

A Reader's Guide



Featherstone

by Kirsty Gunn

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About Featherstone

Kirsty Gunn's first novel, *Rain*, was praised by the *New York Times* as "exquisitely written . . . Every page expresses familiar feelings in ways that are un sentimental and entirely original"; the same resonant magnetism and emotional depth infuse *Featherstone*, the story of the mysterious disappearance of a young woman from a quintessential small town and her influence on the lives of those left behind.

When Sonny Johanssen looks up from his flower bed, he is sure that he has just seen the impossible. And yet he feels her: his niece, Francie, has come home. He's not the only one who senses her presence. Across town, Ray Weldon, Francie's long-suffering high school sweetheart, is anxiously scouring their old haunts, convinced that she has finally returned. But has she really come home, or is her presence some kind of resurrection in the minds of those who love her?

It soon becomes clear that *Featherstone* is not a traditional tale of small-town life but that the enigmatic Francie is a catalyst for a different, deeper story. Her homecoming disturbs the inhabitants of this community, unraveling a sense of security and stability and turning people's hopes and dreams inward — with dangerous but ultimately regenerative consequences.

A New York Times Notable Book

"Kirsty Gunn's *Featherstone* is a parable of home and away, darkness and light . . . A town, a world, a myth about ordinary lives, unfolds in the sensual hours between presence and absence. *Featherstone* sparkles like a shard of glass and cuts as deeply." — Jayne Anne Phillips

"Entrancing. . . the wonderful thing about this novel is watching how Gunn takes all these

places and people and, through a series of extraordinarily written and juxtaposed scenes, gives all of Featherstone a sense of being beautifully distinctive, eerily alive." — Peter Cameron, *New York Times Book Review*

About Kirsty Gunn

Kirsty Gunn was born in New Zealand and has lived in Scotland and England. She is the author of several internationally acclaimed works of fiction, including *The Keepsake* and the story collection *This Place You Return to Is Home*. Her first novel, *Rain*, was made into a feature film that was an official selection at the Sundance and Cannes film festivals. Her books have been published in nine languages. She lives in London.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Featherstone* for every reader.

1. At the novel's beginning, Kirsty Gunn describes the town of Featherstone: "The south you know already as the place you've come from, come so far only to be here, in this small town named for a feather and a stone. The feather drifts on the air, and the stone is a tiny thing you would remove from your shoe, throw down the street to hear the sound of it touch the earth." How does this description fit the town? How could Featherstone be any town, anywhere? Why or why not? Who is Gunn addressing as "you" in this passage?
2. From the very first scene when Sonny is gardening in the late-afternoon sun, the novel is suffused with descriptions of light and dark. How does Gunn use darkness and light, daytime and nighttime, as motifs? What meaning might be behind her choices? How does this set the mood? What does it tell us about the characters?
3. Over the course of one weekend, years after Francie Johanssen fled the town, rumors of her return stir memories that threaten to disrupt the community. How does Francie's absence continue to shape the subconscious longings, hopes, and dreams of those she left behind?
4. Several events spark the belief that Francie is back in town. Early on, Mary Susan says that she sees a mysterious woman. Do you think the mysterious woman was indeed Francie? Is it possible that she has returned? How does Mary Susan's "sighting" contrast with the more wraith-like presence that Sonny and Ray encounter? Why do you suppose these characters have such different experiences?
5. There is great tension between Margaret and Mary Susan, and their relationship evolves dramatically in the course of the book. Margaret seems to change from menacing to comforting. What is the source of their conflict? What do you make of their relationship at the end? What do you think of the notion that good can come out of something terrible? In what ways does this idea play out in the lives of these characters?

- 6.** The idea of a public persona versus the private persona is seen throughout *Featherstone*. Margaret, for example, acknowledges two conflicting facets of herself: "[she] could feel this knowledge deep in her, this secret about herself, and how much she loved the secret too. It was like a trick she'd pulled off, a sleight of hand, that she'd been able to make herself completely the woman who would stand and patiently serve when all the time her life was quite removed from that of any other woman." How do people perceive Margaret? Is her "secret self" really hidden from those who know her? How do her two personas differ? Do any of the other characters have their own secret selves?
- 7.** What role does faith play in *Featherstone*? Sonny and Ray both harbor hope that their beloved Francie will return. Reverend Harland's relationship to faith is a complicated one. How does faith influence the decisions these men make in their lives? How has their faith been tested and/or reinforced?
- 8.** Intuition is another strong force in this book. Sonny, in particular, relies on his intuition. He tells Ray's mother, "Something bad. I can feel it. Keep him with you Elsa." What are some other moments when characters rely on their intuition? How often does intuition prove correct?
- 9.** The past has a tremendous pull on Ray. What is the first sign that he may not be living wholly in the present? How does Sonny influence Ray's mental state? Do you believe Ray's actions are inevitable?
- 10.** What do you think of the idea that "you can only come back to a place by first leaving it"? Do you believe you can only truly appreciate something by distancing yourself from it? Is it important to return to a place, or is it better to have never left at all?
- 11.** Love plays a powerful role in this book. It soothes, inspires, motivates, and teaches. What do you think of Reverend Harland's statement "It's what we learn on this earth from mortal love, to leave it, to let it go"? How does this idea fit into the lives of the characters?
- 12.** Gunn has described this novel as "a book about redemption and love and all the things that save us." Would you agree with her synopsis — is the novel ultimately redemptive? In what ways do the events of the weekend save each character?

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *Featherstone*.

[In the Forest](#) by [Edna O'Brien](#)

[Labrador](#) by [Kathryn Davis](#)

[The Woman Who Knew Gandhi](#) by [Keith Heller](#)

[Mr. Wroe's Virgins](#) by [Jane Rogers](#)