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The Life All Around Me By Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons

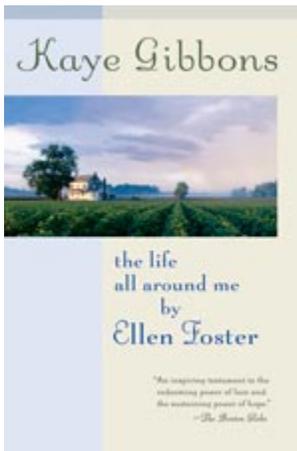
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The Life All Around Me By Ellen Foster

Kaye Gibbons

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About the book:



In this sequel to Gibbons's beloved classic *Ellen Foster*, Ellen, now fifteen, is settled into a permanent home with a new mother. Strengthened by adversity and blessed with enough intelligence to design a salvation for herself, she still feels ill at ease. But while she holds fast to the shreds of her childhood—humoring her best friend, Stuart, who is determined to marry her; and protecting her old neighbor, slow-witted Starletta—she begins to negotiate her way into a larger world.

With a singular mix of perspicacity, naïveté, and compassion, Ellen draws us into her life and makes us fall in love with her all over again.

About the author:

KAYE GIBBONS is the author of seven bestselling novels. Her first novel, *Ellen Foster*, was awarded the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a special citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation. That novel, as well as *A Virtuous Woman*, was chosen for Oprah's Book Club. Gibbons lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Discussion Questions:

1. Ellen Foster has become a classic figure in fiction, joining the ranks of Holden

Caulfield and Scout Finch. What makes Ellen's storytelling voice unique?

2. Why is Laura able to demonstrate so much more compassion than the other adults in Ellen's life? What enabled her to build a stronger bond with Ellen than with the other foster girls, as she views Ellen as her Christmas-gift daughter?

3. In her letter to President Bok at Harvard, Ellen writes, "My childhood was the kind that saturates you with quick ambition." Do the kinds of experiences that shaped her childhood always lead to quick ambition? Or was her ambition innate? Why was Ellen's high IQ perceived as dangerous at the beginning of the novel?

4. What accounts for the rowdy behavior of the other girls Laura takes in? What skills are necessary for "converting the wild" (as Ellen puts it)?

5. How is Ellen affected by her train trip to Baltimore? Does the reality of leaving home measure up to her anticipation? How does she define the "home" she is leaving?

6. At first glance, Ellen might not seem to have very much in common with her closest friends, Starletta and Stuart. What draws her to them, and vice versa? What makes their friendships with one another flourish?

7. Does Ellen's visit to the fair (chapter 7) make an appropriate bridge for her reunion with Nadine and Dora? Why?

8. What was your reaction to Stuart's mother? What does Ellen think of his awkward proposal in chapter 9? Why might Stuart choose John and Maureen Dean as models in his vision for marriage?

9. How much do Ellen and her friends seem to know about sexuality, particularly in chapter 10? Are they well informed or naïve?

10. How did you react to the revelations of forgery? Was Laura's confrontation scene satisfying? How would you have responded if you had been in Ellen's shoes?

11. When Ellen reads her mother's psychiatric file, how does she perceive Shine differently? Does learning more about her mother's illness affect Ellen's perception of herself as well? Does it explain why Shine remained in such an abusive marriage?

12. Ellen often speaks of compare/contrast exercises, and her story lends itself to them quite well. Choose an aspect of her life to explore through the lens of comparing and contrasting. Topics might include: her life as a child versus as a teenager; her life before and after prosperity; Starletta's household and Laura's; or the characters of Ellen and her mother compared to the other members of their

family.

13. Discuss the notion of life as it is featured in the title. As someone who has witnessed so much loss and death, how is Ellen able to acknowledge and even celebrate the life all around her?

14. Ellen tells President Bok that she lives in “the flat, blank section between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Smokey Mountains” in North Carolina. What makes the Southern setting of the novel essential to its plot? How does this setting, combined with the early 1970s time period, shape the story in significant ways? Might Ellen have fared better or worse had she entered foster care in the twenty-first century?

15. In her Christmas wishes for 1975, what does Ellen express about the truly valuable things in life?

16. What do you predict for Ellen’s future? Where will her enterprising nature lead her?

Praise for *Ellen Foster*:

“A breathtaking novel . . . Ellen Foster is a southern Holden Caulfield.”—Walker Percy

“Some people might give up their second-born to write as well as Kaye Gibbons.”—*Time*

“Filled with lively humor, compassion and integrity . . . Ellen Foster may be the most trustworthy character in fiction.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

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