

Reading Group Guide / Discussion Questions for "I'll Be Home for Christmas" by Julie L. Cannon:

1. Margaret is described as determined, gutsy, and defiant. These characteristics are a lot of what attracts William to her. Later he tells Mr. Tyronious Byrd that what he loves about Maggie, he also hates. Have you ever experienced this love/hate of certain attributes in someone?
2. Though Maggie is mad at God and has sworn off prayer because she thinks it does no good, she sometimes breathes out small utterances of 'please don't let anything I did or didn't do cause anyone to lose his life' as she's sitting in the Crew's Room, watching planes she's worked on as they fly off. Do you think she was praying, or just using the proverbial 'wishful thinking'?
3. Maggie's friend and roommate, Helen sometimes seems like one of those simple-minded, goody-two-shoes girls with an infuriating blind faith, and though Maggie despises her at times, she also envies Helen's belief that 'things will be alright.' If you have friends/acquaintances similar to Helen, do you shake your head at their simplicity or somehow envy their mind-set, or maybe even a little bit of both? What difference does believing 'things will be alright' make, if any, in a person's life?
4. Maggie seals up her heart as a sort of self-protective measure. She runs from William's declaration of love because she's afraid of the out-of-control, vulnerable feelings that come with love. Do you think serving in the U.S. Navy WAVES was a good place to try and lose herself? Is the renowned discipline and control of the military enough? Did it work?
5. What preconceived notions about God did Mr. Tyronious Byrd have that surfaced when he went through his dark valley? Did his discoveries about what our trials give to us influence your perception of hard times? Do you think adversities and afflictions come from God, or are they simply allowed by God?
6. The author read that gardening is the #1 hobby in the U.S. and that digging in the dirt is a healing endeavor. Do you find gardening or yardwork to be therapeutic? Do you believe that 'feeling the pulse of the earth' through putting your hands in soil, or harvesting some of the earth's bounty is a healing salve for you? Do you think Mr. Tyronious Byrd feels a stronger connection with his Creator when he's outside with the trees? Does William Dove feel this too?
7. The author of this story suffered a major brain injury as a result of a bicycling accident (she's the poster-child telling everyone to please wear a helmet!). Her recovery was said to be nothing less than miraculous (learning to walk, strengthening injured wrists, dealing with issues in the right-front temporal lobe of her brain). She's thankful to have come so far, but sometimes can still get mad about not being able to drive. Do you see any of her attitudes coming through in William Dove's response to his battle with polio? Do you hear any of the admonitions Julie Cannon might have heard when Mr. Tyronious Byrd tells him, 'Now don't go pityin' yo'self, son. Seem ever' day I hear about some mama or daddy gettin' a telegram say their baby ain't comin' home.'
8. In the novel, William grows uncomfortable around Mr. Byrd when he mentions his 'soul travail.' Why is William afraid to hear about this 'soul travail'? Have you had an opportunity to get to know a zealous,

fervent, impassioned person; someone who's been through 'hell' and back? Has that experience changed their outlook on life? Does their influence make you "see" things differently?

9. How important is it to Mr. Tyronious Byrd to use what he learned going through his hard times to counsel other people who are going through trials?

10. Are there hard times/experiences in your own life you feel have made you a better, or more empathetic person? Have you ever had times in your life when you wondered if (or realized) there was a greater purpose to the things you'd endured? Does adversity make a person stronger?

11. Maggie and Helen embrace two very different perspectives about womanhood and marriage and faith. What are some of the differences between them? How are they similar? Which one of them do you most identify with, and why?

12. What were your initial thoughts about Helen? Did your opinion of her change during the novel?

13. The story is set during WWII, a time when patriotism and the 'war-effort' infiltrated everything. How do you think a man might have felt being labeled 4-F, or medically/physically unfit for military service? William says he feels there is a big stamp on his forehead that says, 'Only half a man.'

14. The Big Band sound was what was popular in 1944. Musicians like Louis Armstrong and Bing Crosby and Glenn Miller had a strong influence on culture. Music can be a very powerful thing. In fact, William tells Maggie that "I'll Be Home for Christmas" is THEIR SONG, because it was playing the first time they kissed. Later when Maggie hears it, she cannot help but travel back to that kiss in her memory. Do you have songs that take you back to certain places, times?

15. Toward the end of the novel, Maggie is enticed into a church despite her intention to avoid anything to do with religion. How does the woman in the congregation's declaration about her son at the Longest Night service affect Maggie? Have you ever had an epiphany while hearing about someone else's struggles? (Having a service on 'The Longest Night' on December 21st is symbolic. December 21st is the Winter Solstice, the night of the year with the longest period of darkness. But you can also look at it from this perspective - it is the beginning of that part of the year in which the amount of daylight each day gradually increases up until June 21st.)

16. War is a terrible, scary thing. Some say it is a necessary evil. How do you feel about that? What have we, the U.S., gained and lost as a result of wars?

17. Mr. Tyronious Byrd mentions to Will that he prays for German and Japanese soldiers. Do you have trouble loving your enemies? The enemies of the U.S? Do you think witnessing all the casualties of war makes it hard for people to believe there's a loving God who wants His children to have an abundant life?

18. Does it generally take some time after heartbreak and grief and trauma for a person to 'let their heart back out there' in this crazy world? Do you think Maggie could have given her heart to William at the beginning of the novel, or was it still too early?

19. Tyronious Bird believes God is in control of the universe, and that true meaning and fulfillment in life are based on a relationship with the Almighty. He believes that while God doesn't CAUSE the hard, scary, painful events of our lives, He ALLOWS them, and if you are willing, if you surrender, He can USE them to make you a more beautiful creation, more like Him. What do you think? Do you think each of us are on our own personal spiritual and physical journey?