



# The Prodigal Daughter: Reclaiming an Unfinished Childhood

*Margaret Gibson*

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The 1950s and 1960s were years of shifting values and social changes that did not sit well with many citizens of Richmond, Virginia, and in particular with one conservative family, a staunchly southern mother and father and their two daughters. A powerful evocation of time and place, this memoir—a gifted poet's first book of prose—is the story of an inquisitive and sensitive young woman's coming of age and a deeply moving recounting of her reconciliation later in life with the family she left behind.

Returning us to a Cold War world marked by divisions of race, gender, wealth, and class, *The Prodigal Daughter* is an exploration of *difference*, the powerful wedge that separates individuals within a social milieu and within a family. Echoing the biblical Prodigal Son, Margaret Gibson's memoir is less concerned with the years of excess away from home than with the seeds of division sown in this family's early years. Hers is the story of a mother proud to be a Lady, a Southerner, and a Christian; of two daughters trapped by their mother's power; and of their father's breakdown under social and family expectations.

Slow to rebel, young Margaret finally flees the world of manners and custom—which she deems poor substitutes for right thought and right action in the face of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War—and abandons her fundamentalist upbringing. In a defiant gesture that proves prophetic, she once signed a postcard home "The Prodigal." After years of being the distant, absent daughter, she finds herself returning home to meet the needs of her stroke-crippled younger sister and her incapacitated parents.

In this tale of homecoming and forgiveness, death and dying, Gibson recounts how she overcame her long indifference to a sister she had thought different from herself, recognizing the strengths of the bonds that both hold us and set us free. Interweaving astute social observations on social pressures, race relations, sibling rivalry, adolescent angst, and more, *The Prodigal Daughter* is a startlingly honest portrayal of one family in one southern city and the story of all too many families across America.

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