

Reading Guide for *IN HOVERING FLIGHT* by Joyce Hinnefeld

About the Book

In Hovering Flight is the story of the struggles and triumphs of bird artist and activist Addie Sturmer Kavanagh, ornithologist and musician Tom Kavanagh, and their daughter, poet Scarlet Kavanagh, at the waning of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. It is a novel about mothers, daughters, and art; about illness, death, and burial; about fragile eco-systems and tenacious human relationships—all explored through characters who are inspired by the lives, and particularly the songs, of birds. The Cuvier's Kinglet—either a long-extinct or, possibly, a mythical species—alights, teasingly, throughout the novel, a fitting emblem of these characters' elusive desires – Joyce Hinnefeld

Brimming with stories and voices as distinctive and compelling as morning bird songs outside a bedroom window, *In Hovering Flight* opens with a death and closes with a burial and its aftermath, including new birth. Having survived one bout with cancer only to have a recurrence years later with a much grimmer prognosis, Addie Kavanagh, age 57, decides to refuse conventional treatment and to live her final months as fully as she can, with all her faculties. She spends her final weeks at the house of her longtime, close friend, Cora. Lou, the third woman in their circle, has joined them there. While Tom and Scarlet struggle to follow Addie's wishes for a natural, illegal burial, the stories of their lives unfold on Cora's screened-in porch in lyrical, lucid prose. Scarlet, herself eight weeks pregnant, seeks to make sense of her mother's life and death and to come to terms with her parents' histories, including her mother's notoriety both as bird artist and environmental activist—some would say, extremist.

Tom and Addie Sturmer Kavanagh met and fell in love in 1968. She was a student in his class on the Biology of Birds at Burnham College, located in rural, idyllic Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She was a farm girl ostensibly preparing for life as an English teacher. To the bewilderment of her roommates Cora and Lou, Addie has just returned a changed person from her junior year abroad in England, where she discovered her passion for birds and her unexpected skills as an artist. Tom is a campus celebrity—handsome, an Irish musician 12 years her senior, who sometimes brings his fiddle to class and into the woods on their daily, dawn field trips. Surviving the consequent small college scandal, they marry soon after Addie's graduation and set up housekeeping in an abandoned fishing cottage that Tom has bought and restored for them. It is mostly here that their married life plays out, as they work side by side, publishing early on what becomes an "environmentalist and antiwar classic, *A Prosody of Birds*—an odd blend of delicate artist's plates and dense poetic scansions of birdsongs." Two other places that figure prominently in the narrative are Cora's warm and loving home in Cider Cove, New Jersey, and Lou's more turbulent and lavish townhouse in Washington, D.C.

After Scarlet's birth in 1968, Addie becomes increasingly angry at what she sees happening everywhere to the environment, including an encroaching luxury-home development near Burnham. She becomes a consummate activist, away from

home for long periods, joining up with groups that are accused of eco-arson, hiding out in Lou's garage apartment in Georgetown. Addie's obsessions take their toll both on the marriage and on Scarlet, who spends more and more time in New Jersey with Cora and her sons, Bobby and Richard, finally leaving home to live there and graduate high school in Cider Cove. Through it all, Tom loves Addie with remarkable constancy as he grieves the loss of the shared passion of their first years of marriage. Scarlet herself goes off to school and ends up living in New York City, after publishing a volume of award-winning poetry. She makes her living free lancing, locked for several years in a dead-end affair with her married editor, residing in an apartment owned by wealthy devotees of her parents' work. All this changes with the events of September 2001, when Bobby re-enters her life and her mother's cancer returns.

As with her activism, Addie's art approaches obsession over the years. She turns to stuffing birds that have been brought to her dead, presumably from environmental causes, including crashes into the two- and three-story windows of the surrounding, ubiquitous McMansions. As she recovers from her first cancer, she uses these as models to create mixed media "Assemblages." One of these, inspired by the work of Kaethe Kollwitz, features a crucifix of seagulls. It draws the wrath of a conservative senator who goes after the NEA in a Mapplethorpe/Serrano-like incident. Ironically, and with Lou's continuing help as a prominent collector of art, this causes Addie's career to take off. Then the cancer returns, and Addie drops out of public sight. But at the same time, she and Tom face their last major public battle with Burt Schafer, the now highly successful developer that Addie had tangled with early on over Burnham Estates. He is trying to buy up the several hundred pristine acres surrounding Burnham College for residential and commercial development.

Listening, writing, reading Addie's field notebooks, tracking these and other stories of complicated interrelationships, Scarlet hovers in her own personal flight, uncovering secrets, filling in blanks, making connections that—with the help of the Cuvier's Kinglet—guide her home to the recognition that Addie's ultimate legacy is one of Hope.

Early readers of this novel have observed its affinities with the work of Barbara Kingsolver, Virginia Woolf, Carol Shields, and comparable others. To those we would add two more: Alice Walker's early masterpiece *Meridian*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The first, about a civil rights worker who sends her own child away in the name of The Movement, explores what Alice Walker describes as "the unsaintlike behavior of saints." And *Sula* arose out of Morrison's desire to write about the kinds of deep, lifelong friendships among women that she observed between her mother and her circle of friends, especially in response to the cultural stereotypes of women as competitors. Alongside married and parental love, it is these territories that Hinnefeld also penetrates with compassion and keen insight in this deeply felt and complex debut novel.

About the Author

Born in 1961, Joyce Hinnefeld grew up in a small town in southern Indiana. Her father was a high school biology teacher who loved birds, but it was her oldest brother who could instantly recognize a bird by its song, something she has always wished for herself, as does Addie Kavanagh. She graduated from Hanover College in Hanover, Indiana, the model for Burnham College in the novel. She took the MA from Northwestern University and the Ph.D. from SUNY-Albany in 1995, after living in New York City for several years, like Addie's daughter, Scarlet. Since 2002, she has lived in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with her husband and daughter, where she is an Associate Professor of English at Moravian College. Her short story collection *Tell Me Everything* (University Press of New England, 1998) won the 1997 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize in Fiction. *In Hovering Flight* is Hinnefeld's debut novel.

Interview with the Author

Did you come from a family of birders?

My dad was a high school biology teacher who grew up loving birds, and so did I. He didn't think of birding as a hobby, but just as part of what it meant to be a farm kid. It was my oldest brother who had the ability to recognize just about any bird from its song, which I have always been envious of and only came to appreciate as an adult. When I began to shape these characters, I had a place to put it.

So you grew up in the country?

We spent a fair amount of time at my grandparents' farms, but we lived in a small town. That was a long time ago! And it was a different world. I think I never felt quite at home there. Even as a young person I didn't feel like I had landed on the same page, politically, as a lot of the people I knew. And that only intensified after I went to college. But now that I am older, I don't feel so much like an outsider when we go back to visit.

Was Hanover College the model in any way for Burnham College in *In Hovering Flight*?

Yes, in some ways. Hanover is on the Ohio River, and I moved it out here, to another river, and Bucks County, PA. But the setting is fictional. As I was gearing up to write this novel I drove around that area and finally sat down at a picnic table right near the Delaware River canal and just drew a map and made it all up, using some of the place names from around there, but moving them and changing things around a little bit. So I had a real clear picture in my head, but it is a mix of lower Northampton and northern Bucks Counties.

Addie is such an angry person, arguably a real pain in the neck, and she definitely put her environmental activism ahead of her family much if not most of the time. What were you trying to do with her, as a character?

I wanted to be fairly explicit about how complicated motherhood is, particularly for women who are “driven,” so to speak, who want to be able to think and ponder things, and work hard, at the same time as they want to be devoted to their children. I have some of those feelings myself. But she is also a mystery to me. She’s probably inspired in some ways by women I knew who are older than me. There were some things about them that I could understand, but not all of it. I am 13 years younger than my oldest brother, who was draft age at the time of the Vietnam War, as was my 2nd oldest brother. And I think I was always looking in on the lives of their wives and girl friends, fascinated by all of it, the music, the protests, the rage, even, and I was channeling a lot of that into Addie. Although there is a little bit of that in me, I don’t think I could ever be as fully engaged with my work as Addie is [at the expense of family], or as committed an activist as she is. I am a little afraid of being so visible, so publicly angry as Addie. I admire and value that, but at the same time I want people to like me! (laughs) So—she’s sort of who I wish I were, but at the same time I tried be realistic about what life would be like for someone so passionate, so dogmatic. That it would be difficult to be with her.

Did you have any models for Scarlet?

My daughter is still very young of course, and I did model Scarlet as a baby and toddler after her. But Scarlet is sort of me, actually. Originally, Scarlet’s sections were written in the first person, and I struggled with her voice, which I think was my own voice, trying to sound like a woman 10 years younger than me, and it just didn’t work. She was sarcastic, with that snide “younger-woman-who-doesn’t-get-her-mother” tone of voice and in things she would say. I hope there is still some of that in there, because that is certainly an element of her character, but I really didn’t like it. So my editor finally suggested that we move into a more semi-omniscient, third person narration for the novel.

That’s interesting, because I was going to ask you who you see as the narrator, or the voice of this novel.

That’s a very tough question now, because of the change in the narration. If I had to say whose story is it primarily, whose consciousness controls the story, it is Scarlet. But it’s now narrated in such a way that there is a knowledge of what Tom and Addie and Cora and Lou are feeling that Scarlet cannot know, so it’s not just her story, and she’s not the narrator. Actually, I originally envisioned this novel as a faux memoir written by Scarlet, as described in the first part of the novel, but I like it better now. The other characters are allowed more of their due this way, and they are very important.

Were you aware of where you were going in terms of ending this book as it went along, or did it just find its way there? It is, after all, a novel which begins at the ending, so to speak, with Addie’s death and the information that she had left instructions that were going to involve an illegal burial.

Not initially. Here I need to acknowledge my friend Mark Harris, who has written a book, *Grave Matters*, about natural burial. It was from reading his manuscript that I realized that, of course, Addie would want to have a natural burial, so that gave the book its driving shape—are they really going to do this or not? Are they going to honor this wish or not, and that’s what you’ll read, ultimately, to find out, although other things become as important, or more important, than that. But truthfully can’t remember where I was in the process when I discovered that. And even as I got the idea I didn’t know what I would have Tom and Scarlet do, whether it would be too outlandish a way to end the story. But eventually it became apparent to me that yes, they were going to do it, and that it would be Scarlet who would insist upon it.

There are so many things that this novel is “about,” but it is certainly a novel about family, in particular a “family of choice,” as I like to call it, a family of friends. Did you consciously set out to explore the question of friendship among women?

I never thought about that, per se, but to a certain degree I have done that. I think it was instinctive. Like a lot of people, I have moved a long way from home, and although my daughter goes to see her grandparents, we don’t live near them. And I do have two close friends from college, like Addie, but Cora and Lou are not based upon them. The seed of the idea for the novel, as I remember it, was a young woman who shows up at the home of an older woman who is not her mother, needing to talk to her, and that’s the very first thing I tried to write. They became Scarlet and Cora. The ornithology, the activism, that all shaped up later in response to a class about the Biology of Birds I audited here at Moravian. I would listen to the lectures and take notes and then my mind would start to wander and I’d make notes for my novel as this wonderful, chatty ornithologist spoke. Some of those debates about evolutionary theory he would describe would start to resonate with me, for instance. But the only thing I consciously set out to do was to put those two characters into the context of a novel that would do something with bird song. The rest just emerged from that. So it wasn’t a conscious choice to explore mother daughter relationships, to explore friendships between women. Those were just natural things that emerged from my own life as I was writing the novel.

I did, however, want to have a sexual betrayal that didn’t lead to the dissolution of the friendship or the marriage. That felt very important to me. It made the characters deeper and more complicated and therefore richer. And showed that the friendships, the bonds, were much stronger than what was a momentary, trivial act that both characters regretted deeply. And that the love between Tom and Addie was stronger than that.

So how did you develop the character of Tom? He’s very solicitous of Addie and her work, and is upset that people refer to *The Prosody of Birds* as his book, when it is, in every sense, *their* book.

He is very vivid and real to me and in some ways my favorite character. From the beginning, I really saw Tom as a man who thought of Addie as his peer. And that was very important to me. I didn’t want their relationship to be reduced to a teacher seducing

his student, or a big power differential having to do with their age difference. I wanted it to be a marriage of true minds, for there to be a really deep bond between them and for him to know that, and want to say that, to Scarlet, to the world.

What exactly is Tom talking about towards the end of the novel when he turns to Lou in the Burnham College president's office after learning of her gift to the school, and says, "You win"?

I think at that point this is a question of who, exactly, among this family circle gets to claim having really understood Addie, and done what she would have wanted. Because they all revere Addie, with the possible exception of Cora who seems to have just an equal, loving relationship with Addie. They're puzzled by her, she drives them crazy, but they all revere her and maybe Lou most of all, because Addie is everything she is not, and everything on some level that she thinks she should have been. As is so often the case between friends, she is given total permission by Addie, maybe more so than by anybody else, which is so interesting. Scarlet says she'll never understand it—how could her mother tolerate a friend like this? Even admire a friend like this—so frivolous, so extravagant. But Addie always says "Never underestimate Lou." She is her great defender, even from youth. So when Tom says "You win," I think he is recognizing that they both just wanted to do what Addie wanted, and here he is, having buried Addie illegally at Scarlet's insistence, ready to face the consequences of even losing his job over it, and Lou has beat him to it. She's the one who gets to do The Great Thing. I sort of like that Lou gets the last word there, because she's not someone you'd expect to see things so clearly.

What if anything were you trying to say by having it be Lou's money and corresponding influence, over and over again, that saves Addie's bacon, that even makes her career, so to speak?

I didn't mean to be cynical about it. I think what I was expressing was the hope that all people with money would get on the right side of things. But also I was trying to show how strangely ludicrous it is that the way an artist becomes well known is to cross a conservative senator, that this is the kind of world we live in now.

Do you relate to Addie's musings at the end about whether or not anything she has done really rises to the level of Art? Her uncertainty about whether or not her work has ever, really, been "evocative of her emotions"?

Absolutely. Because as soon as you write something you start to recognize things that don't do exactly what you want them to do. I always think of something Faulkner said in his Paris Review Interview to the effect that this is a good thing, that if you ever accomplished what you set out to accomplish, you'd have to stop. This is the thing that keeps you going as a writer, as an artist, and things always fall short.

I think it is really interesting that Addie names her daughter Scarlet, after the Scarlet Tanager, the one bird she could never get quite right.

Yes, I like that detail, too. In the case of this novel, that's the thing that's always there—how hard it is to really know someone, that that is why we come together, because we want to try, but even with a mother and daughter, there are always things that will be mysterious about your daughter, there will always be things that are mysterious about your mother.

There is also a debate in the novel about which art form—visual, written, or song—is superior. Do you have an opinion about that yourself?

I sometimes think that why I am drawn to birdsong is that, to me, music captures, does something with emotion, creates emotion probably more potently than anything else. I think that some people would say that words strive for it, but can't quite do it. And then Scarlet would argue that words have a precision that music doesn't. I think where visual art is concerned that what I am most interested in is the debate between representational art and conceptual, or political art, art which makes a statement. And there's a bit of that in this novel, especially between Lou's interests in more abstract art versus the kind of work Addie is doing. And I'm interested in that—if you are making art, what is it that is motivating you? Is it a private vision, is it your sense that if you make something really powerful you might influence someone? I think about those things as a writer, too, but I think that the struggle is really available, it's really there, it's very apparent for a visual artist. I wouldn't even venture, though, into the territory of which art form is superior, beyond saying what I said about music and emotion.

But what about words as heard language, as a kind or form or song? Do you write for the ear?

Sometimes I do, and of course I wanted Scarlet to be a poet, so that these conversations could take place in the novel, and I invented lines for her from her poetry, though no complete poems. And there is irony, too, in that list of smells Addie writes down when she doesn't think she has been a true artist, because that list is really a poem, a passage of pure lyricism. And as for Tom's love of music and poetry, I think of that as just being So Irish. (laughs)

I was interested in the Faulkner allusions in this novel. There is Addie's name, of course, but that scene at the end when Tom and Dustin are struggling to maneuver the coffin on that hand cart up the hill to the burial site is like the journey in *As I Lay Dying* in miniature.

So you got that! Nobody else has, except for my mentor at SUNY – Albany, Gene Garber, who asked me if I was sure I wanted to put all that Faulkner stuff in there, since I am by no means a Faulknerian writer (laughs). But I am so glad you asked, because I had so much fun with that! There is Addie's name, the coffin being built outside her window, and the struggle to get the coffin up the hill – those were meant as a playful homage to that novel.

Well it seemed so appropriate to me, because Faulkner's Addie is, in some ways, an artist of life. She is a "doer." And so is Addie Kavanagh. Even though her love is birds and flight, she is grounded. Cremation would have been a wrong thing to do with her. She would need to go back into the earth. Her senses are the way she knows the world. When she stuffs birds she has to feel their shape in her hands. And that is the stuff of art, of the "literary," which she thinks she lacks. The more you're aware of it the less you can do of it, probably, and that's what makes her the artist she is.

And she struggles with the feeling that making art is not grounded enough, not productive, not doing the important work that has to be done, in her case trying to save the world, trying to clean up the air, trying to stop bad development—that making art is somehow not proper. And that dilemma is mine, too---my own sense of having grown up feeling very much like a farm kid in a family that was very much about the practical. My dad was a biology teacher, two of my three brothers are scientists, and I have struggled with the sense that writing is, if not frivolous, not as important when there is real work to be done. So that is very much my own conflict, one that that I don't say aloud very often. I said it aloud more when I was younger because I was caught in the struggle of "Can I go along this path, I don't know anyone who has, I'm not sure your life is really valuable if you do that." Which seems strange to me now, but it was in my head, and Addie has that. This is her struggle. Can she do this, should she do this? Is it really going to make a difference?

Do you agree with Tom, that scientists are the true optimists?

Some of them are, but there are plenty who are not. As Addie would say, that's why we have agent orange, nuclear bombs. But of course men like Einstein were great visionaries.

Why do you think Tom tells Addie at the end that she is, in fact, a true optimist?

Because she truly believed she could change things. The only true optimists are the people who are Hell bent on making the world better. She really wanted to fight for what she thought was beautiful. And she was complicated and irritating. I think we all know people that make us feel guilty about pretty much every move we make. And yet those are important voices. And I know that there are a lot of readers who react to Addie that way. But I did try to soften her up some towards the end, because I didn't want her to be seen as a character that could just be dismissed.

Yes! That is what happens as the novel progresses. The reader and Scarlet learn things about Addie that mitigate what, earlier, makes her a much more problematic character. How did you organize this narrative?

The novel is divided into parts, with titles that echo themes in the novel. Each part has four chapters, for the most part. The first chapter in each part takes place in time present, and in the first chapter of the first part Scarlet thinks about handling the people

around her as characters in a play. So subsequent first chapters in each part introduce another character to the stage. Then the next two chapters in each part move kind of fluidly between Tom and Addie's consciousnesses. These are essentially chronological. Then the final chapter in each part brings in Scarlet's consciousness and experience. I stuck with that structure from the beginning because it felt very musical, with recurring motifs. It also felt very dramatic, and made each of the characters in turn come across as a little bit larger than life, as happens on the stage, and I hope they feel like real people. It's a little bit murkier in the opening and ending parts, because the opening chapter is more background material, and then you end with that last field notebook entry.

Was there really a Cuvier's Kinglet?

Audubon did paint one, and it may or may not have existed. There is speculation that it was a variant species that just doesn't exist anymore. But I rather like to think he made it up. And Addie? Well, maybe she succumbed to the myth, wanting so badly to believe it, or maybe she really saw it. It was meant to be emblematic of some of their deeper desires.

What about the World Trade Center bombing material? Did you come at that with fear and trembling, so to speak?

Well yes, I did. There was a time when that subject was taboo, literary magazines all said "No 9/11 stories." And I was among them. You just can't touch that. But when it became apparent that I had to include it, because of the chronology of all the other events, which I placed in the time that was necessary for them, like the flap with the NEA, I guess I backed myself into a corner. But when I decided to do it, I kind of embraced it, because there was some important stuff to do with it, like the images of the bodies falling. I also went to a lecture by a woman from a Jungian Institute in New York, about the use of birds in art, after 9/11. And it made me conscious, aware of images of falling figures: falling birds, dark birds, the linkage between the two. Since that lecture, I am seeing it everywhere, and I think it works. So I knew I needed to have that in the novel, and it just felt right, even though I was almost afraid to tread into that terrain. And I'm happy with it, I'm glad it's in there, although it's not a huge part of the novel. I know it affected how I wrote about Addie's work in pretty important ways. And it did feel like such a logical way to bring Bobby back into Scarlet's life. And for her pregnancy. As she tells Tom, after 9/11 so many people started having babies, so it works on that level, too.

Which along with Addie's final field note and drawing of the Cuvier's Kinglet leaves the reader with the sense that Addie's legacy is, ultimately, one of Hope?

Absolutely, yes. Hope.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel, such as the untimely death of a parent, or having longtime close friendships similar to those in the novel? A love of nature and bird song? Or a strong interest or activism in a particular area of interest? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel?
2. How would you describe the tone and style of this novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel? What did you have problems with, if anything? Why?
3. One of the ongoing debates in modern and contemporary American literature, to some extent in all the arts, is whether Art is or is not—or should or should not be—“political,” or “didactic.” Two statements expressive of the differing points of view on this issue that you might be acquainted with are the old dictum, “Art for art’s sake,” on the one hand, and Ezra Pound’s admonition—“All Art is didactic”—on the other. What do you think this novel is saying about that debate? If you came to this novel with a strong position or opinion about the relationship between Art and Politics, how, if at all, did it affect your reading of this novel? Do you agree with Addie’s assessment of herself as an artist at the end of the book?
4. You have read what Hinnefeld thinks *In Hovering Flight* to be “about.” How would **you** describe this novel to someone who asks you what the book is about? What major themes can you identify in the novel? How do you come to your conclusions?
5. What themes do you find echoed in the titles of each of the novel’s parts? I—field notebooks; II—k-selected species; III—proximate and ultimate causes; IV—zugunruhe; V—hypotheticals.
6. What is your understanding of Haeckel’s Theory of Recapitulation— “Ontogeny recapitulates Phylogeny,” which Tom always prints up on the blackboard the first day of his class, Biology of the Birds. Why does he use this statement, despite its having been largely discredited? Can you connect its basic meaning to any elements of the novel, including its structure?
7. How would you describe the portrait of family life, marriage, and friendship as presented in this novel? Whose story is it, do you think? What about the characters in the novel? How do we learn about each of them? The author says her favorite is Tom. Which is yours, and why? Which is your least favorite, and why? With respect to Addie, does your opinion of her change over the course of the novel? If so, why? If not, why not?
8. Birds: What about them, in this novel? How many and in what ways can you find that the author uses birds and bird song as symbols, or metaphors, in this novel or to carry the narrative? Do you believe that Addie ever really saw the Cuvier’s Kinglet? What is it symbolic of, if anything, to you?

9. How did or did not the inclusion of the events of 9/11 affect your reading of the novel? Why? How well, or not, do you think the author handled this part of the narrative?

10. Would you recommend this novel to a friend to read? Why? If not, why not?

Recommended Reading

As I Lay Dying, by William Faulkner

The Waves, by Virginia Woolf

Sula, by Toni Morrison

Meridian, by Alice Walker

Every Past Thing, by Pamela Thompson

Grave Matters, by Mark Harris

The Diaries and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz, ed. Hans Kollwitz

An Inconvenient Truth, a film with Al Gore

An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It, by Al Gore (book)