

Untying the Moon

A Novel

by Ellen Malphrus

Discussion Points

“A seeker. Of what she isn’t certain . . . Right? Wrong? Runaway? Who can say?” (from the novel)

The tension between **rootedness and restlessness** is one that manifests itself throughout *Untying the Moon*. Protagonist Bailey Martin is in perpetual unsettled motion – taking to the highway in her Skylark convertible, indulging her sensual appetites along the way. Yet all the while, her destiny is entwined in the roots of her family and her childhood companion. [Can resolution be found in this constant pull both away from and towards home?](#)

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“Humans are the only creatures who disregard the rhythms of nature. We blast holes in the ocean floor and scrape out the hearts of mountains. We halt the flow of rivers and blow poison into the air. What do we think will happen?” (from the novel)

“When she rises to the air again she sounds Whitman’s barbaric yawp and spins. Nothing could be finer, indeed. To be in these river-rich waters listening to the crunch and crackle of life below the surface. Surrounded by marsh grass and pluff mud, crowning glories of the Southern coastline. Oh yes, she thinks, waving to people on their docks and herons on the flats, sated in the sunshine of Carolina June, afloat in the Edisto and not adrift in the city. This is it – one of those often wished for and seldom won moments of well wrought bliss. On a nice slick bank with no oyster shells she wallows in the slippery mud like the dolphins of Jericho, and the interval of contentment is complete.” (from the novel)

*Untying the Moon* is a novel saturated in sense of place. Landscape, more so waterscape, affects both plot and character development. In fact, the environment functions as a kind of character in the book in that the natural world, as witnessed in the quotations above, is a source of both joy and pain. [Given the destruction and disrespect of the environment that is portrayed in](#)

the novel, does the possibility of redemption through nature even exist for Bailey Martin – or any of us?

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“I love him, you see. He’s crossed the line and now he matters. I make excuses for him. If he hadn’t crossed that line I’d be out of here, adios. But he crossed it, and here I am. And you know what I can do about it? Nothing. Big fat zero. That’s what I can do about it. Here comes the train, and I can’t do a goddamned thing but stand there in the middle of the tracks holding out my sweet lovin’ arms.”

In *Untying the Moon* we are immersed in a world where questions of what is good and bad, right and wrong, don’t have simple answers – especially when it comes to matters of the heart. [When the emotion is real, is there a mast sturdy enough to keep anyone safe from siren song of dangerous love?](#)

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“And that’s that. We’re odd birds, but we’re family.” (from the novel)

[What defines Family?](#) *Untying the Moon* wrestles with this question as well as whether the very nature and dynamics of family relationships, anyone’s family, fence you in or free you to find yourself. Bailey Martin is as independent a free spirit as they come, and yet how and where she was reared influence the decisions she makes at every important juncture.

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Other Possible Discussion Points

- ❖ Identity – what it is, how it’s sought, if it’s ever found.
- ❖ Gullah-Geechee folkways as depicted in the novel.
- ❖ The lure of the open road.
- ❖ Deep sea fishing.
- ❖ Places in the novel – real and imagined.
- ❖ The episodic, sometimes “fragmented” narrative structure of the book.
- ❖ The influence of James Dickey on Malphrus’ writing.
- ❖ Writing about the Lowcountry of South Carolina from the perspective of a true native.

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