



Flora

Gail Godwin

Download now

Read Online →

Flora

Gail Godwin

Flora Gail Godwin

Ten-year-old Helen and her summer guardian, Flora, are isolated together in Helen's decaying family house while her father is doing secret war work in Oak Ridge during the final months of World War II. At three Helen lost her mother and the beloved grandmother who raised her has just died. A fiercely imaginative child, Helen is desperate to keep her house intact with all its ghosts and stories. Flora, her late mother's twenty-two-year old first cousin, who cries at the drop of a hat, is ardently determined to do her best for Helen. Their relationship and its fallout, played against a backdrop of a lost America will haunt Helen for the rest of her life.

This darkly beautiful novel about a child and a caretaker in isolation evokes shades of *The Turn of the Screw* and also harks back to Godwin's memorable novel of growing up, *The Finishing School*. With its house on top of a mountain and a child who may be a bomb that will one day go off, *Flora* tells a story of love, regret, and the things we can't undo. It will stay with readers long after the last page is turned.

Flora Details

Date : Published May 7th 2013 by Bloomsbury USA

ISBN : 9781620401200

Author : Gail Godwin

Format : Hardcover 278 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction, Young Adult, Coming Of Age, War, World War II

 [Download Flora ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Flora ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Flora Gail Godwin

From Reader Review Flora for online ebook

Rob Slaven says

In a not totally unfamiliar preamble, I received this book through the courtesy of the publisher, Bloomsbury, by simply responding to an advert in the Shelf Awareness newsletter. Despite this kind consideration, my candid thoughts appear below.

To summarize, it's 1944 and Helen, our protagonist, has recently lost her grandmother and so her cousin Flora has come for the summer to watch over her while her father goes off to do secret work for the government. In those two short months much is learned on both sides as two very different people figure out how to get along.

Flora isn't a narrative so much as it is a character sketch. Events in the book creep past but until the end there's not really any pivotal moment or any plot to speak of. The author simply paints a picture of these two personalities trapped in a fishbowl, isolated from the rest of their small-town universe. Flora, who comes from a somewhat disregarded and backward side of the family, is looked down upon by the much younger Helen. Yet Helen fails to realize just how naive and inexperienced she is despite her judgmental attitude toward her cousin.

Readers looking for a dramatic storyline are sure to be disappointed, but I don't really think that's the point of Flora at all. Godwin portrays her characters from the viewpoint of her naive narrator in a uniquely realistic way. Reading closely one can almost remember making some of the same misjudgments about people as our young Helen. Our author writes with such clarity that one thinks she must be simply copying from her own diary from her youth. While Helen is so clearly fleshed out within, Flora remains mysteriously simple and one cannot help but wonder what complexities lie beneath the facade.

As I said though, Flora is no narrative wonder. It can take a while to connect with and readers must accept it for what it is. Flora does, however, provide an insightful look at the pre-teen psyche of the 40s and a bit of history with its mentions of polio and listening to evening mysteries on the wireless. Additionally, the story is narrated simultaneously by young Helen and old Helen as she looks back on these events with broader perspective. It can sometimes be hard to tell when these transitions of viewpoint occur so readers should be alert for them.

In summary, Flora is an interesting though not outstanding novel. Godwin's writing is superb and she paints a colorful view on her main characters but in sum total the book seems to be lacking a bit. Readers who manage to finish will be well rewarded but I anticipate some foot-tapping from those expecting more of a narrative thread along the way.

Dale Harcombe says

I've long been a fan of Gail Godwin's work. This novel took me a little longer to warm to largely, I suspect, because I am not a big fan of coming of age stories. But it was Gail Godwin, so I kept reading. By the end I was thoroughly involved in the story of Helen Anstruther and the summer spent with Flora, the twenty two year old cousin who came to care for ten year old Helen while her father was away on a secret mission. It is three quarters of the way through the novel before the reader finds out what that work involves.

The story is told by the aged Helen looking back in that summer. Helen's mother died when she was three and her grandmother who virtually reared her since then died, which is why Helen's father needed someone to care for Helen while he was away. Because of a polio scare in the community, Helen and Flora are confined mainly to the house and each other's company over the summer, except for the visit of Finn, the local grocery delivery guy.

Gail Godwin has captured the self centred attitude of children, and how children think of everything that happens and the interactions of people in regard to themselves. She is very good at picking up on the small details of life.

There were some points I particularly agreed with including the watering down of language that occurs when some people try to 'update' older language in prayer book, hymns etc, about remorse having gone out of fashion and the way people try and make excuses for behaviour and excuse guilt.

This novel is set during World War Two. Reading about the bombing of Hiroshima made me think of A Girl of Nagasaki, a favourite poem by Alex Skovron. I had to go back and re-read it. You can read it here.

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets...#>

The ending of Flora is quite startling. While I didn't adore this book as much as Father Melancholy's Daughter, Evensong, Evenings at Five, and some of Godwin's earlier novels, I did enjoy it and thought about the characters long after finished reading, which is why I have changed my original rating from three and a half stars to four. This is not a book where a lot happens, so if you're looking for an action book it is not for you. But if you like an in depth character study and something that makes you think, you should enjoy it.

Michelle says

Where do I start?? Go up above and read the description of the book. There you go, you have read most of the book. The only significant event in the book happens at the end of the story. Throughout the book Helen acts like a selfish pretentious little brat who acts like 2 year old when she doesn't get her way or when something happens that didn't go her way. She spends a majority of the time making Flora out to be some simpleminded hillbilly who is dumber than a bag of rocks.

I didn't find the book haunting or beautifully written. The beginning was horribly choppy and all over the place. With so many 5 star ratings I began to wonder if I was even reading the same book as everyone else. Alas, I was. I guess this was just not my cup of tea.

Suzanne says

I was walking in the pool lane and ran into Charlotte, a summer friend. We asked after each other. We hadn't seen each other for 10 months, and then asked after our only daughters, girls around 30. Then we got around to books. Each of us had a recommendation. Mine was Flora, by Gail Godwin. Every reader, calls Godwin an old friend. We all have a favorite Godwin novel.

I was only 70 percent done this afternoon, but I recommended Flora. I said, "I think you'll like Flora, but I don't know what happens." I knew that this sleepy little book set in North Carolina during 1945 about 11 year old Helen, a character like Scout from To Kill a Mockingbird spending the summer with her mother's cousin, Flora, a 22 year old innocent who reminded me of Boo Radley, would not end well, but would end beautifully.

I was correct. As I finished this book which is set in a quiet old house haunted by Helen's recently deceased

grandmother and her long deceased mother, I was left with a fine pencil drawing of a young girl who thinks too much about appearances and an even finer image of a young woman who thinks nothing of images and concerns herself only with love and nourishing those around her with food and bits of herself which she serves unselfishly, in generous portions.

?Karen says

This quiet, atmospheric novel drew me in slowly as the story of a few characters during the summer of 1945 North Carolina unfolds. Ten year old Helen is being watched by twenty-two year old Flora, Helen's deceased mother's cousin. Helen's dad is away working on a secret war project, and her beloved grandmother has recently died. Helen has only three friends, and that summer she loses two of them right off and alienates another. Helen is precocious, somewhat bratty, and very smart. At first she reminded me a lot of another ten year old fictional character, Flavia DeLuce, who I adore. Both can be such smart asses. But Helen was given more of a hurtful, spiteful, slant to her ways; and the reader can only hope it doesn't come back to bite her any more than it already had, as she did have her good moments too.

It is a summer of these formerly-estranged cousins getting to know each other, and then themselves as a result. Although the grandmother is gone, her wisdom is often recalled by Helen and the letters she had exchanged with Flora. The book just would not have been the same without the wonderful character of Finn, a paratrooper in the war, who befriends the cousins.

Grief, regret, guilt, redemption, with the war story in the background, all made this a pretty likeable read for me. 3.5 stars.

Megan says

This book receives a three star rating from me. Although I liked it and don't regret reading it, I wasn't "wowed" by it and I feel no urge to rush back and read it again. The biggest issue I had with the book is one of personal preference - I prefer novels with a more engaging plot rather than character pieces. This book tends to drag and although it is clear to the reader that *something* is coming, that something comes far too late in the story and is practically skimmed over.

The other giant issue I had with the story (that is not based on my personal preferences) is the unanswered or vague supernatural things that occurred. A large part of the problem is the marketing the book receives, but the writing itself has issues too. At one point, Helen has a nearly suicidal moment where she becomes disconnected from the world while a "voice" speaks to her. Although mentioned again, this is never explained. And adult Helen makes no mention of it towards the end of the novel. Did she ever hear voice again? Was the house haunted? Did she have mental issues? I don't like that this felt like such a big event, only to turn out to be nothing.

I also had issues with the way the book's critical moment happens, but I won't discuss due to spoilers. I was left feeling underwhelmed.

Jill says

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” For 10-year-old Helen, these words ring true. Living in North Carolina during the tail end of World War II, Helen is devastated by losses – the early death of her mother, the sudden death of her beloved grandmother Nonie, a friend’s diagnosis of polio, another friend’s move, and her father’s decision to go to Oak Ridge to engage in secret war work.

In this compulsively readable book, Helen’s 22-year-old cousin Flora – her mother’s first cousin, once removed – moves in from Alabama to care for her during the summer of her father’s absence. The reader learns early on that Helen possesses an attitude of haughty superiority. She reflects, “Most days my feelings fell somewhere on the scale between bored/protected and bored/superior. But there were also times when I felt I had to fight to keep from losing the little I had been left with.”

The narrative is written as a reflection from Helen – now an older woman – trying to make sense of that poignant summer. An aura of menace hangs over each chapter; as readers, we know that something really bad happened but we don’t know exactly what. We do know that Helen is a fiercely imaginative child who feels an extraordinary kinship with her deceased (and also haughty) grandmother, who listens to radio shows about the occult, and who has a special relationship with the cleaning woman, who believes in messages from the beyond.

Gail Godwin is a master crafter in revealing the push-pull that Helen experiences – a disdain for all that Flora represents (the overabundance of emotion, the simple-hearted ability to willingly let others in) versus the “hope and promise and mutual development” that sustains them in their best moments together. When another character, Finn, who has suffered both physically and mentally from his part in the War enters this isolated scenario, fate intervenes in unforeseen ways.

The novel lingers on the broad themes of loss, regret, illusions, and how one impromptu decision can undo our lives. Ms. Godwin trusts her readers to know where all this is going (for example, with the benefit of history, we know what occurs in Oak Ridge; we also have a pretty good idea where the book will end up). It’s the journey, not the destination, that makes this wonderful reading. I’m torn between a high 4 star and a low 5 star. I’m going with the 5 star because once I started this book, there was no way I was putting it down until I reached the conclusion.

Gary the Bookworm says

There are things we can’t undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service to life.

This is the opening sentence in *Flora*, Gail Godwin's unsettling gem of a novel about memory and remorse. The narrator, seventy year old Helen, is remembering the summer of 1945, which she spent quarantined with her mother's cousin, Flora. Helen is turning eleven on August 7. Motherless since she was three, she was being raised by her father, an alcoholic and his mother, her beloved Nonie, née Honora. Nonie's death while shopping for a new hat for Easter, leaves Helen not only bereft but without a caretaker when her father deploys to Oak Ridge, TN for a top-secret government job. She barely knows Flora, who arrives from Alabama on the heels of an outbreak of polio in the community.

Isolated on the side of a mountain in a ramshackle abode that had once housed "recoverers" which was Nonie's label for TB patients and alcoholics, Helen learns that Flora and her grandmother had been regular correspondents since her mother's funeral. Flora has kept all of Nonie's letters, using them as her guide for living. Helen desperately wants to see those letters. She reads a few of them surreptitiously, causing her to revise her impressions of her grandmother and to rethink their relationship. Eventually, she gets the letters, but the events surrounding their acquisition are tragic.

Flora is described by one character as simple-hearted and from Helen's perspective she seems simple-minded as well. Godwin manages to create compelling and complex portraits of all her characters-both dead and alive-but there is very little action. Their only other human contacts are a weekly housekeeper, who believes in ghosts, an appealing delivery man with a troubled past and the pastor from Helen's church. The story unfolds slowly, but the tension is there from the beginning. Critics have compared it to *The Turn of the Screw* and *Atonement*. There are even some parallels to *The Magic Mountain*. It is a beautifully-constructed study of the peril and pangs of early adolescence and adulthood during turbulent times. It is fitting that their private tragedy occurs the day after the annihilation at Hiroshima because the world Godwin artfully evokes here is gone forever...except in the realm of memory.

Diane S ? says

3.5 This is a novel about regret. a woman looking back at a summer, when she was ten, that had a horrible end. Helen's mother had died when she was three, so she was raised by her father and his mother, Nonnie. They live in a small town in North Carolina in a house the had once been a home for people with physical or mental injuries that were not quite ready to face the world. They called them the recoverers and Helen had grown up with these stories and others. When her beloved Nonnie dies, and her father decides to take a job at Oak Ridge, twenty -two yr. old Flora, a distant cousin, comes to take care of Helen in the house.Helen, who has lost almost everything she loved shows a decided lack of compassion for others, at one point I thought she might be a sociopath, but she was just a ten yr. old girl who has suffered losses and had existed mostly in an adult world. I loved how Godwin uses an internal monologue to let the reader know what Helen is thinking. She also does a wonderful job of evoking the time and place, radio dramas, the racism and snobbery, the making of the bomb and the end of the war. This is a novel about the mistakes we make in our youth that can follow us and change one in ways we cannot know. A quiet novel, with vivid characters and the life of a girl over one summer.

Mij Woodward says

Is there such a thing as getting mad at a book one has read?

I'm mad, Flora, and I am not going to take it anymore!!

I am mad because you made me struggle to finish reading you. Started out so hopeful, just like Charlie Brown must feel when Lucy holds the football for him.

Slowly, I began to realize that 10-year-old Helen is not like any 10-year-old I have ever met.

I confess, at age nine, I was capable of calculating and conniving. On one of our family's vacations, I felt sorry for myself because I kept losing at ping-pong to my younger sister, and no one seemed to care. So I staged a "running away" thing. I grabbed food from the fridge in our little cabin, wrapped it in a big red

handkerchief that I tied to the end of a stick, ala Huckelberry Finn, and took off down the road with our trusty dog, the stick resting on my shoulder.

When I got back, my father was fuming, and I got my first and last spanking from him.

One thing I remember about that incident--before taking off with our dog and my Huckleberry Finn pouch, I deliberately left the door of the fridge open wide, and left the bread-bag open and out. I wanted my family to see these clues and worry about me, to know I was gone.

I mention this incident to show that I know some 10-year-olds can engage in ruses and plots.

Therefore, I grasp that 10-year-old Helen was not your stereotypical sweet innocent young girl.

But at the same time, under my belt, is the experience of raising four boys, as well as taking care of my grandson at that age. I've had experience with kids that age.

With that experience as my guide, I ask you:

*what 10-year-old uses words like "inferiority complex" or even "naive"?

*what 10-year-old talks about not really being "attracted" to someone?

I could offer many other incidents involving 10-year-old Helen that just did not ring true. In her conversations with Flora, she seemed to me to be more like a 16-year-old, or even an adult, in the sophistication of her comments.

I know that some kids are precocious, brilliant, and have vocabularies that can surprise us all, but Helen just did not ever ring true for me.

I googled Gail Godwin, trying to find out if she had ever raised a family. Still do not know the answer to that question, but at least from googling, I could find no evidence that she did.

Then, who was her editor at the publishing house? How old was that editor, what experience had that editor had with 10-year-old kids?

I read all the glowing reviews of Flora. It's what drew me in to read this book. But now I sort of feel like the boy who points out the emperor had no clothes.

So, I am mad at Flora. (The book, not the character.)

Another complaint:

One of the characters, Beryl Jones, listens to radio programs when she cleans house. Like "Guiding Light" and "All My Children". Oh please. The story of Flora takes place during the WWII era. "All My Children" was a television show created in the 70's!

Editor, where were you?

This is an interior kind of novel, about subtleties of motivations and ruminations. Not much happens. Not much action. When something dramatic happens in the end, it turned out to be predictable for me.

On the one hand, I felt for 10-year-old Helen, what she had lost in her young life. On the other hand, she was

not likable. Nothing much endearing about her. And I never really got to know Flora. Not enough emotion in these pages.

The liking or not liking of a book is all chemistry. What is gold for one reader is disgusting to another. The chemistry was off for me with Flora. I just got angry the more I read!

Diane says

In the summer of 1945, the end of WWII, 10-year old Helen Anstruther is in for yet another change in her young life. Her mother died when she was only 3, and Nonie who cared for her since her mother's death, has recently passed away as well. Her father is still in the picture, the principal of a high school in North Carolina. He drinks too much and isn't someone you could call a nurturer. This summer he will be away to work on a secret project for the government. In his absence, he has hired "Flora", a 22-year old cousin from Alabama to come to care for Helen.

Intro ----"There are things we can't undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service to life.

That summer Flora and I were together every day and night for three weeks in June, all of July, and the first six days of August. I was ten, going on eleven, and she was twenty-two. I thought I knew her intimately, I thought I knew everything there was to know about her, but she has since become a profound study for me, more intensely so in recent years. Styles have come and gone in storytelling, psychologizing, theologizing, but Flora keeps providing me with something as enigmatic as it is basic to life, as timeless as it is fresh."

Helen is not thrilled, a pretentious, know-it-all child who finds fault with just about everything Helen will say and do. Her sense of superiority, vivid imagination, and her self-reliance were, were things about her that I actually came to love. She's a sneaky child who tries to undermine Flora every chance she gets, yet there is something about Helen, maybe her spunk, that made me love her all the same.

In addition to Flora there is Finn, a young Veteran who delivers groceries to Flora and Helen who are confined to a ram shackled mountain lodge by Helen's father, a polio survivor, because of another polio outbreak. Finn provides for some interest competition for his attention.

The story is narrated by Helen in the present as a 70-year old, as she looks back on that summer with Flora came to stay after finishing her education in preparation for a teaching career. Old letters that Flora had exchanged over the years with Helen's Nonie serve to fill in the blanks into the family's past. So it is over the course of one summer that Helen learns the many life lessons that can't always be taught in school. In addition, she realizes Flora wasn't all like the older cousin she thought she was as a child.

Flora, is a terrific story about family, loss and how childhood experiences can impact us for life. I loved this one! This just might make my Top 10 list for 2013. Read it!

Claudia Putnam says

So glad to learn there's a new Gail Godwin novel out and about. It doesn't disappoint.

This is a story about how a girl locked in a world of pretense is forced--through tragedy that would qualify

for the definition a Godwin character supplied in I think The Finishing School--to develop the kind of insight and depth she will need in order to become the writer who can reflect back on these events. We don't see her growing up to become that writer. We see a little girl who is quite smart, quite gifted at making up stories, and quite narcissistic.

All children are narcissistic to some degree, but even this girl's more insightful and interesting friend, also quite brilliant for a 10-year-old in the pre-psychotherapy years of the 1940s, thinks Helen's over the top.

When we leave young Helen though, having accidentally contributed to the death of her nanny and cousin (here again the role she thinks she has played is overdramatized and narcissistic, but I suppose that is better, for her, than facing up to the role her father played--one more adult in her life who is not in fact a member of her glorious family on the hill but just another loser), it's amazing how much has come together without its having to be said. Just as Grandmother Nonie would have devised.

I only objected to: the father's parentage having been explained, because I thought we could deduce that on our own; some of Helen's thoughts and observations seemed WAY ahead of a 10-year-old's capabilities (I was willing to write some of this off due to inevitable blurring in the narration--after all, the older narrator is a character, too, and she is bound to confuse her voice with the younger Helen's, and I was also willing to assume that in some cases kids back then were raised as mini adults, and also that Nonie raised Helen as a little friend rather than as a little girl; still, would Helen have the perspective to dismiss Flora's "adolescent" tears, when she, Helen, is ten? I think a tighter edit might have helped. Finally I wondered about the ending itself, whether it needed to be quite so cataclysmic, after all the other deaths. And if it wouldn't have been worse, somehow, if Helen had messed up Flora's career, or her love.

And, though done with just the right light touch, there is a terrible, wonderful explication of the breakdown of self that can occur when the essential stories that have defined us come apart. At one point, Helen walks through a rip in the world occasioned by something, just a minor thing, really, that Flora has mentioned about Helen's mother, Flora's cousin. "Nobody until Flora had called my childhood strange." Brooding on this, she walks down her driveway, a shredded affair that her grandmother has been able to dismiss as something they will deal with later, after the war is over, but that everyone else in town criticizes mightily. Her line of thought, for various reasons, proceeds to the question of how she, Helen, appears to the outside world. Is she pretty? Beautiful? A friend's mother has said she might be stately, like her grandmother, but her best friend, the one with the biting, insightful comments that always make Helen laugh at everyone else, has said Helen's grandmother looked like a mastiff. Helen had looked up mastiffs in a dog book and not spoken to her friend for a week. Then, after a few more steps, a few more thought, she goes through the rip in the veil of the world. "It was like being conscious of losing my mind at the exact moment I was losing it."

She is saved by a character who nearly saves them all. Perhaps it can even be said that he does save Helen, after all.

Terrific writing throughout.

First line: "There are things we can't undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service to life."

"That's the thing about the dead. They make you understand that time isn't as simple as you thought."

"The living room was filling was a nostalgic orange light, which made everything look less shabby and more historical."

"When did remorse fall into disfavor? It was sometime during the second half of my life.... around the same time that 'Stop feeling guilty,' and 'You're too hard on yourself,' and 'You need to love yourself more' came

into fashion..... Remorse derives from the Latin *remordere*: to vex, disturb, bite, sting again (the "again" is important). It began as intransitive verb, as in my "my sinful lyfe dost me remord."

Betsy McTiernan says

I used to be a big fan of Godwin, but somehow I let her recent novels slip by me until I read my sister-in-law's review of *Flora*. She says: "I was left with a fine pencil drawing of a young girl [Helen] who thinks too much about appearances and an even finer image of a young woman who thinks nothing of images and concerns herself only with love and nourishing those around her with food and bits of herself which she serves unselfishly, in generous portions." I think this is a perfect description of almost 11-year-old Helen and her cousin--and summer caretaker--Flora. I was caught up in the story from the beginning. The fact that nothing much was happening enticed me: I knew something big (probably tragic) would happen at the end, but I couldn't guess what it might be (no spoilers here). Since finishing, I have found myself thinking about the narrator, the elderly Helen, who grew up to become a writer. I'm wondering why she seemed so removed from her young self. Is it because of what happened at the end of her story, or because the adult Helen was so like her younger self? In any event, I've decided that she is the real protagonist and the character that will stay with me.

Doreen says

This is a coming of age novel set in North Carolina in the summer of 1945. The narrator, Helen Anstruther, from the vantage point of old age, tells the story of that formative summer when she was approaching her eleventh birthday on August 6. Helen's mother died seven years earlier and she was left in the care of her father and paternal grandmother (Nonie); however, Nonie's recent death and the departure of her father for war work in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, result in Helen's being left in the care of Flora, her 22-year-old second cousin. Except for Finn, a young man who delivers groceries, Helen and Flora are isolated in their mountain-top home because of a polio outbreak in the community.

This novel is very much a character study. Helen is a very precocious and imaginative pre-teen. Flora is preparing for her first teaching position in the fall, and she and Helen play a game of school for which Helen creates and acts out the roles of ten students in a fifth-grade class. She is not, however, always a likeable person. She tends to be moody and has an attitude of superiority; a friend tells her, "your trouble is you think you're better than other people." Typical of her age group, Helen is very self-centred; again, her friend tells her, "Other people don't exist when you're not with them. We're like toys or something. You play with them and examine them and then you put them on a shelf and go away." Indeed, Helen's behaviour attests to the accuracy of these observations: she doesn't even write notes to friends unless she is guilty in doing so, and her interest in her grandmother's old letters is largely restricted to looking for references to herself. Helen also demonstrates the youthful tendency to view the world in terms of black and white; she doesn't see Flora's positive traits or her grandmother's negative traits.

Helen's judgmental attitude comes to the fore in her actions towards Flora. At various times, she describes Flora as simple-minded and a backward country bumpkin. She derides her willingness to engage others in conversation and her tendency to display emotion which Helen mocks as her "gift of tears." In her naivety,

Helen describes Flora as “prosaic, [and] unimaginative” and focuses on her “eagerness and disregard for what should be left unsaid” and does not see that Flora has “no deceit or malice.”

What is wonderful about the book is that the reader will both dislike Helen and sympathize with her. She is motherless and her father chooses to leave her despite the very recent death of her beloved grandmother. One friend is diagnosed with polio and another is moving away with her family, so she is obviously lonely. She speaks of “times when I felt I had to fight to keep from losing the little I had been left with, including my sense of myself.” It is heartbreaking to read about Helen’s attempts to keep her grandmother’s spirit close to her; she moves into her bedroom and models herself after Nonie, even slavishly repeating her harsh judgments of others: “I seemed to merge with Nonie and came out thinking and speaking more like her.” The only stability in Helen’s life is provided by Mrs. Jones, the woman who for many years has been coming to clean the house once a week, and the large rambling house in which she grew up but which is slowly falling apart around her. Most readers will not have difficulty empathizing because they will have experienced loss and will see something of their youthful selves in her.

I loved the hints throughout that there is much more going on than Helen perceives or misunderstands because of her naivety and inexperience. Helen misses her father and wants him to return; she doesn’t fully understand his comment that his true calling “had been thwarted by the social expectations of others” and doesn’t see the unhappiness evidenced in his behaviour. Tragedies in Flora’s life are hinted at in Nonie’s letters, but Helen is blind to them. Likewise, she interprets Finn’s visits to the house as proof of his feelings for her. Reading between the lines and realizing what Helen does not is one of the pleasures of this book. Furthermore, anyone with knowledge of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and August 6, 1945, will also understand some historical significance to events outside Helen’s immediate world.

There is suspense in the book of course. The reader knows that something will happen; the opening clearly indicates something tragic will occur: “There are things we can’t undo, but perhaps there is a kind of constructive remorse that could transform regrettable acts into something of service in life.” What does happen causes Helen to lose her innocence. In this regard, the novel reminded me of *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. There are certainly similarities between Helen and Briony; they share a talent for writing and their childish reactions trigger events that can’t be undone, actions for which they feel remorse and a need to atone.

The plot of this novel is not action-packed, but there is much to ponder in its examination of human experience. It is a wonderful example of interpretive literature.

Note: I received an advance reading copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley.

Please check out my reader's blog (<http://schatjesshelves.blogspot.ca/>) and follow me on Twitter (@DCYakabuski).

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

I was so intrigued by the characterization in the first few pages that I just had to read this book. It’s short and I read it very quickly, but in the end it was something of a disappointment.

Like many first-person narratives, this story is told by an old woman, Helen, looking back on her childhood: specifically, the summer of 1945, when she was ten and left for the summer in the care of her 22-year-old cousin, Flora. Readers are alerted from the first page that the summer will end in tragedy, and in the meanwhile we read about the often troubled relationship between the two main characters, as well as their

interactions with others in the community.

While the characterization is the best thing about this book, the plot is the crux of my problem with it. At various points in the story the older Helen interjects discussions of her remorse, such that the ultimate tragedy is quite predictable; but it's easy to see why Godwin made this choice, because without the promise of something dramatic eventually happening, readers might give up on the mundane account of Helen's life that precedes it. Personally, I don't require dramatic events to keep my interest in a story, but I do like more tension and momentum than this book provides: something needs to be at stake, be it a relationship, someone's position in the community, or a character's choice of direction in life. Unfortunately, here there just isn't much; Helen and Flora go about their daily routines, and the bulk of the book leads up to the tragedy only indirectly. (view spoiler) Then it ends. This is frustrating because there are two potentially great stories lurking just beneath the surface: one about how Helen's remorse affects her and her attempts to atone, and the other about Helen and Flora's family, with its colorful characters and many secrets. We hear almost nothing about Helen's life after that summer. We do learn something about several of the relatives and their secrets, but I wanted more.

Because there are some excellent characters here: the eponymous Flora is one; Helen's grandmother, father and mother are all fascinating and deserve more page time than they get; Flora's relatives are intriguing as well, and I was disappointed not to meet them. Helen is a serviceable narrator with a decent amount of complexity, but this was not one of those books that renders a child protagonist so believably as to take me back to how it felt to be her age. Outside of the family, the secondary characters are a mixed bag: Finn, the war veteran who captures both Helen's and Flora's affections, was not as interesting to me as he was to them; Mrs. Jones, on the other hand, was vivid and believable. The characters' relationships are believable, and their interactions often fun to read.

Other than that, the writing and dialogue are solid, although the characters have a tendency to sound writerly when they talk for more than a few sentences at a time. I liked the use of the grandmother's letters to show another side of her character, but for someone meant to be so discreet and reserved, her circumlocutions are awfully transparent; it tends to be immediately obvious to the reader what she's talking about even when she's evidently trying to obscure it.

Overall, an okay book, but one that had the potential to be better with some smarter editing. If you're a big fan of character studies and less concerned about plot, this book may be right for you; on the other hand, I tend to be more interested in character than plot myself, and still found it lacking in momentum. It's short and decently written, just not as good as I expected.

Maya Panika says

It is 1945, and Helen, a spoiled, selfish, self-centred, snobbish, *deeply* unpleasant ten year old girl is forced to spend her summer at home, trapped by an outbreak of polio. Her father is away working on the atomic bomb so her cousin Flora arrives from Alabama to care for her. Flora is delightful, kind and thoughtful and Helen instantly despises her, dismissing her as an idiot country bumpkin. But then there are very few people Helen doesn't feel are beneath her: the only exceptions - aside from her snobbish and recently deceased grandmother - are her father and the injured soldier Finn, on whom Helen develops a crush. And that's pretty much it. There's precious little plot. There's no doubt that Gail Godwin can write well; the character studies here are wonderfully well done, but the almost complete absence of a story made this tedious reading for me. There is something so lifeless about the prose, so lacking in some thing, some spark of life that sets a good novel apart. I was terribly bored, it's taken *ages* for me to read. It simply didn't excite me or inspire me to pick it up; reading it became a chore. If I hadn't had to review it, I would have given up by chapter five. It

does pick up a little in the last third, when events occur and things actually happen, but the acceleration is too feeble and too late to save this lacklustre tale, so lacking in vim and vigour that even the high points- few as they are - feel glossed over and consequently lost.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Gail Godwin is astonishingly good at character development, and this novel is no exception. The plot, however, stumbles along forever before flopping spectacularly.

Cynthia says

One Summer

I read her Godwin's first ten or so books right as they came out but somehow got out of that habit. After reading "Flora" all I can think is, "What was I thinking?" Flora is set at the end of World War II in North Carolina where ten year old Helen, who has just lost her beloved grandmother, is left alone with her twenty-two year old cousin Flora who's acting as Helen's babysitter. Her father is away in Tennessee at Oak Ridge hard at work on war work. Helen and Flora are isolated on their mountaintop due to a polio scare in the valley. It's going to be a long summer. Their only company is a local priest and a grocery delivery man...and the radio of course.

The story is told by Helen reflecting in her old age about that summer and perhaps this accounts for the unchildlike feel of her perspective. Helen is a haughty and even contemptuous ten year old. Flora is open and loving and quick to talk about the Alabama upbringing that she shared with Helen's deceased mother. Helen previously knew almost nothing about her mother's side of the family and has been unduly influenced by a loving but status conscious grandmother and a largely absent father. Since Helen's mom died when she was three and she barely remembers her Flora's stories are a revelation. As the summer wanes more bits and pieces come out, not all of them flattering.

This a story where not much happens outwardly yet the summer serves as a pivot for both these girls. They're both forever changed by knowing one another, for better or worse. Flora's story shows that neglect can be cruel. It's a mistake I won't make with Godwin again.

This review is based on an e-galley provided by the publisher.
(Disclaimer included as required by the FTC.)

Patrice Hoffman says

The novel Flora, by Gail Godwin, is a first-person narrative by an author, haunted by the summer she spent with her older cousin. It was the summer Helen Anstruther's grandmother died, her father was called to work on a top-secret job during World War II, and a small outbreak of polio has her captive in the house with Flora. This novel is about regret, tragedy, guilt, and a young girl's journey into adulthood.

Helen lets us know from the beginning that this novel is not going to be one of those lovely tales of summer

fun and that some sort of awakening is going to come about by a woman she describes as being layer-less, simple-minded. As Helen and Flora traipse around the huge home that was once a home for recoverers, Helen begins to find herself. She is also confronted with the things that others don't like about her such as the aire of superiority she walks around with constantly.

Godwin delivers a character driven novel that kept me interested until the end. Characters that make the reader love and hate them are the best rounded. Helen is a well-rounded character who I often disliked because of her brattyness yet she won me over at times with her intelligence. Flora was just sunshine in a bottle and represents everything Helen isn't. The need for strong characters is necessary in a novel that primarily takes place in one setting and Godwin excels at delivering on this front.

Overall, Flora is a great summer read that I know fans of Gail Godwin will enjoy. This period novel will remind readers of the summer that changed their lives for the good (or bad). Like Helen, we will wish for a do-over or some sort of try-again in order to get things right; To show appreciation to someone who's only crime was having a simple-heart. The occasions that haunt us help make us who we are today.

Julie Christine says

To paraphrase Colm Tóibín, skilled writers explore not the spaces crowded with words and stories, characters and events; they explore the empty spaces, the quiet that most of us seek to fill with the noise of life.

In her gently menacing *Flora* Gail Godwin creates a character of the empty space. It hovers just beyond the threshold of every doorway at the sprawling One Thousand Sunset Drive and in the dense North Carolina woods that may someday swallow whole the lodge and its remaining inhabitants. It listens in on whispered conversations behind closed doors, it reads letters tucked in the top drawer of a bureau, and it haunts a little girl's dreams.

In the summer of 1945, deep in the woods of Appalachia, Helen Anstruther is approaching her eleventh birthday. She comes to us by way of her seventy-something self, looking back on that long-ago summer with tenderness and remorse. We know this little girl is about to face something terrible - Godwin's careful foreshadowing releases a current of dread from its opening pages. But the narrator takes her time, giving us empty spaces to fill with our own coming-of-age memories.

Helen's world contracts dramatically as school ends for the summer. Her father is called to Oak Ridge, Tennessee to work on a secret military project and leaves her in the care of her young aunt, Flora. We know, of course, what Oak Ridge means and how the summer of 1945 ends, but to Helen, World War II is in the abstract – something that fills radio hours and sermons. Not long after Flora arrives from Alabama, there is a polio outbreak in town. Helen's father quarantines his daughter and Flora to the lonely lodge on the mountain. Their only relief from each other is the weekly visit by Mrs. Jones, who cleans Astruther Lodge, and by Finn, who delivers for the town grocer. During these “three weeks in June, all of July, and the first six days of August” we quietly explore the head and heart of a lonely little girl.

But the novel's title is not *Helen*, it is *Flora*. And it is Flora's behavior and essence adult Helen attempts to reconcile with her memories and her excavation of the quiet spaces during the summer of 1945 at One Thousand Sunset Drive.

This is not a novel of events, though the few that occur are earthshattering. It is a work of voices- voices

from the past, from the grave, from letters and awkward telephone calls, voices from inside. It is the voice of child who is just discovering her own power but has no idea how to restrain it or use it only for good. It is the voice of longing and regret.

It's the perfect time to read this novel, on the cusp of these long, warm days filled with such promise. Do you remember how it felt to be a child at the start of summer break, long before today's hyper-programmed "vacations"? Recall that feeling of freedom and possibility, with just a tinge of loneliness and boredom. Now imagine how your world could turn upside-down in just a few short, golden weeks. Allow yourself some empty space.
