

Swan | Reading Group Guide

1. The first two chapters introduce J. J. and Ginger in settings where they seem fulfilled and at peace. What does J. J.'s cabin have in common with the farmhouse Ginger rents in Italy? Is there any similarity between Ginger's relationship with Marco and J. J.'s experience with Julianne, the teacher from Osceola? How does Julianne measure up to Georgia Larkin?
2. Discuss the narrator's voice in *Swan*. What traits do you recognize from Frances Mayes's nonfiction and poetry? How did her accomplished writer's eye serve her in creating a novel?
3. Compare her depiction of small-town Georgia to that of Tuscany. Are there any similarities between the Mason's family house and Bramasole?
4. Frances told her editor that *Swan* is "a book of memory, how it cuts and comes again, and of a powerful landscape, which is always at work shaping the people who live on its surface." What are some of the ways in which memory and landscape define the inhabitants of Swan? Were Swan's "old days" good ones?
5. Holt's relationship with Lucy is considered just as taboo as Catherine's extramarital affair. As time passes, how is this legacy of racism handled in the town of Swan? In what ways do Tessie and Scott reflect their generations?
6. Frances Mayes is renowned for her description of Tuscany's cuisine. What are some of the most tempting Southern dishes presented in the novel?
7. From Big Jim to Ginger, the novel portrays a variety of traditional and highly non-traditional men and women. Discuss how *Swan*'s characters compare to the men and women in your life. Do you think that Southern gender roles are different from those found elsewhere in America?
8. Occurring early in the novel, Ginger's passionate scene with Marco is immediately followed by gruesome events in Magnolia Cemetery. How are attitudes toward sex and death entwined in the town of Swan?
9. Why do Ginger and J. J. have such opposing reactions to their father? How did your impression of Wills change when you learned of his connection to Dachau?
10. Do you suppose that Catherine would have rebuffed Austin's marriage proposal if she had been born twenty years later? Is her situation reflected in Ginger's first marriage? How does Catherine's affair compare with her children's romances?
11. Who were your primary suspects in Catherine's murder? How would you have reacted in Sonny's place?