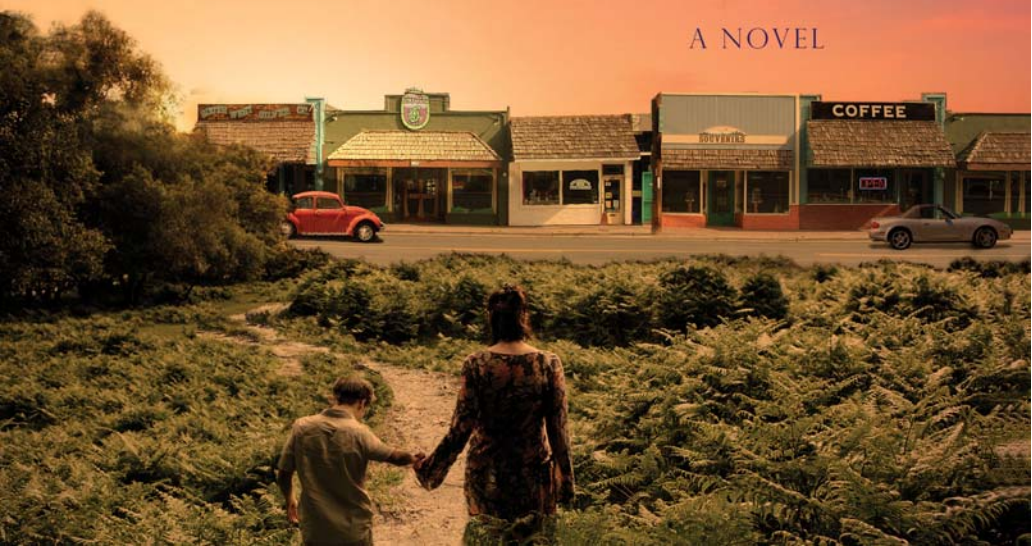




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SHADES
of MORNING

A NOVEL



READERS GUIDE

I was in college when I first fell in love with God. Before that, I knew about Him, I believed that Christ died for my sins and rose again, but He hadn't yet captured my heart with the breathtaking wonder of His love...until 1986, my freshman year. Part of that process happened just outside the Stanford post office. I sat on a bench, praying, thinking, and reviewing all the things I had done wrong in life, all the sins Christ died for. I thought about what the "book" of my life might look like—pages filled with black marks and smudges, covered over with the "whiteout" of God's grace. And while I was glad the sins were covered, it made me sad to think about what the book would have been like if only I'd done better, chosen better, been better all along.

I closed my eyes and prayed. And as I did, an image came strongly into my mind. The book of my life, with God turning the pages. But these pages weren't smudged and whited-out. These pages were crisp, clean, and new. They were beautiful. They were pure. They were pristine. I caught my breath, and for the first time I understood the true beauty of what Jesus did for me on the Cross. He didn't just white out my sins. He made me new. The sins vanished as if they'd never been, and my heart, my life, was transformed and renewed. My "book" was completely clean and ready for Him to write His words, paint His images, and make it into a thing of exquisite beauty.

That's the image that birthed the theme for *Shades of Morning*—the wonder of how God doesn't just erase or white out, He makes new. He makes beautiful. He's in the business of amazing transformation for me, and for you. So if you'd like to dig deeper into the themes and spiritual nuances in *Shades of Morning*, here are some questions that may help:

1. In chapter 5 we learn that real-Emmit prayed he might have a complete family. How might have Habakkuk 1:5 been an answer to real-Emmit's questions about God in that chapter? "Look...and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told." How might this quote apply to your own prayers that God doesn't seem to be answering as you wish?
2. In chapter 9 Taylor relates how his mom once told him that you can't compare apples meant for pie with apples meant for candying. She meant that God's vision and purpose for one person isn't the same as for someone else. How does this address the question of why God may answer one person's prayers in one way and another person's in another?
3. In chapter 10 Marnie asks, "Why couldn't we have just kept the past buried? Buried in a box on a shelf forever." But she realizes that the past wasn't truly buried, and it never had been. She carried it with her always, no matter how she tried to forget. How does her inability to release her regrets to God interfere with her relationships and her spiritual growth? Have you experienced times when your regrets harmed relationships with people close to you? Explain.

4. Think about how Marnie's guilt takes her away from Taylor and how Taylor's guilt keeps him from pursuing Marnie. Then consider the guilt in your own life. What is the proper role of guilt? In what ways can it be destructive? In what ways can it be helpful?
5. In chapter 15 Marnie sees God as the One who looked at baldness and saw beauty. The One who knew her and loved her anyway. When God views you, do you think He sees beauty or baldness? If you lived every day believing that God saw beauty, how would that change the way you live?
6. In chapter 16 Marnie realizes that "Decency couldn't be bought at Saks; honor wasn't purchased at Nordstrom. . . . Instead beauty often hid in ugliness. And wonder often dressed in ratty clothes. The trick was seeing the truth, recognizing the beauty God placed in each person." Consider James 2:1–4 in conjunction with Marnie's thoughts. If we truly believed as Marnie did, how would that change the way we interacted with others?
7. In chapter 16 Marnie realizes that even though she didn't have a good example in an earthly father, she still knew what a loving Father is. Do you think God put the knowledge of real love, a real father, in all of us? What are some characteristics of a good father? How is God like that?
8. In chapter 19 Kinna tells Marnie, "I've learned that God works in the barren years. When He seems the most absent, that's when He's doing His most intimate work." Think of barren times in your own life. How has God changed you in those times? Can you now see how He

was doing intimate work inside you? How might the realization of His work in you help you during barren times in the future?

9. In chapter 20 Taylor recognizes that “Sin was sin for a reason... Sin would tear you apart, leave you bleeding, snatch your future and drain away the life.” Why do you think God calls certain actions “sin”? How would your attitude toward sin change if you defined it as “that which hurts me or others” rather than “things God says I can’t do”?
10. In chapter 20 Taylor writes, “Life isn’t about making things perfect. It’s about living with the blobs of yellow. It’s about rejoicing in the life God gives you, even when it’s not the life you wanted or expected. It’s about throwing your hands up in abandon even when your glasses are askew and you can’t see the reason, the meaning, behind what you’re going through.” Have there been times in your life when you couldn’t see the reason for what you were going through? Consider Philippians 4:4–9. How might those verses help you the next time life takes an unexpected and unwanted turn?
11. In chapter 20, Taylor realizes that “he’d been making his plans and expecting God’s blessing. He’d never bothered to look for God’s plans.” What is the difference between looking for blessing and looking for wisdom? How do you follow God’s will in your life instead of your own?
12. Taylor’s assistant, Nancy, says it’s hard to receive something new when your hands are closed tight around something old. In chapter 23, Taylor learns that he has to release the past, his disappointments as well as his hopes and dreams,

completely to God. Is there a place in your life where you're clinging to "the meaningless furnishings" of a past time? If so, how can you let go of those things in order to embrace the new things God may have for you?

13. In chapter 24 Josephina says to Marnie, "Regrets about what happened yesterday and fears about what may happen tomorrow keep you from living now." Later Marnie realizes that "She'd hung on to her regrets instead of her joys." Consider Matthew 6:34. Have regrets and worries kept you from living to your fullest in the "now"? If so, how might you let go of both? How does hanging on to your joys help?
14. In chapter 24 Marnie realizes that the Cross is the ultimate example of how God transforms tragedy into triumph. She considers the Cross "the darkest moment in all of history, when the Son of God bled, cried out in agony, and died. The moment when all hope seemed lost and everything that had ever happened appeared meaningless because the darkness had won. But it hadn't. The darkest moment was also the brightest, because all the past, present, and future changed in that moment. It was redeemed. Death defeated. Hope reborn." Think about what Jesus did on the Cross. Then consider how the cross itself was once a sign of the most grisly type of execution, but has now been transformed into a symbol of redemption and wonder. What does that say about how God might transform the ugly things in your past as well? Think about how He might redeem the mistakes, the tragedies, the sins, the disappointments. How might your darkest moments be transformed into light?

15. In the end, Marnie realizes that no one deserves second chances, but God gives them to us anyway. Think of a time when you had another chance to do something right. Did you deserve that opportunity, or was it a free gift from God? How might God be giving you another chance today to do right?
16. In the epilogue, notice that angel-Emmit's name changes to Emeth, his true name. The Hebrew word for *truth* is pronounced "Em-it" but when scholars write it in English, they usually write "Emeth" as Hebrew doesn't have a "th" letter or combination. So *Emmit* and *Emeth* are the same Hebrew word but written differently. How does Emeth's name change reflect the change in his character? How is he different? How is he the same? And how does the word *truth* reflect his role in the story? Similarly, how has God's gift of truth changed your life and your view of the past?