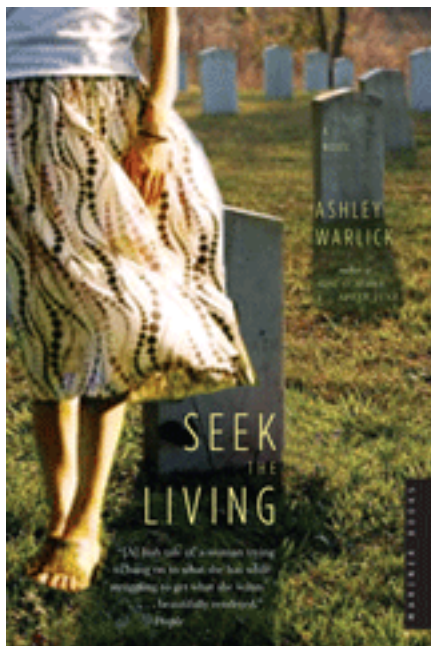


A Reader's Guide



Seek the Living

by Ashley Warlick

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"[A] gemlike novel about a Southern family . . . Original and surprising on page after page, it is a gift of language from an extraordinary writer." — *Raleigh News & Observer*

About the Book

Set in the new South, *Seek the Living* is a beautiful novel about the allegiances within families — the ones we are born into and the ones we choose. Archivist Joan Patee seems to have it all without quite having anything: her marriage is passionate, but childless; she is surrounded by family, but she hasn't connected with her brother or her father since her mother's death. Behind her calm demeanor, she is rife with doubt. And now a secret from her past is threatening to erupt, disturbing her serene life and harming the people dearest to her.

"Warlick's new novel . . . once more puts her in the first rank of American novelists . . . Her prose is silken, and barbed, and clean." — Pat Conroy, author of *The Prince of Tides*

"[A] lush tale of a woman trying to hang on to what she has while struggling to get what she wants . . . Beautifully rendered." — *People*

About the Author

Ashley Warlick's previous novels are the reading group favorites *The Summer After June* and *The Distance from the Heart of Things*, for which she was the youngest recipient of a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. In 2006, she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. A graduate of Dickinson College, Warlick teaches creative writing at Queens University of Charlotte. She lives in Greenville, South Carolina, with her family.

Questions for Discussion

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

- 1.** *Seek the Living* beautifully captures the charm and serenity of life in the South, but it also touches on controversial aspects of this life. How is Ashley Warlick's background important to her understanding of the way of life in the South? What aspects of the novel strike you as distinctly Southern?
- 2.** Ashley Warlick's writing is very intimate; her candid style allows us to delve deep into Joan's memories and thoughts, which are by Joan's own admission sometimes unreliable. For instance, upon first meeting Denny's girlfriend, Hedy, Joan says: "Later I'll have trouble reconciling what is really her and what I have made up." In your opinion, does this make Joan less believable as a narrator, or does the demonstrated self-awareness add to her credibility?
- 3.** The allegiances of familial love and of romantic, marital love are very important in this novel. How are the two loves different? Which love merits a stronger bond?
- 4.** In her teenage years, Joan complained that her parents were not respectful of her privacy. Discuss the idea of privacy as it comes up in the novel. Consider intrafamilial and personal privacy. How does Joan's belief that there should be privacy in a marriage inform her relationship with Marshall?
- 5.** *Seek the Living* is largely about expectancy — the sway and cost of waiting for the best or worst of things to happen — and the way it shapes our lives. Discuss the characters' responses to unmet expectations, their unwillingness to effect change, their tendency to wait for it instead. Which characters in the novel are the most proactive and why? How do others become more willing to act as the novel goes on?
- 6.** At one point Joan confesses that if her mother had lived, she "would have done a better job caretaking" than Joan. What does Joan mean by "caretaking"? In Joan's eyes, can a man be a caretaker? Could, or does, her father succeed in that role? How much of Joan's insecurity about her inability to conceive has to do with the feelings of inadequacy in her role as a woman, as a caretaker?
- 7.** Joan believes she would be different if Bannon, her childhood friend, were still alive: "I would have made different bargains with myself." Which bargains is she talking about? How is her way of bargaining different from Lewis's or her father's? Which bargains are acceptable to you and why. Which are not?
- 8.** "In the end, what you lose to a place might be as strong a tie as any," muses Joan. How does loss shape the lives of the characters in *Seek the Living*? When are their actions dictated by what they have (or hope to have), and when is their behavior shaped by the memories of what they used to have?

- 9.** The theme of unearthing the past is omnipresent in *Seek the Living*. Each character uses a different coping strategy in dealing (or not dealing) with what has been buried and what has been discovered. How is Denny's method of coping with the past different from Joan's? How does their father's attitude toward the past inform their own? In what way, if any, are these attitudes dictated by their gender?
- 10.** Although Joan and Gail live across the street from each other, they prefer not to be friends. What are their reasons for this decision? Who are Joan's friends? How do you explain her choice of a solitary life in light of her own admission that "we all have stupid, reckless thoughts when we are left alone"?
- 11.** Discuss the idea of home in the novel. What does home mean to Denny, to Joan, to Marshall, to Gail, to Mary Soomes?
- 12.** Because of her enormous sense of duty and responsibility, Joan feels guilt easily. She even says, at one point, that she feels she has somehow failed Denny, not the other way around. Are her feelings justified? How are her feelings of guilt expressed in other relationships?
- 13.** The morning after Lewis's New Year's party, Joan finds Bannon's recipe for onion soup and starts cooking. What do the novel's descriptions of meal preparations reveal about the characters? How are these scenes telling in terms of the characters' emotional states? Do you feel that you could try cooking some of the dishes described in the novel?
- 14.** In the beginning, Joan considers herself to be shrewder than her brother's girlfriend, Hedy — more adept at handling men, Denny especially. How does this self-assurance play out in the end? Who is better at "handling" him, Hedy or Joan? Does this speak to Joan's ability to influence men, or more generally to a sister's role in her brother's life?
- 15.** In an interview, Ashley Warlick said of Joan's relationship with Marshall: "Everything I threw between them, they climbed over." How is this statement true? How is it false? What in their marriage remains unresolved at the end of the novel? In your opinion, will their marriage survive?
- 16.** Sean Scapellato, of the *Charleston Post and Courier*, observed that, in Joan Patee, "Warlick has created her wisest heroine yet . . . precise, poetic, and layered with thought. Heroines of such ilk and depth don't appear often in literature." What other literary heroines does Joan remind you of? In what ways could Joan serve as an inspiration to you?

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *Seek the Living*:

[The Distance from the Heart of Things](#) by [Ashley Warlick](#)

[The Summer After June](#) by [Ashley Warlick](#)

[Drives Like a Dream](#) by [Porter Shreve](#)

[Almost](#) by [Elizabeth Benedict](#)

[Decorations in a Ruined Cemetery](#) by [John Gregory Dunne](#)