

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## A Recipe for Bees by Gail Anderson-Dargatz

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- Why do you think the book begins the way it does—with Augusta's description of the mating habits of bees and the dominance of the queen bee? (Do you think she sees herself in the same light?)
- Why do you think Augusta tried to shoplift the book from the bookstore while she was with her daughter? (p. 17) For Joy reading was a luxury; Augusta felt a compulsion to take it and felt a "sensation of freedom" after.
- Why do you think Augusta is such a poor housekeeper? What does this say about her personality? (When Karl brings her home new stainless steel pots she's thrilled because she no longer has to "wrestle food off the chipped enamel".) Joy is an obsessive housekeeper — she was often embarrassed by the slovenly state of the house when as a young girl she brought her friends home.
- How would you describe the Reverend and his relationship with Augusta? He thinks she should be with other women and maybe get a job. (p. 116) Why do you think this relationship is so candid? His admission to her about his true religious beliefs which are completely different than his stoic sermons, the fact that he goes fishing with her. Do you think their close relationship has anything to do with his relationship with Lilian, his own wife? His wife is a shoplifter and he blames himself because "she wasn't cut out to be a pastor's wife". (p. 107.)
- How would you describe the marriage of Augusta's parents, Manny and Helen? Did they have a good one? Manny was overly jealous. "In the forties, a man like Manny was called a leghorn rooster, after the small scappy birds that strutted around the yard." (p. 69) Do you think he was really in control? (p.70)
- Why do you think Manny pushes Augusta away when she tries to hug him in the yard? It's right after this incident that she has the premonition of her mother's death. (p. 113)
- Why does Helen choose to tell Manny she's pregnant in front of Augusta? (p. 157)
- When Augusta announces to her father, Manny, that she intends to marry Karl, Manny seemingly tries to discourage her by reminding her about the death of Karl's mother and about the remoteness of the ranch where she'll be living. He also tells her she can still get out of it on the way down the aisle. (p.58) Why isn't he more forthcoming about his misgivings? Do you think he foresees any alternative life for his daughter? She does get a foreshadowing of how difficult her life will be when she visits Karl and Olaf after their engagement. Is there any significance to the fact that Olaf's ranch used to be a place of prostitution called the Whorehouse Ranch?
- Augusta becomes angry with Karl when he tries to give his father free eggs. When Karl pays for them, she contemplates what she will buy with the money, never considering a possible extravagance of a new blouse or dress like Martha Rivers. She finds such women selfish. (p. 207) Do you think her attitude is hypocritical considering her love affair with Joe?
- How do you think Karl would describe the early years of his marriage? Do you think his style of lovemaking ("brief, to the point, in the dark") was a result of his being intimidated by Olaf and the demands of the ranch or was an obliviousness to Augusta's needs and desires? (Augusta tells the Reverend about Karl's dirty magazines.) Later on in the story he leaves her in the cornfield after bathing her with cool water (p.266) Why do you think he does this? Do you think he has changed?
- Why doesn't he tell Augusta the truth about his mother's death?



**Skokie Public Library**

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- Augusta and Joe's affair is conducted during the day — they would meet in the café, stop in the middle of the street for a daylight kiss. Do you think Augusta may have wanted Karl to find out about her affair? One day Karl catches her during the day with her clothes off taking a bath in the kitchen. He tries to make love to her but is clueless about the art of lovemaking. She's disappointed. Do you think he really cares and is just inept?
- Do you think the inclusion of family photographs add to the story? Why do you think the author decided to include them?
- After the Reverend dies Augusta thinks she may have to get a job to ward off the "loneliness and drabness of the farm" but she didn't like the thought of leaving Joy, the farm, or the garden. She changes her mind when she finds the \$50.00 in Karl's pocket that he says he was saving for an emergency. Why do you think Karl failed to give the money to Augusta for food? Do you think it was an oversight or intentional? What did you think about Karl's hiring Sara to fill in as housewife when Augusta leaves?
- Gabe had once brought a recipe to Augusta "for whipping up a batch of bees which he found in Virgil's Georgics." Augusta notes that "likely what they took for bees were some sort of golden fly." but she likens this process to the magic of "something fermenting inside the lifeless carcass of a marriage." How does beekeeping effect Augusta's life, and the life of Helen, her mother?