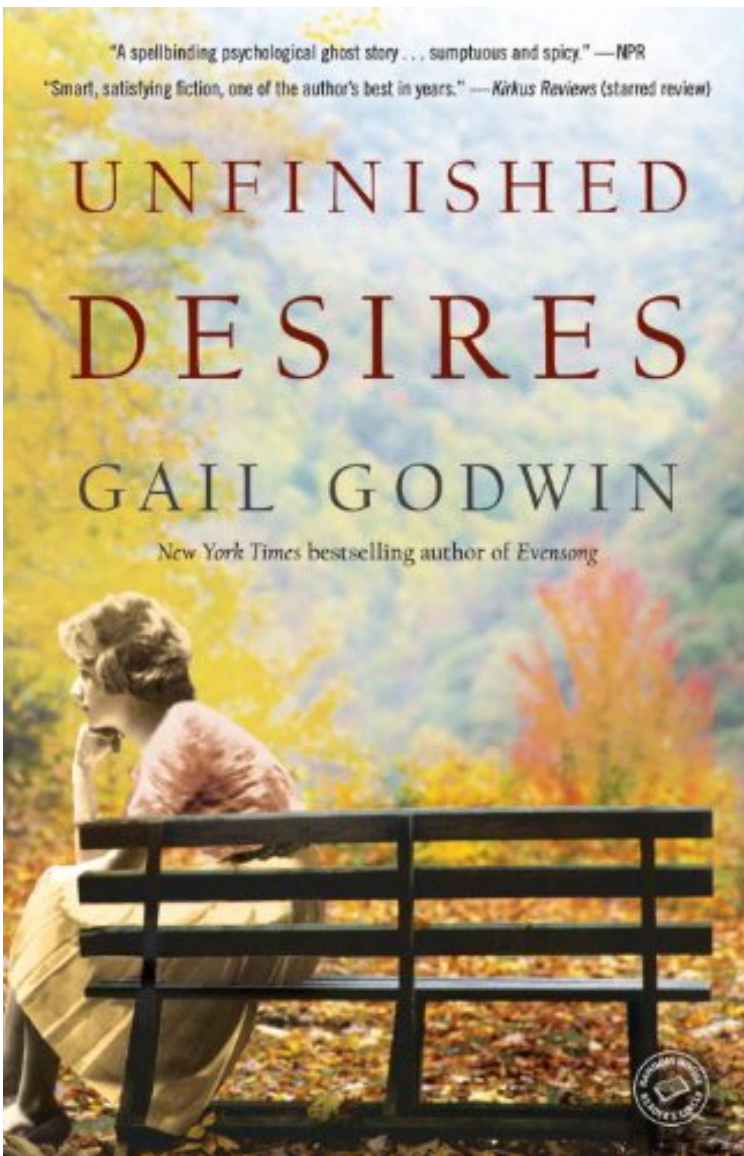


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Unfinished Desires: A Novel



Par Gail Godwin
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an Unfinished Desires discussion guide. From Gail Godwin, three-time National Book Award finalist and acclaimed New York Times bestselling author of Evensong and The Finishing School, comes a sweeping new novel of friendship, loyalty, rivalries, redemption, and memory. It is the fall of 1951 at Mount St. Gabriels, an all-girls school tucked away in the mountains of North Carolina. Tildy Stratton, the undisputed queen bee of her class, befriends Chloe Starnes, a new student recently orphaned by the untimely and mysterious death of her mother. Their friendship fills a void for both girls but also sets in motion a chain of events that will profoundly affect the course of many lives, including the girls young teacher and the schools matriarch, Mother Suzanne Ravenel. Fifty years on,

the headmistress relives one pivotal night, trying to reconcile past and present, reaching back even further to her own senior year at the school, where the roots of a tragedy are buried. In *Unfinished Desires*, a beloved author delivers a gorgeous new novel in which thwarted desires are passed on for generations and captures the rare moment when a soul breaks free.

Chapter One
Tour of the Grounds
Third Saturday in August
1951
Mount St. Gabriels
Mountain City, North Carolina

When you've done as much girl-watching as I have, Mother Malloy, you can see even as they're coming up through the lower grades how each class reveals itself as an organism in its own right. You're not too tired for a bit of a ramble, I hope. Not at all, Mother Ravenel. I've only been sitting on trains for two days. Good, in that case the headmistress, as quick of step as she was in speech, veered suddenly off the gravel walk and, snatching up her ankle-length skirts, plunged down a woodland path well take a turn around the new athletic field and then go up to the grotto and sit with the Red Nun awhile and have a little prayer to Our Lady in front of our Della Robbia. Who is the Red Nun? Without slowing her pace, the headmistress turned back to reward the new young teacher with an appreciative smile. You know, I often still catch myself thinking of her as a who. After all these years! The shortest way to put it is, she's our mascot. If you can rightly call a six-foot-high ton of red marble a mascot. She's been unfinished since the middle of the First World War. It's quite a story, and you know what? I'm going to save it until we're at the grotto. There are so many things I want to point out to you first. Now, where was I? You were saying about organisms? Oh, yes. A class is never just a collection of individual girls, though it is certainly that, too, when you're considering one girl at a time. But a class as a whole develops a group consciousness. It's an organic unit, with its own special properties. While we're having our walk, I will tell you a little about your ninth-grade girls, the upcoming freshman class. They are a challenging group, those girls. They will require control. As an organism, you mean? Or some ones in particular? Both, Mother Malloy. In the presence of the headmistress, Mother Malloy, who was by habit cool and exact in speech, found herself stumbling and blurting. From my responses so far, she thought, this voluble, assured woman must be wondering how I am going to take charge of any class, not to mention a challenging one that requires control. Mother Malloy was vexed by the clumsiness that had come over her even as she had been descending the steps of the train, taking caution with her long skirts, thanking the conductor who steadied her by the elbow, when a nun wearing aviators sunglasses shot forward to claim her. Mother Ravenel was a vigorously handsome woman of medium height, with a high-colored face and fine white teeth. Snappy phrases, bathed in southern drawl, assailed the young nun from Boston. Her hand was clapped firmly between Mother Ravenel's immaculately gloved ones and she was mortified that she had not remembered to put on her own gloves. There was worse to come. Mother Ravenel introduced her uniformed Negro driver and a lighter-skinned young man: This is Jovan we call him our Angel of Transportation and this is his grandson Mark, who will be going off to college next year. Mother Malloy extended her hand first to gray-haired Jovan, who took it after the merest hesitation. Though sensing she had done something outside of protocol, she had no choice but to repeat the gesture to young Mark, who, after a quick glance at his grandfather, shook her hand and bolted away to see to her trunk. While the two men loaded it into the back of the wood-paneled station wagon bearing the Mount St. Gabriels crest (the archangel with upturned palms floating protectively above mountain ranges), Mother Ravenel tipped her veiled head close to the new nuns and gently confided, We do things a little differently down here, Mother, but you'll get used to our ways. I think you'll find there's a great regard between the races and just as much love if not actually more. I have never seen a nun wearing sunglasses, Mother Malloy thought at the train station, trying to contain her mortification and offer it up. Of course, girls in their early teens are always difficult, Mother Ravenel was saying now. She zigzagged off the woodland path and into a clearing. Do you have sisters, Mother? I have never known a nun to dart about so, thought Mother Malloy, struggling to keep up with her guide. They taught us to glide and keep custody of the limbs in the Boston novitiate. Perhaps religious formation is another thing they do differently in the South. The accent is melodious, but somehow it doesn't lend itself to gravity. Except for my sisters in the Order, none, Mother. Ah, same as myself. I grew up with two older brothers. I was the baby sister. You had brothers, perhaps? No, no brothers, either. An only child. That has its advantages. For instance, I could never go off by myself and read and daydream, as I imagine you could. My beastly brothers were always dragging me up into their tree houses or out on their boats. We lived on the East Battery, in Charleston. You were saying about these girls the rising ninth grade? Kate Malloy had been raised in a Catholic foster home in West Newton, near Boston, but saw no point in tempting Mother Ravenel into further asides. Their challenging aspects? Yes, well, my point was, all girls are challenging at that age. They're sensitive and acute and they have a cruel streak a different cruelty from boys, has been my

experience and a shocking amount of energy. Their bodies are ready for childbirth, but their cognitive development isn't complete yet. You have only to recall your own feelings at fourteen. You felt you were capable of making your own life decisions. You felt that most adults, besides being over the hill, had compromised themselves and were to be pitied rather than listened to. Am I right? No, but you're my superior. I was lucky to have several adults I truly admired. What I do recall feeling is wishing I could spend more time with them. Ah, mentors, you mean. But a mentor is not in the same category as your average compromised adult, wouldn't you agree? And since you have brought up the subject of mentors, Mother, that's exactly what I'm praying these girls will find in you. Their specialty is intimidation. In sixth grade they demoralized a popular lay teacher. I'll supply the gory details later, but right now, I want you to take in Mount St. Gabriel's picturesque view. It's at its most sublime from here. That's why we chose this site for the new athletic field, even though the excavation and tree-topping costs completely wrecked our budget. Mother Malloy took in the vista from this place into which her vow of obedience had so abruptly landed her. In three weeks she was to have begun her second year of graduate work at Boston College. But a week ago Reverend Mother had summoned her. I know it's a great disappointment, my dear, but Mother Ravenel down at Mount St. Gabriel's is in a bind. The junior college lost their shorthand-and-typing mistress, a young novice who has asked to be released from her vows, and Mother Sharp, who normally takes the ninth grade, is the only one qualified to teach secretarial courses. Offer it up to Our Lord, and we'll see if we can arrange for you to come back to Boston for summer courses. The spot on which Mother Malloy and Mother Ravenel stood commanded a panorama of mountain ranges stacked one behind the other, their hues fading from deep smoky purple into the milk blue of the horizon. Below them was Mountain City, its downtown buildings and curving river twinkling with late-afternoon sun. A solitary hawk dipped and soared, riding the air streams above them. Mother Malloy was in the midst of composing a suitable line of praise for the school's picturesque view when Mother Ravenel, off on another tack, rendered the effort unnecessary. And next year we will be taking on the boys. The boys? Newman Hall for grades one through eight, and Maturin Hall for the high school. Though there's still some lobbying going on about calling the upper grades forms, like the prep schools and the English public schools. If you look over through those pines, you can see the slate roof of what will be Newman, when the renovations are finished. Mother Malloy followed the tanned pointing finger. She took in the gabled roof; she also took in the headmistress's youthful, well-kept hands. The older nun's silver ring flashed in the sunlight. What will be Newman and Maturin were lovely adjoining estates. Within a single year they were left to us by two cousins: grateful mothers of satisfied alumnae. I told the bishop, I said, We must be doing something right at Mount St. Gabriel's. His nose was a little out of joint because the properties were deeded to us, the Order of St. Scholastica, and not to the diocese. Isn't this a grand athletic field? When the boys come, we'll put in goalposts for football. Howard, our handyman, is so proud of the turf and of his new tractor mower that we have to restrain him from mowing twice a week. Only yesterday I told him, Howard, this is not a golf course, but I can see and smell perfectly well that it has been mowed again since. What sports... *Revue de presse* "A large, roomy story of love, loss, fidelity, secrets, rivalry and faith in the lives of a charming, flawed troupe of characters. Provocative and rewarding." *Boston Globe* "This rich world draws and holds the reader from the first to the final pages of the work." *Denver Post* "Tender but clear-eyed Godwins South has always been a place where charm and good manners can barely conceal the emotional drama pulsing beneath the surface. Recalls the fraught family bonds of Godwin's best novels." *San Francisco Chronicle* "Godwin's reserved yet powerful new novel is set in a boarding school in the mountains of North Carolina. Though it's a beautiful well-intentioned institution, the school is anything but serene." *New York Times Book* "If you plan on reading just one great novel in 2010, this might be it: a big old-fashioned book about jealousy and passion at a Catholic girls school, written with Gail Godwin's trademark depth and humor." *Bookpage* "Godwin's writing is marvelous, engaging, clever." *Christian Science Monitor* "Poignant and transporting, convincing, satisfying." *Publishers Weekly* "Intoxicating Godwin's latest novel charms." *Asheville Citizen-Times* "Masterly." *Dallas Morning News* "A strong story populated by a host of memorable characters, smart, satisfying fiction, one of the author's best in years." *Kirkus's* starred review, "If you plan on reading just one great novel in 2010, this might be it. *Unfinished Desires* is a big old-fashioned book about jealousy and passion at a Catholic girls school, written with best-selling author Gail Godwin's trademark depth and humor. Godwin's 13th novel is filled with penetrating observations on women's friendships, family and faith. The wise, human story she tells reaches beyond the boundaries of region and religion, satisfying any reader looking for a good story." *Bookpage* "What better setting for exploring female bonds than a Southern Catholic girls school where epic feuds and forgiveness pass through generations?"

Godwins take is smart and intriguing." Good Housekeeping"Ten Titles to Watch For: This seasoned author revisits familiar territory. Fascinating, always."O: The Oprah Magazine