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CHARMS FOR THE EASY LIFE

Author: Kaye Gibbons

Publisher: Avon

First printing: 1993

Available in:

Quality paper, 256 pages. $10.00
(ISBN 0-380-72557-6)

Paperback, 256 pages. $5.99
(ISBN 0-380-72270-4)

Summary

This is the memorable story of three generations of North Carolina women. Charlie Kate is a renowned folk healer and practitioner; Sophia is her spirited and headstrong daughter; and Margaret, who is the story’s narrator, is Sophia’s shy and inquisitive daughter. These unconventional women are passionate, yet tough-minded. In the rigid South of the 1940s, their less-than-typical lifestyle puts them in conflict with men, society and, quite often, each other.

Recommended by:

Barbara Landwehr, Book Group of Sewickley, PA

Author Biography

Kaye Gibbons is the acclaimed author of Ellen Foster, A Virtuous Woman, and A Cure for Dreams. She has received numerous literary awards, including the Sue Kaufman Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation and the Chicago Tribune’s Heartland Prize. Kaye lives in Raleigh, NC with her daughters.
Topics to Consider

Charlie Kate’s family is plagued by a cluster of suicides. In fact, her first important female relationship with her twin sister is cut short by a violent suicide. How was the course of her life influenced as a result? Do the suicides have any impact on the relationships she cultivates with her own daughter and granddaughter?

The relationships between mothers and their daughters is a major theme of this book. It may be argued that the relationships that exist, or fail to exist, between fathers and daughters are equally important. Which of these relationships do you consider more defining? Is it the lack of a tangible relationship that causes a major impact on the course of one’s life or the overpowering existence of one?

The relationships that exist between the women are blurry. Is the confusion of roles the reason for Margaret’s lack of trust in her mother? Why?

The short-lived return of Charlie Kate’s husband left Margaret confused. Does Charlie Kate know what she is doing when she runs to her wayward husband? Is she holding onto a thread of foolish hope or is she intent on revenge?

Throughout the novel, Charlie Kate stresses the importance of living one’s life fully. She has no tolerance for people who wait for life to happen to them or who spend their lives merely waiting to die. How does this relate to her fascination with purging? In keeping with her desire to be forever active and involved, is it significant that Charlie Kate does not purge upon her death?

Charlie Kate gives her “easy life” charm to Margaret for Tom (p. 231). Do you think Charlie Kate had an easy life? What do you think her definition of an easy life would be?

Describe how important it is to all the women that “the mills of the gods grind slowly but exceedingly small,” that the guilty do not go unpunished. Do you believe this to be true in life?

Kaye Gibbons
1960-

**Nationality:** American  
**Entry Updated:** 05/19/2004

**Place of Birth:** Wilson, NC

**Genre(s):** Fiction; Novels; Local history/Rural topics

**Award(s):**  
Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and citation from Ernest Hemingway Foundation, both for *Ellen Foster*; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, for *A Virtuous Woman*; Nelson Algren Heartland Award for Fiction, *Chicago Tribune*, 1991, and PEN/Revson Foundation Fellowship, both for *A Cure for Dreams*; Critics Choice Award, *Los Angeles Times*, 1995, for *Sights Unseen*; Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (French Knighthood), for contribution to French literature, 1996.

**Personal Information:** Family: Born 1960, in Wilson, NC; daughter of Charles (a tobacco farmer) and Alice Butts; married Michael Gibbons (divorced); married Frank Ward (an attorney), 1995 (divorced); children: Mary, Leslie, Louise (first marriage).  

**Career:** Novelist.

**WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:**

**NOVELS**


Contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*. Her novels have been translated into French.
Works in Progress: Completing Jeanne Braselton's posthumous novel *The Other Side of Air*; a biography; a sequel to *Ellen Foster*, to be published in 2005.

Media Adaptations: *Ellen Foster* was adapted for audiocassette by Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1996, and for the Hallmark Hall of Fame television movie, 1997; movie rights to *A Virtuous Woman* were bought by the Oprah Winfrey production company. *Charms for the Easy Life* was made into a television movie by Showtime Productions, 2001. *A Virtuous Woman* was recorded as an audiobook by Recorded Books, 1998, and *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* was recorded as an audiobook by Recorded Books, 1999. *Sights Unseen* was recorded as an audiobook by Chivers, 2001, and was developed into a movie script by the author.

"Sidelights"

Kaye Gibbons has won a number of literary awards and much praise for her body of fiction, a group of novels predominantly set in rural Southern communities not unlike Nash County, North Carolina, where Gibbons grew up. From the matriarchal folk healer to the uncompromising eleven-year-old, Gibbons' strong central characters--almost always female--possess a grounding and wisdom that transcends the often-difficult circumstances of lives. Writing in *Publishers Weekly*, critic Bob Summer termed them "Southern women who shoulder the burdens of their ordinary lives with extraordinary courage."

Gibbons was born and raised in North Carolina. The daughter of an alcoholic father and a mother who suffered from bipolar disorder and committed suicide when Kaye was ten years old, Gibbons later drew on some of her experiences in her fiction. While she did not go to live with her grandmother, as Ellen Foster does in *Ellen Foster*, she did live with an older brother, and she did and does value books. "Books are the most important thing in my life," she told Book writer Liz Seymour in 2002. "I grew up walking three miles to a Bookmobile--books aren't property, they're a whole separate category." Like her mother, from the age of twenty Gibbons has suffered from bipolar disorder, once known as manic depression, in which a person veers dangerously from periods of depression to periods of mania (intense activity and sleeplessness). She wrote her first novel, *Ellen Foster*, during a six-week manic binge and her 1998 novel *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* during three months when she would write from forty to sixty hours at a time. And though this condition has become more treatable, Gibbons is careful, for she does not want to sacrifice the creativity that has allowed her to become an award-winning novelist.

The novel *Ellen Foster* began life as a poem Gibbons started while a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, initially in the voice of the protagonist's young African-American friend, Starletta. The author admitted to being influenced by the work of early twentieth-century African-American poet James Weldon Johnson, and his use of common speech patterns and idioms in his prose. "I wanted to see if I could have a child use her voice to talk about life, death, art, eternity--big things from a little person," Gibbons told Summer. Ellen Foster's title character is a mere eleven years of age, and the story follows her travails in the rural southern states as she bounces from relative to relative. Speaking in the first person, Gibbons's heroine refers to herself as "old Ellen," and recounts her difficulties in flashback form. Deanna D'Errico described her in *Belles*.
Ellen's grandmother vents her grief at her daughter's suicide on her granddaughter, forcing her to work the family cotton fields and inflicting verbal and emotional abuse upon her. Over the course of Gibbons's novel, Ellen faces her problems with a good nature and determination: she learns to hoard money in a small box that contains all of her other vital belongings. She also befriends the aforementioned Starletta, who is mute. "Gibbons, unlike so many writers of the New South, doesn't evade the racism of Southern life," wrote Pearl K. Bell in a review of Ellen Foster for the New Republic. Growing up hearing the racial prejudices of her family, Ellen also feels such biases, and reminds herself that no matter how bad her own situation is, it would be worse to be "colored."

When Ellen's grandmother dies, she is sent to live with an aunt, and the aunt and Ellen's cousin also heap abuse upon her--at one point, ridiculing the picture she has drawn for a Christmas present as "cheap-looking." When the aunt sends her away, Ellen spends a night at Starletta's home, which eventually leads to the protagonist's realization that "now I know it is not the germs you cannot see . . . that will hurt you or turn you colored. What you had better worry about though is the people you knew and trusted they would be like you because you were all made in the same batch." In the end, Ellen discovers that her small town contains a "foster" family--a single woman who takes in children. She shows up on their doorstep and offers the $160 contents of her box in exchange for a home.

In the New Republic review, Bell praised Gibbons's evocation of Ellen's unique personality through her narrative, as did many other reviewers. "The voice of this resourceful child is mesmerizing because we are right inside her head," she noted. Alice Hoffman reviewed Ellen Foster for the New York Times Book Review and asserted that the first-time author "is so adept at drawing her characters that we know Ellen, and, yes, trust her from the start." Hoffman further noted that "in many ways this is an old-fashioned novel about traditional values and inherited prejudices. . . . What might have been grim, melodramatic material in the hands of a less talented author is instead filled with lively humor . . . , compassion and intimacy." Sunday Times critic Linda Taylor termed Gibbons's debut "fresh, instant and enchanting . . . a first novel that does not put a foot wrong in its sureness of style, tone and characterisation."

In her second novel, A Virtuous Woman, Gibbons again sets her characters in the rural South and allows them to speak in the idiomatic, direct language of her own upbringing. The 1989 work opens as Jack Stokes laments the loss of Ruby, his wife of many years, from lung cancer. "She hasn't been dead four months and I've already eaten to the bottom of the deep freeze," the farmer thinks to himself; despite her illness, Ruby had prepared months worth of meals ahead of time for Jack. Such details pointing to the ordinary, yet loving familiarities of the institution of marriage are what Gibbons attempts to call forth in the story. A Virtuous Woman is told in alternating first-person flashbacks for most of
its course--Jack looking back after she is gone, alternating with Ruby's ruminations on their life together in the months before her death. The reader learns how Ruby's disastrous first marriage ultimately resulted in her inoperable tumors, and why her marriage to Jack was less vivid than her first, but over time, ultimately more satisfying.

As both characters in *A Virtuous Woman* come to grips with their impending tragedy, the interior monologues that Gibbons has Jack and Ruby voice in the novel propel it forward. Toward the end, Gibbons switches to a third-person perspective as the motivations and actions of other characters involved in Jack and Ruby's life come into play. "Too often, lacking a conflict of its own, the story wanders off to peek in at the neighbors," remarked *Los Angeles Times Book Review* critic Susan Heeger of this literary construction. "Pages are spent on the meanness of peripheral folk, whose main raison d'être is to show up Jack's and Ruby's saintliness and to raise the question of why bad things happen to good people." The critic D'Errico, writing again for *Belles Lettres*, also found this switch disconcerting. "Technique suddenly looms over the tale," she lamented, "and it is difficult to view the scene without fretting over the strings that are showing."

In 1997 Oprah Winfrey chose *Ellen Foster* and *A Virtuous Woman* for her television book club, exposure that launched the books onto the best-seller lists and thrust their author into the limelight. Gibbons found the publicity both a blessing and a curse: blessing for the sale of books she believes in, but a curse in terms of the distractions of fan mail and telephone calls. *Ellen Foster* has come to be read in many high schools along with such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Ellen Foster* was made into a Hallmark television movie that premiered in December, 1997.

Gibbons's third novel, *A Cure for Dreams*, won the *Chicago Tribune*'s Nelson Algren Heartland award for fiction that same year. In it, Gibbons recounts the multigenerational family saga of a trio of three women: Lottie, her daughter Betty, and granddaughter Marjorie. The novel begins as Marjorie introduces her recently deceased mother Betty to the reader, and relates how much her mother loved to talk. "Talking was my mother's life," she says, and the story is soon overtaken by Betty's own narrative voice. Betty describes her indomitable Irish immigrant grandmother--Lottie's mother--and the harsh life Lottie suffered in rural Kentucky during the early years of the twentieth century. Lottie escapes by marriage, but her workaholic husband isolates her emotionally until Betty arrives as a newborn in 1920.

As some reviewers noted, most of the male characters in *A Cure for Dreams* seem unsympathetic figures, absorbed in their own world of nonverbal communication, while the women ultimately triumph over adversity by virtue of their need to communicate with one another, resulting in strong bonds. In coming together, they manage to overcome both petty and grievous abuses inflicted upon them by the men of their families. Throughout the course of *A Cure for Dreams*, Gibbons lets Betty continue the decades-long tale of her family, recalling how her mother, Lottie, became the de facto community leader of the women around North Carolina's Milk Farm Road in the 1920s. She organized card parties, passed along useful gossip and wisdom, and at one point even protected a friend who may or may not have shot her abusive husband. Betty's own saga of coming of age in the South of the 1930s is also recounted, and the novel ends with the birth of her daughter Marjorie during World War II.
The overwhelming successes of Gibbons's literary career were also accompanied by periods of personal strife during the early 1990s. She went through a divorce, relocated to New York City but returned to North Carolina, and changed publishers. In 1993, her fourth novel, *Charms for the Easy Life*, was published. Like *A Cure for Dreams*, the story follows the exploits of a family of strong women, and develops through the recollections of its youngest member. Set over a forty-year span that ends during World War II, the novel begins with narrator Margaret recounting the courtship of her grandparents in Pasquotank County, North Carolina. Her grandmother, Charlie (Clarissa) Kate, becomes the central figure in the novel through her work as a local midwife and faith healer. Gibbons had originally modeled the character on an African-American midwife who served as the best friend of Lottie in her previous novel, but reconsidered doing a sequel after she began, and instead made Charlie into a completely separate entity.

Like Lottie in *A Cure for Dreams*, Charlie becomes a vital and important force in her rural community. When she saves an African-American man from a lynching, he gives her a rabbit's foot, her "easy-life charm." A folk healer who reads the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Charlie promotes sex education and manages to put a halt to the damaging medical treatment meted out by the charlatan local "trained" doctor. She is also the first person in the community to own a toilet. "She's an implacable force of nature, a pillar of intellect, with insight and powers of intuition so acute as to seem nearly supernatural," remarked Stephen McCauley of Gibbons's creation in the *New York Times Book Review*. As in previous works, the author allowed few compassionate male characters into the story of the three women. "The men in their lives are largely ineffectual," observed McCauley. "They can be relied upon only to disappoint, disappear and die." Charlie's husband simply does not return home one evening, an act which has little impact upon her young daughter, Sophie. Like her mother, Sophie later enters into a marriage with the wrong man, who passes away in the middle of the night; the two then move in with Charlie. Now all three women are free to pursue their ambitions and lend support to one another. They debate literature, Sophie and Margaret act as assistants to Charlie's unofficial doctor/dentist/midwife practice, and Charlie meddles in the affairs of her granddaughter, who in turn finds inspiration from the older woman.

Published in 1995, Gibbons's *Sights Unseen* tells the story, from the perspective of twelve-year-old daughter Hattie, of a mother's struggle with mental illness and its pervasive influence on her family's life. This novel was part of Gibbons's efforts to come to grips with the mental illness that had cost her mother her life and has plagued the author for decades. She struggled in its production, writing five drafts before she was satisfied. Her efforts paid off, for it garnered praised from critics. Comparing *Sights Unseen* to Gibbons's first novel, *Ellen Foster*, New Yorker critic James Wolcott noted that the narrator in each novel portrays "an avid need for normality and acceptance in a world of precarious well-being." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer cited Gibbons's "restrained prose of unflinching clarity" and praised the novel, declaring it "a haunting story that begs to be read in one sitting." As Donna Seaman noted in *Booklist*, "Gibbons writes seamless and resonant novels, the sort of fiction that wins hearts as well as awards." Indeed, *Sights Unseen* won the *Los Angeles Times* Critics Choice Award for that year.

For her next novel, Gibbons delved into the history of the twentieth-century South that had been the setting of her previous works.
titled because first-person narrator, Emma Lowell, is recalling her life as she prepares to die, follows the narrator's life as the daughter of a Southern slaveowner who follows her own path. In the **Winston-Salem Journal**, Anne Barnhill remarked how well Gibbons's research into the era served her: "It's evident that Gibbons has done a great deal of research for this book. The language has the authentic sound of yesteryear, and interesting details are peppered throughout the novel." *Library Journal*'s Joanna M. Burkhardt likewise praised the novel for its "crystal clarity and brilliant realism." However, while *America* reviewer Jane Fisher found the novel "lively and readable," she questioned Gibbons's characterization of Emma, who, she complained, "seems almost too good to be true." Another reviewer found the novel to be too didactic at times: "Gibbons has wrought a balanced and highly accessible novel which, although well constructed and provocative, descends into cliched and tiresome tirades," wrote *London Times* critic Victoria Fletcher. Because of its fictional memoir structure, the reader knows that the narrator survives any perils, thus eliminating some of the possible suspense. Nevertheless, Dennis Love of the *San Francisco Chronicle* maintained that Gibbons overcomes any difficulties the structure might pose: "We see everything coming from miles away, yet it doesn't matter; this is a master storyteller who, like some arrogant, gifted athlete, telegraphs her every move but still scores at will." Despite any shortcomings, Fisher suggested that Gibbons's "major appeal as a novelist lies in her linking of unrelenting truth with the transformative power of unconditional love" and that she succeeds again in linking the two in *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*.

Despite the praise bestowed by critics and the numerous awards she has received, Gibbons admits that the writer's life is a strenuous one. "Nobody ever told me it was going to be easy," she noted in the interview with Bob Summer for *Publishers Weekly*. "If I weren't a writer, I'd probably be a lawyer or an architect. I wouldn't want to do anything easy, and I chose to be a writer." The author reflected that, "as a writer, it's my job to come up with three hundred pages or so every two years. Each time I begin, I know it's going to happen, but I'm scared it won't. It's working with that element of fear that keeps a book going," a process she also likened to "looking over an abyss and knowing I have to jump."

**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**BOOKS**

- *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 34, Gale (Detroit, MI), 2000.

PERIODICALS


• *Time*, April 12, 1993, Amelia Weiss, "Medicine Woman, " pp. 77-78.


• *Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), September 15, 1991, p. 7.


**ONLINE**


• *Syracuse Online*, http://syracuse.com/ (August 17, 2003), Laura T. Ryan, "Gibbons Says Manic Depression Fuels Her Art."


**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2004.

**Gale Database:** Contemporary Authors
Biography

In 1997, Gibbons was awarded a Knighthood from the French Minister of Culture for her contributions to French literature. In 2001, she spoke at the Pompidou Center in Paris in what one journalist called, “an act of sustained brilliance.” She has read and lectured to sold-out audiences from New York to Seattle. With domestic sales of more than 4.2 million copies and numerous worldwide translations, she was designated "one of the most lyrical writers working today" by Entertainment Weekly and described by one columnist as, “a genius-Madonna in a black leather jacket,” and by another as, “a brilliant woman with old-fashioned star quality, rare....”

Kaye Gibbons was born in 1960 in Nash County, North Carolina on Bend of the River Road. She attended North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, studying American and English literature. At 26, she wrote her first novel,
ELLEN FOSTER. Praised as an extraordinary debut, Eudora Welty said that "the honesty of thought and eye and feeling and word" mark the work of this talented writer, and Walker Percy said, "ELLEN FOSTER is a Southern Holden Caulfield, tougher perhaps, as funny...A breathtaking first novel."

ELLEN FOSTER was recently honored in London as one of the Twenty Greatest Novels of the Twentieth Century. In 1997, the novel won the Sue Kaufman Prize for first fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Special Citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation, the Louis D. Rubin Writing Award, and other major awards. Now a classic, it is taught in high schools and universities, often teamed with THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN, CATCHER IN THE RYE, and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD. The book has been widely translated, frequently performed in theatres throughout the United States, and was produced by Hallmark Hall of Fame for CBS, starring Emily Harris and Jenna Malone.

Published in 1989, A VIRTUOUS WOMAN also received wide praise in the United States and abroad. The San Francisco Chronicle called the work "a perfect gem of a novel." Both ELLEN FOSTER and A VIRTUOUS WOMAN were chosen together as Oprah Book Club selections in 1998, leading The New York Times bestseller list for many weeks.

In 1989, Gibbons received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to write a third novel, A CURE FOR DREAMS, which was published in 1991. This novel won the 1990/PEN Revson Award for the best work of fiction published by an American writer under thirty-five years of age, as well as the Heartland Prize for fiction from the Chicago Tribune, and other awards. In the novel she used transcripts from the Federal Writers' Project of the Great Depression. For the first time, she said, she "discovered the voice of ordinary men and women as a pure form of art and force of nature" and realized those voices would carry her through every novel she writes.

When CHARMS FOR THE EASY LIFE was published in 1993, it became a New York Times bestseller and prompted a Time magazine reviewer to say, "Some people might give up their second-born to write as well as Kaye Gibbons." This novel, which takes place between 1910 and 1945, in the home of three generations of highly intelligent and forthright women, was filmed by Showtime Productions, aired in October 2001, starring Mimi Rogers and Gina Rowlands. SIGHTS UNSEEN (1995) was also a national bestseller and a winner of the Critics Choice Award from the San Francisco Chronicle.

The following year, G. P. Putnam's Sons published her sixth novel ON THE OCCASION OF MY LAST AFTERNOON, "a book of saints, sinners, and sorrows offering much pleasure," said one reviewer. Readers agree that it is "another cause for accolades" and many regarded it as her most brilliant to date.

Most recently, she was invited to become a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, a most significant honor. She has received the Oklahoma Homecoming Award and was made a member of the YWCA Academy of Women. She was also chosen to write the introduction to the 2000 Modern Library Edition of Kate Chopin's THE AWAKENING AND OTHER STORIES.
She has completed a posthumous novel, THE OTHER SIDE OF AIR, which was left unfinished after the death of her close friend, the writer Jeanne Braselton, in early 2003. Random House plans to release this novel in the fall of 2004. Currently, she is working on journalistic pieces for publication and collection, a biography, and the sequel to ELLEN FOSTER, proposed for a 2005 release.

Gibbons lives in Raleigh, NC with her three daughters, Mary (19), Leslie (16) and Louise (15). Her newest novel DIVINING WOMEN, set during the 1918 influenza epidemic is due out from Putnam in April of 2004, when she will combine a 35-city, book festival, and college tour.

She recently summed up her philosophy of her success when asked whether she was surprised by everything she has achieved thus far in her career:

**KG:** I would’ve been surprised had I stumbled blindly into any of it, scratched a lottery ticket and found a prize that would then take me through the rest of my life. I wasn’t “lucky” that the books sold. I wasn’t “surprised” to learn that they’re also taught in literature classes. That sounds arrogant, but it’s not. To be able to write literature that sells takes an almost surreal amount of stubborn persistence; imagination; the ability to forego distractions, such as vacations, men, alcohol; and a willingness to lock oneself in a room and submit oneself to constant, ruthless self-criticism. If a writer is any good, he or she will criticize himself so unmercifully that the reader and the reviewer either have to be misguided or wrong to make too much of a complaint. And there’s something almost fun about fixing that deal in place. That sounds arrogant, and it may be. But it’d be more arrogant to subject readers, nice, hopeful people, to 250 pages of words I had not tried to perfect, that I’d merely typed, as Hemingway said of meaningless writing. I know when it’s being done to me, when clichés are bound or filmed and sold, and I don’t appreciate it, the disrespect for this gift of language and for the people we’re offering it to.

But getting there, to that lucky, sacrificial place, requires long, long stretches of unbroken concentration and more Diet Cokes than most people can or want to tolerate. I love the labor, the sheer manual labor that goes into making these books seem as though they were effortlessly written. I love what has come to feel like a habit of invention. I go about my days stunned that I didn’t waste what Walker Percy called a “knack” for writing.

And there’s the grace that comes when I’m in my daughters’ presence. I go about stunned that I didn’t drop or misplace my children or cause them to be expelled from school for repeating what they learned at home. You see, I live alone with three smart and sober teenage girls—it has taken skill, patience, stamina, and that same kind of “knack.” And like this 40-year custom of reading and writing, the girls are a seriously profound, sustained joy.

You see, I love what I do. I raise three human beings, and I do language for a living—it’s only as terrifying as it is lovely.