

# VIKING READERS GUIDE

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## HOME TO HOLLY SPRINGS

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### AN INTRODUCTION TO HOME TO HOLLY SPRINGS

As a retired Episcopal priest, Father Tim Kavanagh is well aware of the power of words. Words of comfort. Words of Scripture. Words of encouragement. But it only takes two simple words to inspire him to make one of the most important journeys of his life, and those words are: “*Come home.*”

And so he does.

Traveling to his boyhood home in northern Mississippi doesn’t merely take Father Tim across hundreds of miles. Thanks to a thousand sights and smells, he also travels back through memories—some fond and some he’s tried for nearly forty years to forget. He recalls his stern, quick-to-anger father, who was plagued by his own father’s abuse. He remembers his beloved maternal grandfather, who, like himself, lived his life in service to God. And, of course, he thinks back to his mother, whose beauty was rivaled only by that of the gardens she so lovingly tended. Though the memories may be very much alive, the people connected to them are all buried near the oldest tree in Hill Crest Cemetery.

But what about the people his age? What about his best friend and blood-brother from childhood? And the boy who received a harsh punishment that rightfully should have gone to the young Timothy?

Arriving at the town’s picturesque square, Father Tim is pleased to find a few familiar storefronts. But trying to find the people he’s looking for only leads to frustration. Until, that is, the small town rumor mill kicks in. He receives an invitation to have tea with two women, one of whom was his long ago fiancée.

Slowly, the people from his past help illuminate for Father Tim his life and his family. For the first time he turns fully toward the memories of his childhood in Holly Springs and lets them flood over him. He’s grateful to sleep in the same room he slept in as a child. He’s thankful for the grace that allows forgiveness to take the place of resentment and anger in many of his relationships.

Finally, the author of the mysterious note that brought him to Holly Springs is revealed. The answer to this mystery also leads Father Tim closer to understanding his parents and why, so many years ago, a beloved family friend disappeared without saying goodbye.

But with these answers come another question, one that will lead Father Tim to an agonizing question: Should he once again seal a brotherhood with his own blood?

## A CONVERSATION WITH JAN KARON

1. *As this novel is set away from Mitford, readers don't encounter many of the characters they've grown to love. Was writing this book more challenging without a cast of characters on which you could rely? Or was it freeing to create new personalities?*

Yes to both. But I was quite ready to leave the safety of Mitford's shores and cast out into the deep. Frankly, it was scary. But every launch into a new story scares me. There's a time of gnashing of teeth, then one simply must dive in and swim for yet another shore, sharks and all.

2. *Please tell us more about your visit to the real Holly Springs. What surprised you most?*

I was most surprised by the lovely difference in the Deep South from the South. There's a dash more of the past still available behind the Magnolia Curtain, and something still left of innocence.

3. *A number of characters in Home to Holly Springs say that a visit to Graceland is a must. Have you been?*

I was taken there by two Memphis sisters, and it just—let me use the vernacular here—blew me away. I was never an Elvis fan and was absolutely dumbfounded when I suddenly became one a couple of years ago. It didn't exactly grow on me, this appreciation for his great artistic gift and big heart, it just—boom!—happened. Graceland was the key, for it let me imagine his tender heart and compassion for others.

4. *The Scriptures are very much woven through this story. Did you choose to reference your personal favorites? What are some verses you find yourself turning to most often?*

I think one can't help but reference personal favorites of nearly anything in one's work. Throughout the Mitford series, I referenced Philippians 4:13. Many of the scriptures referenced in *Holly Springs* are ones that have nourished and edified me, and several are repeated in the two books of quotes collected by Father Tim: *Patches of Godlight* and *A Continual Feast*.

5. *Much of Father Tim's past is revealed through the characters telling family stories rather than through straightforward narrative. Were there a lot of stories passed down in your family?*

My grandmother was a consummate storyteller. I learned everything at her knee. She had the most colorful, even playful speech habits, and small details never escaped her. She could remember, at the age of one hundred, how the bodice of a certain dress was smocked, or the fabric from which it was made. Lawn, silk shantung, *crepe de chine*, dotted Swiss, and marquisette were just a few of the poetic fabric names she often referenced. She told me all about her five suitors and how the best man won. "Fannie," said my grandfather, sitting on the far end of the davenport in his courting garb, "Do you care for me?" My grandmother sat up even straighter and gave him a piercing look. "I don't know, Monroe. Do you care for me?" She told about the hawk she killed barehanded, the games she played with her brothers and sisters under the big pine tree (this pine tree appears in *Home to Holly Springs* in a story Peggy Winchester tells).

I must give credit also to my grandfather, who took me on his rounds to swap hunting dogs, buy horses, shop for nails and seed corn, and generally interact with the country menfolk. Out of these powerful childhood memories swarm such characters as Mule Skinner, Percy Mosely, T (for Theophilus), and a number of other male characters. No character is based on a real person, but is formed out of the soup of memory and experience. My mother provides material, too. She's now in her eighties and perfectly gorgeous, and her hard-of-hearing episodes can be hilarious. I had to give just a touch of this odd magic to Miz Lewis.

6. *Did any of the new characters you conceived become particular favorites? You especially seemed to have a little fun with Luola Dabney Randolph Lewis.*

Miz Lewis blew into the story with great force. I love the way she castigated our priest for having left his hometown for greener pastures. She preached a sermon that, bitter as it was, contains much truth, and certainly reveals a largely unspoken disappointment shared by those left behind to contend with the fallout.

I liked all the characters immensely, as I nearly always do when I write. Writing is a severely lonely occupation, as most writers will tell you, and I think my characters provide a sort of social outlet for me. Sitting on the porch with T and Ray was sublime.

7. *Mississippi has been portrayed by some of the greatest Southern writers—from Faulkner to Welty. Did you draw inspiration from any of them? Do you have any favorite novels set in Mississippi?*

I draw inspiration from all the writers I read, which is why I'm careful about the reading I choose to do. I'm not aware of being inspired by Welty or Faulkner in any specific way, though the rhythm and color of their dialogue, and how each chose to cast their native speech, was a definite benefit to me. North Carolina and Mississippi are two quite diverse places—one must catch the subtle nuances of speech differences and make them ring true. I feast with pleasure on dialogue that is well crafted and authentic.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which of the two men, Jim Houck or Father Tim, do you think benefited more from the truth about what happened between their fathers: Father Tim learning the truth about what happened or Jim finally being able to tell him the truth?
2. What do you think Matthew Kavanagh's last words meant?
3. Father Tim is surprised that the courthouse was as large as he remembered it. Discuss times you revisited places from your childhood only to discover that things were different than you recalled.
4. When young Timothy Kavanagh uses a racist epithet, he's told to read First Corinthians 12:13, which says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." How do you think it was so easy for people to profess their Christianity while still embracing racism?
5. Father Tim reflects that since returning to Holly Springs, "his own bear had lumbered up to the wagon." Discuss what he meant. With what other bears are the characters in this book struggling?
6. Discuss the instances in *Home to Holly Springs* where the sins of the father are passed on to the son. Father Tim's father was a distant and strict person prone to bouts of depression. Why do you think Father Tim's parenting style wasn't negatively affected by how his father treated him?
7. Father Tim wanted to ask his dad, "Why do you hate me?" How do you think he would have reacted if the question had been posed?
8. As in Jan Karon's previous novels, food and fellowship go hand in hand. Discuss a few examples in the book where events and people are directly tied to food. What are the foods that you associate with childhood memories or other specific times in your life? Have you carried on those traditions?

9. Several people in the book say it's a must to see Graceland before one dies. What are your must-visit destinations?

10. Do you think the favor Peggy asks of Father Tim is selfish? What would you have done if you were in Father Tim's shoes?