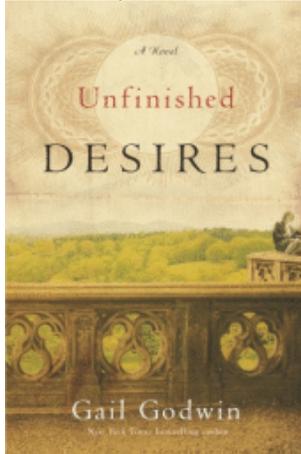


Unfinished Desires

A Novel

Written by Gail Godwin



- **Category:** Fiction
- **Format:** Hardcover, 416 pages
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Reader's Guide

1. In Mother Ravenel's 2001 reflections on Mount St. Gabriel's, how does she foreshadow the events that transpire in the "toxic year" of 1951? By the end of **Unfinished Desires**, do you think she's reconciled herself to this "year better forgotten"? Does she "prevail"? Does she leave anything "undone"?
2. Who is the Red Nun? How does the myth and tragedy of her origin shape, sustain, and "protect" the Mount St. Gabriel's community?
3. What is "holy daring" as Mother Elizabeth Wallingford, foundress of Mount St. Gabriel's, conceived it? Discuss how Mother Ravenel interprets and relates "holy daring" and "a woman's freedom in God."
4. How and why does Mother Malloy, at Madeline's urging, encourage Tildy to keep her "intrepid little soul"? Does her diligent tutoring change Tildy?
5. Why does Mother Ravenel place Tildy in charge of the freshman class revival of the Red Nun play? Does she ultimately regret this decision?
6. What is Agnes's "mortal mistake"? Do you think she anticipated her own untimely death? Why or why not? Is Chloe really "haunted" by her mother?
7. Tildy understands that "best friends have been known to do hurtful things to each other." Does this explain why Suzanne

Ravenel decides to enter as a postulant without her best friend, Antonia? If not, why did she “jump the gun on [her] vocation”?

8. Do you agree with Tildy that “some girls are just always *background*” and “some girls just stand out”? How does Chloe counter Tildy’s argument? Why doesn’t Chloe unveil her “masterpiece” to the class?

9. Discuss the impact of Cornelia Stratton’s “dry ice” comments on those she loves. How does her “caustic tongue” influence her daughters? Her sister, Antonia? Mother Ravenel?

10. Consider Tildy and Maud’s friendship from its beginning and from each girl’s perspective. How does their friendship evolve? Is it, like each of them, a “work in progress”? How do their perceptions of each other change? How would you define their relationship at the end of the novel?

11. Reading *David Copperfield* for Mother Malloy’s class, Maud is introduced to the idea that “someone else’s story, if told a certain way, could make you ache as though it were your own.” Do you identify strongly with one particular character’s story in **Unfinished Desires**? Which one(s)?

12. Discuss the importance and power of secrets in **Unfinished Desires**. How do they serve to either unite or isolate those who tell them and those whom they are about?