

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## ACCIDENTALS

A NOVEL

BY SUSAN M. GAINES

### INTRODUCTION

When Gabriel's mother suddenly decides to repatriate to her native Uruguay after thirty years in California, he takes a break from his uninspiring desk job to accompany her. At first, Gabe observes his mother's squabbling family in the same detached way he watches the new species of birds he encounters in the marsh on their neglected land—but when he falls in love with Alejandra, a local biologist, he is suddenly transformed from observer to main character in his family's transnational saga.

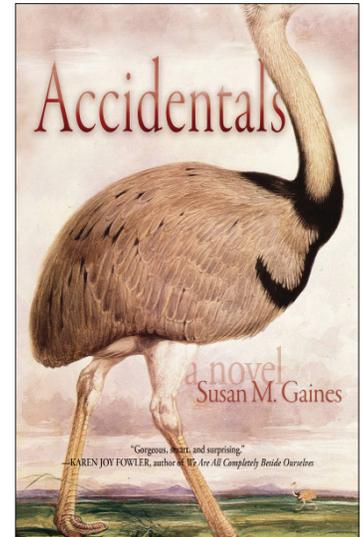
Through Gabe's eyes, the gently rolling landscape of Uruguay gains complexity and depth, as does his mother and the election she's insisting on voting in; his uncle and his ambitious plans for the family land; and Alejandra and her intricate microbial studies. As Gabe and Alejandra grow closer, they struggle to confront the environmental devastation of their twenty-first-century future and find themselves mired in the mud of their parents'—and their countries'—Cold War—era past. *Accidentals* is a multicultural novel of loss and discovery that challenges our notions of family and explores the ways that science, with all its uncertainties, illuminates the natural world and our future.

"Gaines's melding of sensual landscapes with ruminations on political history and environmental devastation will be a treat for conservationists, and her critique of globalization and portrayal of sibling rivalry are particularly well rendered. Barbara Kingsolver fans will want to take a look."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"Gorgeous, smart, and surprising, this family saga takes us into the large world of nations and politics, but also the microscopic world of mud and microbes."

—KAREN JOY FOWLER, author of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*



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## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. An *accidental* is a bird that has strayed far from its normal territory, often for unknown reasons.<sup>1</sup> What other meanings and metaphors did the title bring to mind? How might it apply to the novel's various characters and story?
2. Rubén remarks that "Uruguay is all about land" (p. 111). How do each of the main characters view that land, and the estancia in particular? Do their relationships to the land change as the novel progresses, and if so why? What is your own relationship to the land in or around the places you and your family have lived, and how has that relationship changed over time?
3. At the beginning of the novel, Lili sees her son as cynical and directionless, despite his success by traditional standards. She says, "Uruguay te hará bien" (Uruguay will be good for you). What do you think she wants for her son? How does her prediction reverberate through the novel?
4. As Gabe starts exploring Montevideo, he realizes that not only was his idea of the city circumscribed by Lili's nostalgia, but he had never actually experienced cities "as living entities, with personality and character and history," the way he now experiences Montevideo (p. 72). What, if any, cities have you experienced in this way?
5. There are a number of "ghosts" in *Accidentals*. Who—and what—are they and how do they influence the living characters? Are there any influential ghosts in your own family history?
6. Some of the birds in *Accidentals* make repeat appearances. Are they just part of the setting, or did you feel some special connection to them? In what ways do the rails reflect Gabe's evolving understanding of his place in the world?
7. When the novel opens, Gabe was "convinced that nature was fading with the millennium." During a national park internship, he'd "felt more like a zookeeper than a naturalist, more custodian than observer" (p. 158). Later he notes that there's "not even much *real* nature left" for a naturalist to observe, and he bemoans the concept of managing nature (p. 158, 230). How do you feel about these observations in light of your own experience of nature? How do Gabe's ideas about his relationship to nature change over the course of the novel and why?
8. Gabe's story takes place at the turn of millennium, before climate change was as evident as it is today. Yet he and Alejandra are well aware of the problems greenhouse gas emissions pose for the future. What do you know about the history of understandings of climate change among earth scientists, biologists, and environmentalists? How has the mainstream public discourse changed in your lifetime?<sup>2</sup>
9. Scientific quests and knowledge are woven into the plot of *Accidentals*, and Gabe's and Alejandra's intellectual as well as emotional lives are center stage. What other novels have you read that do this? What, if anything, did you learn from the discussions and descriptions of science in the novel?<sup>3</sup>
10. The Quiroga family was shaped and riven by the national and international politics of the twentieth century. How has politics shaped your own family's interactions, both in the past and in recent years?
11. Why do you think Abuela and Lili's relationship is so strained?
12. Why do you think Lili—who had emigrated from Uruguay, married a yanqui, and become an American citizen—felt so compelled to try to "save" Eva in 1976?
13. Is Gabe's anger at Lili justified? Do you know any families where parents and their grown children have become estranged?

14. How do you feel about Gabriel and Alejandra’s relationship by the end of the novel? What roles do love, science, morality, and their family histories play in their decisions?
15. As Gabriel delves into the history of Uruguay—and of his family—he comes to see “history and the future as one continuum that stretched backwards and forwards into the new millennium” (p.190). Do you think remembering the past has a role to play in building the future? What does the epilogue intimate about this, and about the relationship between environmental collapse and political upheaval? How does that resonate for you now, in the 2020s, given current developments?

## NOTES

1. Ornithologists have postulated various causes, including mutations that affect a bird’s navigation system, storms during migration, malnutrition, habitat loss, and climate change. This article in *Scientific American* gives a good overview of recent research on accidentals, or *vagrants* as they are also known: “Vagrant Birds May Portend Species Distribution in Climate-Changed World” [bit.ly/3anAuwU](https://bit.ly/3anAuwU)
2. Gaines’s 2001 novel *Carbon Dreams* dealt with this history in the 1980s. Russ Gelbspan’s 1998 book, *The Heat is On*, documents the campaign of deception by fossil fuel industries that prevented climate change science from finding its place at the top of the public agenda. Historian Spenser R. Weart’s 2008 book, *The Discovery of Global Warming*, is a readable and comprehensive history of the science of climate change.
3. Gaines and her colleague Jean Hegland have taken to calling such novels “nerd novels.” For more examples, see their list at [jean-hegland.com/resources-nerdnovels/](http://jean-hegland.com/resources-nerdnovels/). For examples of novels in which the sciences play a central role, see the database on the website of the Fiction Meets Science program that Gaines founded at [www.fictionmeetscience.org/ccm/lib/novels---novellas/](http://www.fictionmeetscience.org/ccm/lib/novels---novellas/).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan M. Gaines is the author of the novel *Carbon Dreams* and of the science narrative *Echoes of Life: What Fossil Molecules Reveal About Earth History*. Her short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals and been selected for the Best of the West anthology and nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Gaines’s fiction is informed by a youth spent hiking and birding California’s mountains and coastline, and by her education in chemistry and oceanography. She is the recipient of an Art in Science Fellowship at the Hanse Institute for Advanced Study, as well as the 2018 Suffrage Science Award. Currently at work on another novel, Gaines divides her time between her native California, Uruguay, and Germany, where she co-directs the Fiction Meets Science research and fellowship program.

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