

# PENGUIN READERS GUIDE

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## THE MITFORD YEARS SERIES

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### INTRODUCTION

Come away to Mitford, the small town that takes care of its own. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Mitford is a crazy quilt of saints and sinners — lovable eccentrics all. Seen through the eyes of Father Tim, the long-suffering Village Rector, Mitford abounds in both mysteries and miracles, compelling readers to return again and again to this beloved series.

In the tradition of James Herriot, Bailey White, and Garrison Keillor, author Jan Karon brilliantly captures the foibles and delights of a hilarious cast of characters.

Book I: In *At Home in Mitford*, Father Tim finds himself running on empty. Even after twelve years of shepherding his flock, he finds that Emma, his secretary, persists in treating him like a ten-year-old. Barnabas, a huge black dog, adopts him, and a hostile mountain boy, Dooley, is thrust into his care. To add to his confusion, a growing friendship with Cynthia Coppersmith, his new neighbor, stirs emotions he hasn't felt in years.

Book II: In *A Light in the Window*, Father Tim is in love and running scared. Cynthia has won his heart, but he is set in his ways and afraid of letting go. To complicate things, a wealthy and powerful widow pursues Father Tim, plying him with crab cobbler and old sherry. In the ensuing comedy of errors, he just can't set his foot right. Somehow the antidote to this confusion rests in the history of his oldest and dearest parishioner, Miss Sadie, and the discovery of family she didn't know she had.

Book III: In *These High, Green Hills*, Father Tim fulfills Cynthia's conviction that deep down he is a man of romance, panache, and daring. Though his cup of joy overflows, his heart goes out to those around him who so badly need the healing aid of a loving heart. Chief among these is Dooley, his teenage ward, whose rough edges grate against the boarding school he both loves and hates. Can Father Tim face the much deeper needs of Dooley's mother, Pauline, and the battered young girl Lace, whose childhood has been a horror story of neglect?

Book IV: In *Out to Canaan*, Father Tim grapples with his sixty-fourth birthday and his decision to announce his retirement. That's just one element of change Father Tim and his beloved Mitford struggle with. A Mayoral election threatens to divide the town. Mitford's long-term mayor, Esther Cunningham, whose slogan is "Mitford Takes Care of Its Own", may be ousted by Mack Stroupe ("Mack for Mitford, Mitford for Mack"). Old friends are retiring, even moving away. Change seems to be the only constant, and when Mule Skinner, a regular at the Main Street Grill, grimly asserts, "I despise change," Father Tim wholeheartedly agrees. Is it unreasonable to hope that all Father Tim holds precious might somehow be preserved? Or is transformation the real way of things? Readers new and old will be reassured that the uncommon delight of life in Mitford lives on.

Book V: In *A New Song*, Father Tim, recently retired after years of serving as the rector of Lord's Chapel, agrees to pastor a small parish off the Atlantic coast. There's only one problem: How can he and Cynthia leave the town—and the boy—they love? Soon, however, the charming island of Whitecap reveals its own cast of unforgettable characters: a lovelorn bachelor trying his hand at personal ads, a church organist with a past, a gifted musician who never ventures beyond his gate, and a young mother struggling with paralyzing depression. Still, Mitford is never far from their minds—especially when Dooley ends up on the wrong side of the law. Like every other bestselling Mitford novel, *A New Song* is a book you can't bear to see end.

Book VI: *A Common Life* is set in the time between *A Light in the Window* and *These High, Green Hills*, as Father Tim and Cynthia finally become engaged and married. The sixty-two-year-old priest is still battling fear and conflict when, suddenly, the beauty of a heaven-sent sunset galvanizes him into a formal proposal. Mitford residents, stunned and thrilled by the news, indulge in their own plans and reminiscences as they prepare for the nuptials. The happy couple's phones ring off the hook with offers of bridal showers and visiting choirs, and the bishop—in addition to his standard pre-marital counseling—insists on lending them his cottage in Maine for the honeymoon.

But some have mixed emotions. Dooley likes Cynthia, but isn't sure about living with her—he remembers the terrible domestic life he had with his parents. Cynthia wonders if she can truly be a mother to him, and the wife Tim Kavanagh deserves. Only after wedding bells ring out are such quandaries—and some hilarious mishaps—resolved.

Book VII: In *In This Mountain*, Father Tim, three years after his return from Whitecap, faces the stresses of retirement, and of a happy marriage to a famous author. Cynthia's new children's book wins a big award, makes headlines in the *Mitford Muse*, draws fans right into their backyard, and takes her on a nationwide tour. Distracted, even a little jealous, Father Tim in a careless moment seriously harms an old friend. When this happens, he himself slips into a depression that challenges his faith and undermines his health—with disastrous consequences. But through it all, Father Tim continues to be surrounded by caring Mitfordians, whose efforts to help sometimes mean more to Father Tim than their off-the-wall efforts to cheer him up, especially those of Uncle Billy, who remains convinced that the right joke will do the trick.

Father Tim can't help but get involved in the lives around him. He encourages "The Man in the Attic," who has just been released from prison, as he begins a new life and a new job at Hope Winchester's bookstore—and watches as two lives are transformed. And he helps Dooley, now a college student and aspiring veterinarian, navigate the choppy waters of young love and stumbles upon an exciting but dangerous lead on his long-lost brother.

At sixty-nine, Father Tim has helped so many people discover a new lease on life—can he find one, too? Will prayer, and an unexpected call to work—plus his initiation by Emma Newland into the mysteries of e-mail!—lead him out of this valley and onto the mountain top?

Book VIII: *Shepherds Abiding* is a simple story that unfolds over a span of ten or twelve weeks—a time in which Father Tim and a lot of villagers discover something new and surprising in themselves.

It's October, and already, the excitement of Christmas is in the air. Hope Winchester has just been given a thrilling, but scary new idea. Lew Boyd longs for his secret to be out, and his life to move on. Uncle Billy is getting ready to play his annual role of Santy Claus to Miss Rose. And Father Tim, who thinks he's giving Cynthia silk pajamas this year, spies a forsaken Nativity scene at the Oxford Antique Shop.

Once he sees the nativity scene, he can't stop thinking about it. He and Cynthia had used his maternal grandmother's scene once or twice, but its dull, base-metal figures seemed forbidding, so he packed it up and put it in the attic. The scene handed down from his Irish great-grandmother had perished in an Alabama flood, and the small scene that Cynthia created from clothespins and scraps of silk at the age of fourteen is definitely showing its limitations.

Thus begins Father Tim's journey to Bethlehem.

Advent takes on new meaning for Father Tim as he takes on this new challenge: repairing the shepherds, angels, and even Baby Jesus. As he works on the figures, exploring an artistic side he never knew he had, he experiences Advent in a way he never has before and discovers the best of all presents—the gift of one's heart.

Book IX: As *Light from Heaven* opens, Father Tim Kavanagh still isn't taking kindly to retirement. Even though being in a new environment like Meadowgate Farms is a breath of fresh air, he still feels like life is passing him by. So when Bishop Cullen at last reveals Father Tim's new assignment, he is ready to jump in with both feet. But getting Holy Trinity, the long-neglected mountain chapel, up and running is sure to be more work than he can say grace over—especially since a new deadline will make it nearly impossible for Cynthia to help.

But Father Tim's prayers are heard and answered in the form of Agnes Merton and her son, Clarence. Over the years, they have kept Holy Trinity in remarkably good shape. Other than a few broken windows and a minor amount of vandalism, the chapel is ready to open its doors to worshippers. So with Agnes along for the ride, Father Tim pulls together a hungry and imperfect congregation.

Shining brighter than ever and buoyed by his new calling, Father Tim is a beacon of faith not only for his new flock, but also for the beloved citizens of Mitford and, once again, for a child desperate for the warmth of a loving home. And as spring finally takes root in the mountains, God makes His presence known in daily miracles small and large. Grieving hearts are soothed with laughter. A young woman is healed. A wayward soul finds the acceptance he has so desperately sought. And a simple truth emerges from an unexpected source: indeed, God is good.

## **ABOUT JAN KARON**

Jan Karon was born in Lenoir, North Carolina, in 1937 (“A great year for the Packard automobile,” she says). Her creative skills first came alive when her family moved to a farm. “On the farm there is time to muse and dream,” she says. “I am endlessly grateful I was reared in the country. As a young girl I couldn't wait to get off that farm, to go to Hollywood or New York. But living in those confined, bucolic circumstances was one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Jan knew that she wanted to be a writer, and even wrote a novel at the age of ten. Her first real opportunity as a writer came at age eighteen when she took a job as a receptionist at an ad agency. She kept leaving her writing on her boss's desk until he noticed her ability. Soon she was launched on a forty-year career in advertising. She won assignments in New York and San Francisco, numerous awards, and finally an executive position with a national agency.

Recently she left advertising to write books, and moved to Blowing Rock, North Carolina, a tiny town of 1,800 perched at 5,000 feet in the Blue Ridge mountains. “I immediately responded to the culture of village life,” says Jan. “And I must say the people welcomed me. I have never felt so at home.”

Blowing Rock is the model for Mitford, and the similarities are strong. “None of the people in Mitford are actually based upon anyone in Blowing Rock,” says Jan. “Yet, the spirit of my characters is found throughout this real-life village. You can walk into Sonny’s Grill in Blowing Rock and find the same kind of guys who hang around Mitford’s Main Street Grill.”

Jan is quick to assert that there are Mitfords all over the country, those hundreds of towns where readers of Jan’s books cherish their own cast of eccentric and beloved characters. Currently, one of Jan’s chief delights is getting to meet those readers. “Some people finish writing and open a bottle of scotch or a box of chocolates,” she says. “My reward is meeting my readers face-to-face. I think an author is something like a glorified bartender. My readers tell me all kinds of things about their lives, and I get these long, long letters. I answer every one, of course.”

Jan has a daughter, Candace Freeland, who is a photojournalist and musician.

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JAN KARON**

*You write about the small town of Mitford, yet haven’t you spent most of your life in cities?*

Until I was twelve I lived in the country, then I spent many years in cities. I think that I was born with a kind of deep affinity for the rural, the rustic. In addition, I’m very drawn to the pastoral novels of the English genre — the village novel where a small group is used to paint a picture of a larger society.

I still have in me a great love for the agrarian — for what this country was, for what we still are. People say, “Oh well, I guess there’s no such thing as Mitford.” Well, the good news is there are Mitfords all over the country, and there are still great stretches of open land and pastures and meadows and fields. It’s not all bad news. There’s so much left of this country that is reasonable and moral and strong. And that’s the part I relate to.

*You’ve often said how important a rural upbringing was for you. How has it influenced your writing?*

On the farm there were long passages of time in which to observe. The senses are very important to me, and I try to bring the experience of the senses into my writing. And life on the farm is very graphic. Calves are dropped, colts are foaled, manure lies steaming in the sun. It’s the bottom line of what life is about.

*Mitford is packed with delightful characters like Dooley, Miss Rose, Emma, Miss Sadie, and Homeless Hobbes. Where do they all come from?*

Darned if I know. My characters walk in and introduce themselves to me and I’m stuck with them. When I first moved to Blowing Rock to write a book, I struggled hard to write according to the outline I came here with, but the book never worked. The characters never got off the page. That was a real defeat for me. “Woman’s dream turns to nightmare,” I thought. “I don’t know how to write a book!”

Then one night in my mind’s eye I saw an Episcopal priest walking down the street. I decided to follow him and see where he went. Well, he went to a dog named Barnabas, they went to a boy named Dooley, and the story unfolded before me. Instead of me driving the story, the story began to drive me! I got interested, wrote a couple of chapters, and there you have it.

*How much do you personally relate to Father Tim? Are you very much like him?*

Father Tim's personality is far more conservative than mine, but like Father Tim, I don't know a great deal about having fun. If I get dragged into it, I can always enjoy it, but it's hard for me to go out and find it on my own. And of course we both share a faith. My books are formed on my connection to God. That's the seasoning in the stew.

*How would you describe the nature of that faith?*

In my books I try to depict not a glorious faith with celestial fireworks, but a daily faith, a routine faith, a seven-days-a-week faith. Father Tim's faith is part of his everyday life. He has simple prayers, not polished, pious prayers. He follows the Apostle Paul's command that we pray without ceasing. I try to depict how our faith may be woven into our daily life, like brandy poured into coffee. I believe that spirituality needs to be basic, common, everyday.

*Father Tim seems in the thick of things whether he wants to be or not. How does this affect him?*

In the first book, *At Home in Mitford*, he lived a very quiet life. In the subsequent books we are able to see far more of Father Tim's humanity because he is surrounded by people. That means that his heart is going to be broken and his patience is going to be stretched — all of the things that happen when we get involved with other people. This has made him a much more human figure.

Father Tim is very heroic but he does grand things in such a quiet way that he doesn't assume the proportions of a hero. I think Father Tim is somebody who's into recycling and restoring people. It comes from two places inside of him. First of all, it comes from that place where he was so deeply wounded in his relationship with his father. He is in a sense recycling himself; he's still trying to heal himself. And second, he operates on the fuel, the steam that comes from his relationship with Jesus Christ. But he's definitely into reclamation, recycling, helping people find the way — which is what Jesus is all about. So I suppose that Father Tim is a type of Christ figure — not just because he is a preacher but because of the way he is constructed.

*In *Out to Canaan*, Father Tim lives in a chaotic household. Did you grow up in such a household?*

No, I didn't. I've lived a fairly ordered life. Being a writer requires a lot of solitude. I've not lived like that, but I've always looked toward those households with a certain longing.

*Where do you write?*

My studio stretches across the back of my little house. It has eight windows that look out on a copse of trees. I can see the blue outline of the mountains in the distance. Where I write is exceedingly important to me. I am never comfortable unless I am in a room that pleases me. I need the pictures on the wall to be hanging straight. I have to do my housekeeping before I can sit down at the computer. Things need to be in order in my mind and in the place where I write. In recent months my life has been topsy-turvy. I have learned to write with utter chaos all around me. I turn to my book with great intensity. Sometimes I may write twelve hours a day. Sometimes I can write only two hours a day.

*Do you have any conscious technique that so effectively makes Mitford come alive for people?*

I grew up in the era of radio. When you turned on the radio, you heard the voices and you filled in all the blanks. Radio helped me become a writer. Television would never help me become a writer. With radio you have to color in everything. What you need to do for readers is give them as much free rein as they can take. Let them participate in the story by building their own imagery.

*So conversations and characters bear the burden of telling the story?*

My books are about relationships. With rare exceptions, the scenes are all one-on-one relationships: Father Tim and Dooley, Father Tim and Cynthia, Father Tim and Emma. There are times when I step away to the Grill where three or four people are in a relationship. Basically, I try not to waste the reader's time with descriptive narrative, details of what people are wearing, how they look, how tall they are.

*You seem to have a lot of lovable eccentrics in your books. Are you attracted to unusual people?*

I see everyone as unusual. Most everyone seems to have an extraordinary life story. "I just love people," was my grandmother's saying. Casting the writer's light on ordinary people makes them appear extraordinary.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **The Mitford Years Book I: *At Home in Mitford***

1. What role does Barnabas play in Father Tim's life? What other characters seem to invade Father Tim's already busy life, only later to prove enriching elements? Are there any that are a permanent drag on his spirits? How does Father Tim come to terms with them?
2. Dooley appears on the scene untamed and uninvited. What is it that finally makes Father Tim and Dooley aware that they need each other? How does Dooley contribute to Father Tim's life? Have you had "Dooleys" in your own life?
3. Choose two of your group members to read the dialogue between Dooley and Puny in the middle of Chapter Seven — the scene where they first meet. How does the dialect differ in your part of the country? Try reading a brief part of a Dooley speech in the dialect of your own region.
4. Which characters did you dislike at first, only to later come to appreciate or at least understand them? What characters in the book react that way to someone new?
5. Compare Miss Sadie and Miss Rose. They are very different characters, but both make a powerful contribution to the books. What makes them such vivid characters? What would Mitford be like without them? What unique contributions do they make?
6. Priests seldom have people they can confide in. Who are Father Tim's confidants? What secrets does he entrust to them? What role does prayer play in giving Father Tim a chance to truly vent his feelings?
7. "Mitford takes care of its own," says Mayor Cunningham. How does this happen in the book? Is this limited only to small towns? What other types of communities can it take place in?

## **The Mitford Years Book II: *A Light in the Window***

1. Why do Father Tim's deepening feelings for Cynthia frighten him so? What are Father Tim's fears about marrying? Is it a good idea for Father Tim to marry Cynthia? How might Father Tim's marriage to Cynthia enhance his role as a priest? How might it detract from it?
2. Minor characters are an important part of the Mitford books. Can you name four minor characters? What does one minor character contribute to the fabric of village life in Mitford?
3. Many people don't like to talk about their faith. Why? Why do you think it is socially permissible to discuss sexual behavior, income, politics, and other highly personal matters, yet discussing one's faith is often discouraged?
4. Compare Miss Sadie's gift of money to build the nursing home with Edith Mallory's promise of donations to the children's hospital. What is each looking for in return for her gift?
5. Jan Karon says there are Mitfords all over the country. Do you live in one? If so, why do you think your community is like Mitford? Is Mitford necessarily a small town? Discuss whether it might also be a close neighborhood in a large city.
6. Have you ever had company like Cousin Meg? How could Father Tim have handled her presence in his house better? How can guests enrich your life? What kind of strain does having guests put on your life?

## **The Mitford Years Book III: *These High, Green Hills***

1. How has Father Tim's marriage influenced or changed his life? How have his relationships with Barnabas, Dooley, and Miss Sadie changed him?
2. Do Jan Karon's characters remind you of people you know? Have you ever lived next door to a Mitford character? Are you kin to any of the Mitford characters?
3. Faith in God is clearly a significant part of Father Tim's makeup. How would you describe his faith? What role does prayer play in Father Tim's faith?
4. The Seven Virtues are: Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice. Choose a character that exemplifies one of these virtues. For example, what virtue do you feel Uncle Billy exemplifies? What about Miss Sadie? Olivia?
5. What did Father Tim and Cynthia learn about themselves when they were lost in the cave? What did they learn about each other? What did Father Tim learn about his relationship with God? How did understanding and forgiving his father change him?
6. What gifts did Sadie Baxter give Dooley? Did her bequest surprise you? Why did she choose Dooley?

### **The Mitford Years Book IV: *Out to Canaan***

1. In times of crisis, Father Tim and Cynthia pray “The prayer that never fails.” What prayer are they referring to? Why is it a prayer that never fails?
2. Pauline’s growth and redemption is a gradual, step-by-step process. Who helps her? Where does Pauline succeed? Where does she fail?
3. Father Tim’s home is transformed from staid bachelor quarters into a topsy-turvy household. Lace quizzes Harley on his schoolwork in the basement, Dooley pounds up the stairs, Puny cleans with her twins underfoot, Violet the cat balefully eyes Barnabas from atop the refrigerator. How does Father Tim’s household compare with your own? Do Jan Karon’s descriptions make you view the chaos in your life differently?
4. The construction boss, Buck Leeper, is a diamond in the rough. In *Out to Canaan*, what is Buck Leeper feeling? How does he view himself? How do you think he may view others?
5. Note the ongoing presence of children and the elderly in the Mitford books. How does this enhance these stories? What lessons do they teach Father Tim?
6. Why does Father Tim have such trouble going to Fancy Skinner, Mitford’s unisex hairdresser, for his haircuts? Who does he press into service to cut his hair when he is avoiding her shop? Choose one of your group members to read the monologue by Fancy found toward the end of Chapter Five.
7. Do you have a Main Street Grill? What function does a place like the Grill fill in a town? Where do you get your town news? Where are you likely to meet friends and neighbors?
8. Esther Bolick’s orange marmalade cake plays a role in each book. What is the specialty in your region? What food item makes an annual event special? Festive? What other object can fill this role?
9. Describe the ways in which those who come in contact with Father Tim are changed. How does contact with others change Father Tim?

### **The Mitford Years Book V: *A New Song***

1. Father Tim and Cynthia’s good-bye to their friends in Mitford is long and painful. Have you experienced a similar good-bye? What have you learned that can lessen the pain? What can be done to ease the transition?
2. Ernie Fulcher said the yellow line down the center of the floor of his and Mona’s building has helped save their marriage. Is having separate areas a good idea for a couple? How might it affect customers? Friends? In what other ways do people define their space? How do children sharing a bedroom define “my side”?
3. Junior Bryson advertises for a bride. How would you write the personal ad for Junior? Should he have been so honest about himself? How would you describe yourself in an ad?



4. Father Tim met his neighbor, Morris Love, when Barnabas dove under his fence. Father Tim was hot, angry, and feeling foolish. Have you met someone in your life in an unusual way? How do you feel about meeting people when you don't look your best?
5. What elements contributed to helping Father Tim see the suffering soul behind Morris Love's infirmity? Have you ever had such an experience?
6. Should Father Tim have welcomed the wayward ex-choirmaster, Jeffrey Tolson, back to St. John's? Should he have consulted with his parishioners or was it his responsibility to decide? Was repentance a fair requirement?
7. Was it wise for Father Tim and Cynthia to take Jonathan Tolson into their home? Did caring for a toddler help or hinder their work? Was Father Tim's concern about Cynthia's emotional attachment warranted?
8. How did the storm change the landscape of Whitecap? How did it change people's lives?
9. Was Helene Pringle right to come to Mitford? Was Father Tim right to give her his angel? Whom do you think it belonged to? What was he given in its place?
10. How does Father Tim react to the glowing praise of Mitford's new rector? Have you ever been in such a situation? How did you react?

### **The Mitford Years Book VI: A Common Life**

1. Even after his proposal, Father Tim's long struggle between his inner fears and his love for Cynthia is not over. How does Jan Karon manage to make him both an inspiration to all and a very down-to-earth human being? Are there any figures like that in your life?
2. The flurry of competing plans—choir, cake-baking, flower arrangements, honeymoon—threaten to take away the happy couple's control of their own wedding. Should they have had a quieter ceremony? How would Mitford have reacted?
3. When Cynthia says she has no family, Hessie Mayhew tells her the whole parish is her family. What different kinds of families exist nowadays, and how well do you think they can substitute for the traditional one?
4. The Book of Common Prayer's description of marriage as "a common life" was written centuries ago. Do you think it still applies today?
5. *A Common Life* brings together Mitford characters' memories of their own romances and weddings, with moving incidents—or those as comical as Cynthia's bathroom doorknob falling off at the last minute. What memories did *A Common Life* awaken in you?

### **The Mitford Years Book VII: *In This Mountain***

1. When Father Tim neglects his health, it impacts not only himself but his wife, his friends, and his plans for a new mission. Is taking care of ourselves a responsibility to others? How can we balance our commitments with what we can realistically manage?
2. Father Tim is deeply torn between his need for Cynthia's presence and his concern that she not miss her thrilling trip to New York. What are some other examples of mixed feelings that haunt even the best marriages?
3. Mitford's longtime rector remembers how writing has helped him with unhappiness in the past. Have you tried that? What kinds of things would you write in a journal, an essay, or a story? Have you suffered depression, or cared for someone who did?
4. A year's ministry with Appalachian children could be, Father Tim feels, his legacy to the future. What do you hope to bequeath to generations to come?
5. When George Gaynor arrives in Mitford, several characters see a dilemma in the employment of an ex-con. Was it a wise decision? What are the arguments for and against?
6. Discuss how Hélène Pringle and Hope Winchester are guided to Lord's Chapel. How often does this happen through other people, and how often is it a direct revelation from God?

### **The Mitford Years Book VIII: *Shepherds Abiding***

1. Father Tim is inspired to finish restoring the crèche by imagining Cynthia's face when she sees the time and love he put into her gift. What are some memorable and unique Christmas gifts you've given? You've received? When you give someone a gift, how important is his or her reaction?
2. Karon reflects on the season of Advent. What is this season all about, and what do you do to mark this time of preparation? Does your family have Advent and Christmas traditions?
3. Father Tim wrestles with memories of his father. What do you think of his decision to focus on the good time he spent with his dad? Is there anyone in your life you deal with this way or have chosen to remember this way?
4. With the possibility of entrepreneurship and a budding romance with Scott Murphy, Hope Winchester's life is suddenly turned gloriously upside down. Does it seem that major life events come in clusters? Can you think of a time in your life when everything was joyfully, to quote Father Tim, "berserk"?
5. Father Tim tells Esther Bolick that not taking a cake to Ol' Man Mueller out of spite would be much worse than feeling like a hypocrite for giving him a cake even though she didn't want to. Do you agree? Would you continue giving gifts to someone with whom you no longer had a good relationship? Does Ol' Man Mueller's reaction upon receiving the cake change your mind or reinforce your opinion?

6. Father Tim takes on a new challenge and discovers an artistic talent he never knew he had. Have you ever made or been given a handmade gift? Aside from the time it takes to make, can it be harder to give a handmade gift? Do you enjoy new challenges? What's Father Tim's attitude toward them?

7. Who do you think put the stable in the back room? Why do you think it was that character? What might his or her reasons have been? Have you ever given a gift anonymously? Do you think it's possible to be joyful about giving a wonderful gift, if no one knows the giver?

### **The Mitford Years Book IX: *Light from Heaven***

1. Father Tim has rather unsavory encounter with a man who's set up rustic housekeeping on Meadowgate Farm. Were you surprised at the way Father Tim treated the trespasser? When is a person beyond forgiveness? On their second chance? Third? Fourth? What are some actions that are, despite Jesus's teachings, unforgivable by mere humans?

2. The Flower sisters are an interesting group to say the least. What are the commonalities you share with your siblings or other close family members? And what differences?

3. There are examples in *Light from Heaven* of people dealing with grief in unexpected ways. Father Tim hopes a series of jokes will make the perfect eulogy. Esther Bolick throws herself into baking to help her through the grieving process. What interesting sendoffs have you seen in your own life for departed friends or loved ones? Do you have unusual ways of dealing with sadness?

4. Do you think Sammy is going to become as well-adjusted as Dooley? Why? How are the two brothers similar? How are they different?

5. Cynthia always has an answer to the question "what *don't* you love?" Make a list of things you don't love. Now do the same with things you do love. Which list is longer? Which was easier to compile?

6. Louella tells a story about her and Miss Sadie's brief quarrel over a box of chocolates. Miss Sadie wants to save them but decides it would be better to go ahead and enjoy them. What treats or special experiences in your life have you saved for a later time, only to wish, when the time comes, that you had gone ahead and enjoyed them sooner?

7. Rooter wants to learn sign language so he can talk to Clarence. Using the Internet or a book, teach yourself a few signs to share with the group. Father Tim employs a similar strategy in his knack for talking to just about anyone on his or her own level. How is Father Tim different when talking to Agnes versus Jubal?