

Under Magnolia | Reading Group Guide

The beloved, bestselling “Bard of Tuscany” (New York Times), Frances Mayes now turns her writer’s eye to Fitzgerald, Georgia, the colorful southern town that defined her early years and shaped her understanding of home and family.

In her signature voice, Mayes introduces us to the people and places of her bittersweet past. From her years as a spirited, secretive child through her university studies—a period of exquisite freedom that set in motion her literary life and her passion for travel—*Under Magnolia* explores the intense relationships of Mayes’s upbringing, with her beautiful yet fragile mother, Frankye; her volatile father, Garbert; her grandfather Daddy Jack, whose life Garbert saved; her grandmother Mother Mayes; and the family maid, Frances’s confidante Willie Bell. By turns searingly honest and humorous, *Under Magnolia* is an ode to enduring legacies.

A lyrical and evocative memoir, *Under Magnolia* will captivate your reading group. We hope this guide will enrich your discussion.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Frances Mayes begins *Under Magnolia* by recalling a chance weekend in Oxford, Mississippi, where she stood “on the X, not knowing it’s time to leap, when, really, I’d only meant to pause.” When have you experienced a similar crossroad? What did it take to make you leap?
2. As Mayes describes surreptitiously touring William Faulkner’s house, what truths emerge about the humanity of great writers? Why has the South produced so much enduring literature?
3. How did Willie Bell help Mayes master the art of endurance? What prevented Mayes’s mother, Frankye, from being more self-sufficient? What did both women teach Mayes about her role in the world?
4. As Mayes describes attending college both at Randolph-Macon and the University of Florida, before the easy availability of the Pill, what can we discover about the impact of the 1960s on young women in America? How does Mayes’s college experience compare to yours?
5. Mayes describes her young self as a free spirit with an independent mind, transfixed by literature and disinterested in other subjects in school. How did these attributes feed her highly successful career, first as a professor and then as a bestselling author? What does her story tell us about the keys to success and fulfillment?
6. From reading this background story, what future would you have predicted for this child?

7. What does *Under Magnolia* tell us about Mayes' early perceptions of home? What spurred her to move to California? What called her home to the South so many years later?
8. Discuss the freedoms and restrictions Mayes experienced throughout her youth. How did her family manage resources, particularly Daddy Jack's assistance? How did Mayes define "fortunate"?
9. How did the presence and absence of Mayes's father influence her life? How did she heal the scars of his anger, and the trauma of his early death?
10. Discuss the similarities Mayes observes between Tuscany and the South, both her native Georgia and her current homeland of North Carolina. What draws her to these locales? Is the sense of community so strong in these places because of history and landscape, or are there other factors?
11. How has Mayes's experience of love and relationships evolved since she was a young woman? How did her experiences with Paul and Frank shape her sense of self? How did her parents' marriage affect her expectations for happiness in a relationship?.
12. What did you discover about Mayes's literary approach as you read her descriptions of her earliest memories? If you've read other works by Frances Mayes, how does *Under Magnolia* enrich your experience of them, including her fiction and poetry?
13. What are the defining traits of the town where you were raised, especially the food and the customs as well as architecture, history, or even special words or phrases? Would you like to return to your birthplace?
14. Southern writers are especially strong on conveying a sense of place. In *Under Magnolia*, how is Mayes shaped by the landscape?

Guide written by Amy Clements.