

# A Reading and Discussion Guide

Novel & Short Story Winner, 19th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

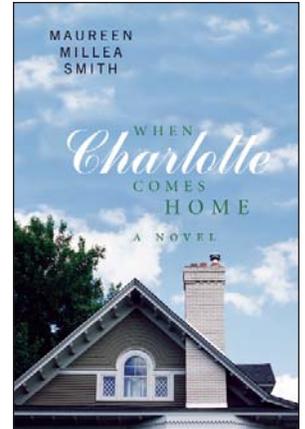
## ***When Charlotte Comes Home* by Maureen Millea Smith**

Alyson Books, 2006

Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library. Made possible by a grant from the Office of State Library Services – Minnesota Department of Education.

### **SUMMARY:**

*When Charlotte Comes Home* is the story of Fred Holly, the oldest of four children, set in Omaha, Nebraska in the 1960s and '70s. During his senior year in high school, Fred works part-time at the Omaha art museum where, surrounded by beauty, he escapes his father's worries about the Vietnam War and the draft. As fall progresses, Fred becomes jealous when his best friend starts spending most of his time with his male debate coach, and then Fred's precocious eleven-year-old sister, Charlotte is admitted to the hospital with kidney problems. As Charlotte's condition worsens, great sadness descends upon the Holly household. The story follows Fred into adulthood where he continues to search for self-discovery and to understand his family's loss.



### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the significance of Fred starting his life story with, "It began with the colic. Charlotte was born with the colic"?
2. Describe Fred and Charlotte's relationship. Do you think Fred would have experienced the loss of Charlotte differently if their relationship had been less conflicted?
3. Why do the children call their father Morgan instead of Dad?
4. What role does the sixties play in the novel?
5. In what ways is Laurence special? Describe his relationship with Charlotte, Fred and Morgan.
6. Describe Charlotte and Hetty's relationship. In what ways is their relationship a typical childhood relationship? What strikes you as unusual about their relationship?
7. The book touches on many losses besides the loss of Charlotte's life. What are some of those losses, and how do they impact the lives of Fred and other family members?
8. What role does Fred's homosexuality play in the novel?
9. In what ways does the museum provide an escape for Fred, and from what is he escaping? Describe other ways in which Fred finds escape.
10. When the author was ten years old, she experienced the death of her sister who was older by one year. She explains that the book grew stronger when she diverged from the facts of her own life. Why do you think this was the case?
11. What is the significance of the book's title? Describe your understanding of Charlotte coming home.
12. Does the ending bring closure to the story, and how?

## A CONVERSATION WITH MAUREEN MILLEA SMITH:

### Q. What inspired you to write *When Charlotte Comes Home*?

The death of my older sister in 1968 inspired the novel. She was eleven years old and I was ten years old. Her death changed the storyline of my family's life. In my grief, I became a passionate reader. I began to understand life through stories.

### Q. How long did it take you to write the book?

I began writing about these characters in 1996. One draft was my thesis in 2000. I completely rewrote the book after two revisions. It was a solid manuscript in 2003. Altogether the book took seven years.

### Q. What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *When Charlotte Comes Home*?

The book grew stronger when I diverged from the facts of my life. It became "truer" as it developed into a more fully realized universe of fiction.

### Q. What do you like most about the book?

I like the setting, which is the setting of my childhood. I was fascinated with the sixties. I was a child when it happened, but I remember how turbulent and sad and dramatic and romantic it was. That I remember so much attests to the fact that I was merely a child observing adults, watching with awe and shock the evening news and reading the front page of *The Omaha World Herald*.

### Q. Please share some of your journey in becoming a writer.

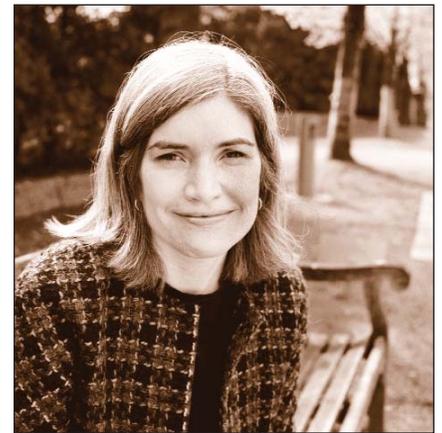
Writing was something that I enjoyed as a teenager. It was one of the few things that two of my teachers in college affirmed. My writing voice and speaking voice have nothing to do with one another. They are as different as night and day. I did an M.F.A. at Hamline University to learn the craft of fiction and to establish the habit of writing. It is like learning a sport. It takes discipline.

### Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

I talk to my husband and daughter, clean house, take walks, and read the *New York Times* and *Minneapolis Star Tribune* over my morning coffee every day before going to work at the Edina Library. I pray for peace for everyone every day. I talk to our cat. I fall behind in emails. I check in with family and friends, and read before bed.

## ABOUT MAUREEN MILLEA SMITH:

Maureen Millea Smith is a native of Omaha, Nebraska. A graduate of the University of Wyoming in Laramie, she received her M.A. in Library Science from the University of Iowa. Smith's first published book, *When Charlotte Comes Home*, began as her thesis project for her M.F.A., which she received from Hamline University. She is a librarian with the Hennepin County system and lives in Edina, Minnesota with her husband and daughter.



The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. Visit us online at [www.thefriends.org](http://www.thefriends.org).

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