

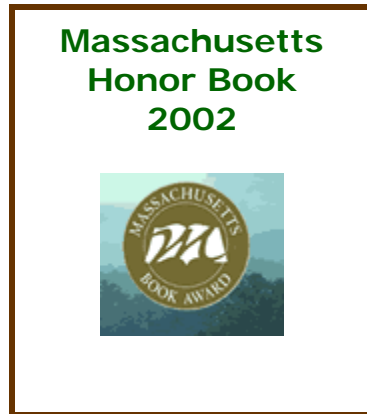
Uphill Walkers: Portrait of a Family

By Madeleine Blais

Grove Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Linda Knaack
Forbes Library, Northampton, MA



SUMMARY:

After her father died unexpectedly when she was only five, Madeleine Blais, together with her family, faced an uncertain future. A small western Massachusetts town in the early fifties was often not a tolerant place for a widowed and pregnant mother with five children. This was especially true of a woman of Irish-Catholic heritage.

Uphill Walkers chronicles the poignant and moving story of a mother's indefatigable efforts to keep her family united in the face of daunting obstacles, including near poverty and mental illness. It is a tale of great courage, a memoir told with warmth and humor.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The book's epigraphs include "Our beginnings never know our ends." --T.S. Eliot; and "In the first place, you should know that Cranford was ruled almost entirely by women." -- Elizabeth Gaskell. Why did the author choose these quotations? How do they relate to the themes of *Uphill Walkers*? Do you think they were well chosen? Would the memoir have been any different without them? In what way(s) did the beginnings of the Blais family not know the ends?
2. Maureen told Ray when she first met him that she was a graduate student in English at Columbia University and that she couldn't see him until the spring semester was over. "That lovely woman, wishing even then for a life with more expansive borders, told a wishful lie..." (p.10) Do you think it was wrong of her to do this? Is it consistent with behaviors she exhibits later? What does it tell you about her character?
3. Discuss the impact of Ray's early death on Maureen. How did her roles as a wife and mother change in relation to those of a "typical" fifties wife and mother? The author states "My mother believed in euphemisms." (p.2) What does she mean by this, and how did it affect the way her mother talked to her children about her husband and his death?

4. Madeleine's father died when she was five years old. How did she react to his death? Why was she so focused on the lost sympathy cards? (p.3) What happened to them?
5. The author maintains that "it is a truism that a child born after a major death is often turned into a symbol of hope." (p.20) What are some of the negative and positive aspects to being a "symbol of hope?" How did this symbolism play out in Michael's life?
6. The author devotes considerable space to Raymond's mental illness. Does she spend too much time on it? The right amount? Too little? "Raymond's illness drove us closer and fostered an interdependency in ways that were not always healthy or desirable." (p.204) Describe the negative aspects of the siblings' interdependency. After Raymond's death, Maureen dictated "her usual elaborate obituary." (p. 229) Why was this obituary so grandiose, and why did it stray so far from reality? Why did Maureen refuse to allow even close friends to attend the funeral?
7. "For a while now...we have had a glad-tidings policy in our dealings with each other." (p.246) What does the author mean in this description of her relationships with her sisters? How does this differ from when they were little? What life experiences have affected the relationships? Has the author been transformed as a result of her past? In what ways?
8. Most of chapter eight ("Serviam," p.123) describes with humor and sometimes irreverence the author's time spent as a student at Ursuline Academy, a Catholic girls' school. The lighthearted memories end suddenly with the chilling events of the Kennedy assassination. Why does the author interrupt humor with tragedy? Does the device reveal anything about how the Blais family viewed its Catholicism? What roles do Madeleine's experiences at Ursuline Academy and her upbringing in an Irish-Catholic family play in her character as an adult?
9. How does the book reflect changes in American small town culture during the fifties? Discuss specifically perceptions of race and gender. What was the author's ethnic background and how was it viewed in the fifties? How did these perceptions change as the author grew up?
10. "My sisters still seemed useless to me: whiny, malodorous appendages who relied on me to tie their delinquent shoelaces and to tell them which hand was right and which was left. It was my job to ...prevent coins from being stuck in their ears during magic tricks...Clashing was the chief fashion sin with which I was familiar, and I saw my job as a matter of keeping plaids and stripes, pinks and oranges, Belfast and Dublin, apart. I taught them the joy of licorice: 'See, it makes your spit black.'" (p. 19) How effective is Blais in drawing us into her childhood world? Consider her use of detail. Draw on other examples of her slightly quirky use of language to evoke feelings in readers of their own past.

11. "It was important that when the priest deposited the Host on your tongue, your teeth did not actually champ down on it. The way to practice was to take Wonder Bread, flatten it into chunks the shape and width of a quarter, and swallow it in one gulp, an activity easily accomplished while also watching 'Hopalong Cassidy'." (p.29) How does the author use language and setting to create humor? Can you find other selections in the book that successfully combine setting with improbable language?
12. Could Maureen be considered the protagonist of this memoir? What examples from the book support this conclusion? Does Maureen seem transformed by her husband's early death and/or her son's mental illness? Consider why or why not and use examples from the book.
13. Who were the "uphill walkers?" Why did the author choose this phrase as a title for her book? How does it relate to the book's theme(s)?
14. Blais wonders if memoirs are self-serving. "Or are they something else, these slender volumes, these mere weekend guests, these evanescent versions of lost time and lost places, something with unexpected force and overlooked heft." (p.217) Does *Uphill Walkers* have "unexpected force?" How does it compare to other memoirs you have read?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeleine_Blais

Madeleine Blais is a journalist, author and professor in the journalism department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. As a reporter for the *The Miami Herald*, Blais earned the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 1980 for "Zepp's Last Stand," a story about a self-declared pacifist and subsequently dishonorably discharged World War I veteran. Blais has worked at *The Boston Globe* (1971-1972), *The Trenton Times* (1974-1976) and *The Miami Herald* (1979-1987). She has also published articles in *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Newsday*, *Nieman Reports*, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *San Jose Mercury News*.

She is the author of a collection of essays entitled *The Heart is an Instrument* (a phrase borrowed from Williams) and *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle* (a phrase borrowed from Emily Dickinson), about a championship season in a girls high school basketball team. This book was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award in the category of nonfiction. Blais lives in Amherst, Massachusetts with her two children and her husband, the writer John Katzenbach.

Writings:

- *The Heart is an Instrument: Portraits in Journalism.* (University of Massachusetts: Amherst), 1992.
- *In These Girls, Hope is a Muscle.* (Atlantic Monthly : New York), 1995.
- *Literary Nonfiction Constructs a Narrative Foundation.* The Nieman Reports, v.54 (3), Fall 2000.
- *Uphill Walkers: Memoir of a Family.* (Atlantic Monthly : New York), 2001.

NPR Interview with Madeleine Blais:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1123722>

HELPFUL LINKS:

Writing Memoirs:

Inkspell: <http://www.inkspell.homestead.com/memoir.html>

How to Write Memoirs :

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/arts/features/howtowrite/memoirs.shtml>

Bringing Real People to Life in Memoir:

http://www.writersstore.com/article.php?articles_id=98

Real People, Real Characters, The WHO of Memoir :

http://www.writersstore.com/article.php?articles_id=120

Curriculum Resources:

The Learning Page: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/index.html>



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, the Commonwealth Affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Visit us on the web at www.massbook.org.

Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Center for the Book