlie's Angels, and we posted an ad on craigslist and we got quite a few gigs. But the thing is—we were rarely asked back twice! Instead people would hire us and then would never call us back.

For two years I waited tables at a Middle Eastern restaurant in San Francisco. I loved that job, mostly because the staff was so nice, and the woman who ran the place, Ellen Sinaiko, is smart and funny and, in general, just a joy to be around. Also, I've taught junior high and high school English. I really love teaching.

Is there a character from *Bound South* to whom you most relate? Is *Bound South* in any way autobiographical?

Bound South is not autobiographical, but it is based on my understanding of the people of Atlanta. It's funny—I tried to write an autobiographical story and found that I wasn't very good at it. I took myself—or perhaps I should say my viewpoint—too seriously. So I started writing about people different from me, first Missy and then Louise. Which isn't to say that I don't take either of them seriously, just that I'm able to see their foibles, and I'm able to see how their specific backgrounds influence who they are and what choices they make, and how each character knows truths about life that come into direct conflict with the other's truth. (For example, Missy knows that she *cannot* have an abortion, while Louise knows that Missy's life will be infinitely more difficult because she doesn't have an abortion. Both women are correct but neither was really able to see the other's point of view.)

In terms of relating to any specific character, to be honest, I relate to them all. While we have somewhat different worldviews, like Louise I try to be honest about acknowledging uncomfortable and painful truths about myself. And I really like living in a pretty environment, as does Louise. I'm a big cook,

like Caroline, and I've always been drawn to religion, though I've never bought a cross to wear around my neck. And like Missy, I've had my heart broken (although not by my father), and I understand how we can create gods and ghosts out of those people who break our hearts, the way that Missy did with her daddy, Luke Meadows.

Art plays such a pivotal role in *Bound South*. What role does art play in your own life? Do you personally know, or collect the art of, anyone like Mr. Earl LeTroupe?

I have a distinct aesthetic sensibility—can't say if it's good or not—and I usually have an immediate response when I see a piece of art for the first time. Either I am instantly drawn in—as Louise was drawn to Earl's egg tempera pieces—or I am left cold.

I have a very odd photo that I just adore. I bought it for my husband's birthday, and he was nice enough to let me pretend that it was a gift for him and not really for me. The photo is huge—at least three feet long—and in it an old beat-up sofa is on fire. The fire is just raging. And in front of this burning sofa is a stuffed (but very real-looking) fox, whose hair is being blown by the gusts from the fire. When I first saw the fox I thought it was alive, but then I realized that all of the animals in this artist's work are taxidermied. (The artist's name is Jody Fausett.) Anyway, I looked at that photo and I just loved the statement of the fire, the intensity of it, the lack of ambiguity, the clearing away. And so I bought it and hung it in my dining room, justifying the central placement by saying that it's a conversation piece.

My friend Susan Bridges runs an art gallery (named whitespace) out of the carriage house behind her home. Through

her I have met some eccentric Southern artists, though none quite like Mr. LeTrouve.

Bound South does not shy away from either serious or controversial topics, including transgenderism, teen pregnancy, suicide, the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, sexual harassment, and even a mother's own violent thoughts toward her daughter. Yet the book is laced with humor. How did you manage to write about such weighty topics and still write a funny book?

When I was growing up my father often said something to the effect “very few things in life constitute an emergency,” and I suppose that attitude got somewhat ingrained in me. (Although if you ever sit next to me on a plane you will experience a not-so-Zen girl. I am a panicky freak on planes.) Also, I'm not writing about war or genocide or imprisonment (though there have been funny books written about war). Anyway, while some experiences are inextricably difficult and sad, how we deal with them is often laced with humor. I am reminded of the time that my grandmother, who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, started to sit and then froze halfway down because she couldn't remember whether or not she was in the middle of standing up or sitting down. It was a horribly sad moment, and a harbinger of many more terrible moments to come, yet she and my mother started laughing hysterically because it was all so ridiculous and darkly comic. And it seems to me that that is how life is. There are ridiculous moments even in the middle of big and serious events.

Caroline, Missy, and—to a lesser extent—Louise all struggle with their religious beliefs. Does this reflect a struggle in

your life with religion? Do you consider yourself a religious person?

I have a genuine desire for religious experience in my life, and I am quite envious of those who have it. And though I'm not always comfortable calling myself a Christian, I do—most of the time—believe in God and I do practice elements of the faith. And yet, I am fundamentally put off by any religion that claims its followers have backstage passes to the God show, as it seems most major religions do.

The times I feel most spiritually connected are during times of service (volunteering at the homeless shelter), times of meditation, and times spent in nature. I wish I had a more solid religious core, and yet I often feel that people who are very religious erect a certain boundary around themselves that no one can enter except those of their own faith. And that seems a shame.

Will you share with us the titles of some of your all-time favorite books and explain why you love those particular ones? Are there any books you've read lately that you are itching to recommend?

Oh yes! I just read *The World to Come* by Dara Horn and I absolutely loved it. The prose is gorgeous and smart, and the book is such a page-turner! I have also just recently discovered the novels of Gail Godwin, who started writing books around the time I was born and is still going at it. I admire her so much. To me she is an artist who has fully embraced her craft, someone who has stretched herself to her potential. I will forever love *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole, as it makes me laugh out loud every time I read it. And I love *The Assistant* by Bernard Malamud, in part because my husband bought it for me when we were first falling in love, but also because there is nothing clever or cynical about

it, it's just about human love and human failings. And, man, do I love Flannery O' Connor's short stories, though I think you really do need to understand her views on faith in order to understand them. *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons is important to me because Ellen's moment of becoming fully human, when she realizes Starletta is as intrinsically valuable as she, made me stop reading, put the book down, and just let her epiphany wash over me like a baptism. And speaking of baptisms, there is a strange sort of cookbook, *The Supper of the Lamb*, by Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon that is truly odd and truly life-affirming.

You earned your MFA in creative writing from Hollins University. There is a lot of discussion among writers about the value and merit of these programs. Are you glad that you attended one? Do you think your time at Hollins helped you to become a better writer?

Absolutely. There is nothing like having two years during which your only real responsibility is to write. The danger with MFA programs, I think, is that you can start writing for your little bitty circle of readers and forget that there is a larger audience out there who might not have the same preferences as the small sample of people in your writing workshop. But all that means is that you learn to take criticism with a grain of salt, which isn't a bad skill to develop if you want to be a professional writer.

Will you tell us anything about what you are working on now?

I am writing a story about a modern-day patched-together family who, through tragic circumstances, gets ripped apart. It is a comedy. (Just kidding! But it does have its funny moments.)

Enhance Your Book Club

1. *Bound South* highlights the friendship between Tiny and Louise, which has been in place since childhood. Bring in a picture of a childhood friend, or even have that friend join your book club and share memories of growing up.
2. Louise has a deep appreciation for art, especially art created by Southern eccentrics. Do a Google image search for art created by Southerners, particularly those who are untrained. You might want to start by looking at images of art created by Howard Finster, Thornton Dial, and Nellie Mae Rowe. Print out images of some of this art and bring it with you to your book club.
3. If you are hosting the club, consider serving (or asking others to bring) traditional Southern foods to your meeting. Some ideas for foods to serve are: cheese straws, ham biscuits, spiced pecans, celery sticks stuffed with pimiento cheese, and preacher cookies. Check out Scott Peacock's *The Gift of Southern Cooking* for recipes. Or you can just order a case of MoonPies off the Internet and serve those! (You can order them from Southernconnoisseur.com.)