



A Study Guide by Dr. Rachel Price Cooper
Instructor of Theatre, University of Southern Maine



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Fireflies

By Matthew Barber

From the novel *Eleanor & Abel* by Annette Sanford

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MAY 2019

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THE PLAYWRIGHT

Matthew Barber was born and raised in the Los Angeles area. He attended West Torrance High School where he wrote plays and helped to start a theatre club “so [that he] could get transportation to go see shows” in downtown Los Angeles.¹ Barber went on to major in English at UCLA. He moved to San Francisco after he graduated in 1985 and went to work as the arts editor of the *San Francisco Independent*. He also worked as a marketer for a gay and lesbian theatre company called “Theatre Rhinoceros.”

Barber returned to L.A. in 1994. Prior to leaving San Francisco, he was alerted to the prospect of adapting Elizabeth von Arnem’s *Enchanted April* for the stage by friend and director Scott Williams. Barber, like so many in the entertainment industry, took a far from glamorous day-job to subsidize his more creative pursuits. He worked as a proofreader of corporate advertising at Nationwide Advertising’s Sherman Oaks office from 1994 to 2003. He spent another six years there as an office manager. It was there that he wrote much of his Tony Award nominated version of *Enchanted April*, an adaptation of the 1922 novel that follows two London housewives who rent an Italian villa with two high-maintenance, upper class women. He managed to secure the stage rights for *Enchanted April* for only \$1500 dollars. Upon completing the script, Barber sent thirty queries to New York agents. Only one responded. That one was Peter Hagan, who enlisted Jeffrey Wilson as a producer. *Enchanted April* premiered at Hartford Stage in Connecticut in 2000. It was directed by artistic director Michael Wilson. Wilson would also direct the subsequent productions on Broadway starring Molly Ringwald and Elizabeth Ashley in 2003 and a later production at the Pasadena Playhouse.

Barber’s initial success at a literary source for the stage was further honed by his sophomore effort in full length playwriting. His second full length play was *Fireflies*. It is based on Annette Sanford’s novel *Eleanor and Abel*. In an interview with Long Wharf Theatre for the play’s premiere in 2017, Barber discussed his gravitation towards Sanford’s writing about life in small-town Texas. When speaking of his own work, Barber’s affection and ear for tight knit communities and regional dialogue is clear. Although born and raised just south of Pasadena, Barber expresses an affinity for small town living. Barber’s grandparents migrated from rural Nebraska in 1941 and even growing up as a mostly urban Californian he, “absorbed their rhythms, the sharp humor, the saying much with

¹ Don Shirley, “A great view from his desk,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 18th, 2004, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-apr-18-ca-shirley18-story.html>, Accessed March 29, 2019.

very little.”² After receiving Sanford’s permission to adapt her work, Barber drove through Southern Texas to meet the then eighty-year-old novelist in her home town in Jackson County, where the play is set. *Fireflies* went on to be awarded the Edgerton Foundation New Play award in 2017.

THE SETTING

The action of the play occurs on Eleanor Bannister’s property in Groverdel Texas in July of 1995. Groverdel is a fictional south Texas town with a population of only 1,472. Annette Sanford lived and drew from Jackson County to create the setting for her novel. The actual Jackson County area was created as a municipality of Mexico in 1835 and reorganized as a County belonging to the Republic of Texas in 1836. It was named for president Andrew Jackson. The county itself is sparsely populated. In the 2000 census, just five years after the play is set, there were 14,391 people living in its entirety. 76.49% of the population identified as white. Hispanic or Latino people made up the next largest demographic at 24.68%.

Jackson County falls in the Coastal Prairies region Southwest of Houston. Cattle farming and agriculture are still primary industries. Petroleum, metal fabrication, plastics, and tooling also play a role. That being said, Eleanor Bannister’s status as an educator in a region where much of the work is in farming and manufacturing says something about her status in her community.

From the onset of the play, the audience sees only Eleanor Bannister’s kitchen which has an attached screen porch that leads outside. It is clear that the once impressive property has seen better days. In fact, the derelict state of Eleanor’s home serves as the inciting incident for much of the plot: Eleanor’s fig trees are overgrown and their fruit decimated by mockingbirds, her screened porch is so crammed with clutter that it is unusable, and there is a hole in her uninhabited rental cottage. When the itinerant Abel Brown arrives on the premise of repairing the roof, he puts his foot through the cottage steps. Later on, he takes it upon himself to mow the overgrown grass. Eleanor’s air conditioning is also broken in midst of the oppressively hot Texas summer and it is so stifling that characters are often seen standing in front of her open refrigerator.

Eleanor’s neighbor, Grace Bodell, mentions multiple times that Eleanor’s father built the nicest house on the block and frequently professes astonishment at Eleanor’s having let things go so thoroughly. Their houses are close enough together that Grace is able to keep tabs on Eleanor’s movements from her kitchen window. Grace peered on as Eleanor suspiciously returned from her unoccupied rental house whilst scandalously clad in only a nightgown the day before. Grace’s frequent appearance at Eleanor’s house denotes not only their homes’ physical proximity, but the somewhat begrudging intimacy between two women who have lived next door to one another for the majority of their lives.

From the onset, the dialogue is peppered with details about the day to day realities of a close knit, small town community: a librarian prone to closing on account of the weather, a woman named Patsy who has yet to return Eleanor’s casserole dish, the Sheffley boy who does yardwork for Grace, calling Puffer MacAdoo about the broken air conditioner. They are all unseen characters who make up the fabric of Groverdel, a place where Eleanor has lived and worked for the entirety of her life, apart from her time away at college. In short, it is a place that has come to define her. Thus, the appearance of Abel Brown, a drifter asking around for manual labor jobs, proves to be quite jarring to the predictable, day to day routines and normalized relationships of Groverdel’s inhabitants. We learn that Abel Brown was drawn to the town because it is built around a lake that you cannot see from the road until you get to the top of a hill. Beyond that, it boasts a diner, a drugstore, a police station, and a school. We know that there are working farms close by, and a neighboring town called Paleyville, but not much else.

² Matthew Barber, Writer, “The Long Wharf Interview”, <http://www.matthewbarber.info/fireflies.html>, accessed March 1, 2019.

THEMES

Playwright, Matthew Barber describes how the small Texas-town environment of Groverdel functions as a character in and of itself in Annette Sanford's novel, *Eleanor and Abel*. The novel expanded upon her short story "Housekeeping." Life in a small town where everyone carries preconceived notions of who their neighbors are seems to be a primary focal point of the play. Eleanor is resigned to her public identity as the most respectable woman in Groverdel. She has become so attached to this identity that it starts to overshadow a far more complex and nuanced personality. Now that she is retired, she is having trouble reconciling her identity as a teacher with the current, day to day realities of her life.

It takes the appearance of an itinerant outsider to shake up those preconceived identities. Very early on, Grace exclaims that Eleanor Bodell is not the sort of woman who would have gotten into a truck with a handsome stranger when he told her there was a hole in her roof. Grace proclaims that Eleanor "is the one woman [she] would have counted on to have not only chased a drifter off [her] property but straight out of Groverdel." She is even more astonished when Eleanor admits that she hired him to fix it, all while wearing only her nightgown.

The concept of life still holding new and exciting possibilities in its later years also runs strong throughout the play. Eleanor has resigned herself to being single, living alone, and maintaining her role as the arbiter of knowledge in her small community. As such, she is an unmarried, retired woman who has found herself in an increasing state of complacency. Her resignation towards the state of her house is an extension of these feelings. The honeymoon cottage holds specific significance in that it was intended for her when she got married, an event that never occurred.

The idea that opposites attract also permeates Eleanor and Abel's relationship. Eleanor's life is built around certainty and stability, while Abel has lived a life of wandering and "looking" for new experiences. In finding one another though, they realize that they also crave what the other has to offer. Abel brings new experiences and challenges to Eleanor and Eleanor brings out a sense of home and steadiness to Abel.

THE CHARACTERS

Eleanor Bannister: The play's central character is a retired school teacher who has reached the later years of her life. Having taught every child in a small town for forty years affords her a certain amount of prestige and authority in her small community. Her neighbor, Grace Bodell, offhandedly mentions that Eleanor, rather than the local librarian, is the "gatekeeper of knowledge." This seems to cause Eleanor to bristle, but it is clear that she is often quick to correct those around her. In the first few moments of the show, when Grace mentions that a wasp stung her on the end of her elbow, Eleanor unnecessarily informs her that an elbow has a center rather than an end. We learn that Eleanor was an only child as the plot proceeds. She taught school for forty years, never married, and cared for her parents in their old age until they died together when her father had a stroke while driving eighteen years ago. She now lives alone in the house where she grew up.

From the first moments, we learn that the generally rock-solid Eleanor is preoccupied and acting odd according to her hyper-vigilante neighbor and friend Grace Bodell. Eleanor bustles back and forth from her overcrowded porch on the premise of preparing for a charity sale. She keeps refolding the same towel and Grace insists that Eleanor tell her if she is becoming forgetful in her old age. She also notes that Eleanor has uncharacteristically put a rinse to color her hair and is acting cagey about what she had been doing the day before.

As the two women converse, we learn that people around Eleanor and Grace's age, people that they have known for their entire lives, have started to die. The two women discuss the recent service for Dewey Newsome. Both women had been in school with Dewey and Grace is shocked when Eleanor insists that their old classmate was actually a fool. She goes on to express distaste for the living's tendency to idealize the dead. We later learn that

Eleanor and Dewey had been “friends for a time” (IE romantically involved) fifty years ago and that she was far more rattled by his death than she had originally let on.

In general, Eleanor’s initial demeanor is gruff, authoritative, and slightly self-important. It is also clear, through her conversation with Grace, that something is off. Grace notes that every year since Eleanor’s retirement six years prior has been marked by her doing less; she has let her home fall into disrepair and she has stopped going to twice monthly dominos even though she always wins. It seems that Eleanor has historically been a creature of routine, but that the routine is holding less and less appeal—she goes to the library every Friday and she states that she has had breakfast cereal for dinner for the last five years. She states that she likes certainty, rather than venturing into the unknown. What we also see, is that she is drawn to Abel Brown, who in many ways is her polar opposite in such respects.

Grace Bodell: We learn that Grace Bodell, Eleanor’s next-door neighbor and close friend, is the widow to a man named Roger. She has sons who have grown up and moved away. It unclear whether an unseen character named Patty is her daughter who still lives in town or an unrelated neighbor. To an outsider, Grace would appear to be a reactionary busy body who frequently calls the police and stands on a chair in her kitchen window to see what Eleanor is up to in her own yard. From Grace’s end though, her tendency to meddle into Eleanor’s affairs comes from a place of genuine concern and care. She exhibits a tendency to mother people. For instance, when Eleanor is coming undone over Abel Brown, she tells her to “sit up straight and drink [her] milk.”

We also learn that there is more to her than being the neighborhood busy-body. After Eleanor confesses to her depression about the state of her life and the effect Abel Brown has had on her, Grace admits to have been briefly infatuated by a butcher named Friz at the Four Start Market for a period after her husband died. We also learn, that although she does not confront her directly about it, that she is quietly hurt that Eleanor seems to take their friendship for granted. Near the end of the play Abel Brown mentions that a local man named Bill Taylor has been infatuated with Grace for the past thirty years and she is apparently unaware.

Abel Brown: Abel Brown is described as an extremely attractive older man. He has a confident swagger and he is someone that people tend to warm to. He is described in the stage directions as having “the laconic charm of a world weary poker player—amiable calm, [and] a little cocky.” When he appears in Eleanor’s kitchen in scene two, he is described as a masculine type, clad in cowboy boots and denim. We learn that he has had a variety of different jobs. He states that he has drilled wells, built houses, worked on cars and dabbled in plumbing. He also claims to have written a song that was stolen and ended up on the radio. Mainly though, he states that he has traveled around, “looking” for something he cannot quite put into words. Where Eleanor states that she prefers certainty, Abel points out the merits of taking chances.

As the play progresses, Abel makes no secret that he considers himself a highly flawed man—he expresses regret at having left his surrogate daughter behind with a mother that was also not always present. We also learn a bit more about the circumstances of his family and marriage. His own father was not in the picture and his mother died when he and his younger brother were quite young. Abel acted as a father figure to his brother Jim, until leaving school to join the army. He found that the army was a good place for him and upon returning to civilian life, he bought himself a house using money from the G.I. bill. While he was gone, Jim seems to have gotten himself mixed up in some kind of trouble and decides to follow in Abel’s footsteps by joining the army as soon as he is of age. Abel states that he was killed overseas just two months after enlisting. A girl showed up on Abel’s doorstep stating that she was pregnant with Jim’s child, before the body had even made it back home for burial. Abel, knowing the social stigma and financial hardship of being a single mother, married her, and acted as a father to his niece, Mary Kate. As much as his intentions were noble, Abel confesses that he quickly felt trapped by the relationship and began his life on the road. He began roaming from place to place in a camper van, picking up jobs as he went, and looking for some intangible thing he couldn’t quite name.

We learn that Abel’s cryptic note and abrupt departure to come to the aid of his granddaughter is as much about trying to rectify the guilt he carries for leaving his stepdaughter behind with an unreliable mother as it is about his tendency to feel trapped in domestic situations. This time however, he is able to recognize this weakness in

himself and returns to Eleanor intent on giving their relationship a real try. On the surface, he asks that she reinstate the arrangement made to remodel her rental house, but the implicit agreement is that they are going to pursue a life together. He, like Eleanor realizes that they have lived utterly divergent lives up to now; she has lived in the same house her parents built when they were starting a family, in a tight knit community with a long memory. Abel was orphaned as a child and has been often been a stranger, moving from new place to new place for the majority of his adult life. Eleanor has had a handful of romantic relationships, most of which were in college. When sked about his romantic history, Abel simply states, "I've been trav'lin' 'round a long while," as a means of confirming that they have been numerous. Despite these differences, and Abel's acknowledgement of his own demons, he recognizes the attraction between himself and Eleanor almost immediately and pursues her with a frankness that even the unflappable Ms. Barrister cannot ignore.

Eugene Claymire: Eugene Claymire is a Groverdell police officer in his late thirties. He is a former pupil of Eleanor's who she remembers for having set off a string of firecrackers in the faculty bathroom as a boy. Eugene appears to still defer to Eleanor as an authority figure as an adult and officer of the law. He is cordial and somewhat nervous as he takes Eleanor's statement about Abel's alleged theft of two thousand dollars. The playwright states, "There's a sweetness to Eugene, but he's not the sharpest crayon in the box." As the scene progresses, we see that although Eugene is not exactly an intellectual, he exhibits good instincts about people. He is sensitive to Eleanor's vulnerability in this moment and handles her with care. He also states that he had a good impression of Abel, which we later learn to be correct on many levels. He is the father of two girls, who are clearly the light of his life and when the somewhat unapproachable Miss Bannister states that she would like to meet them, he cannot contain his pride. Much like the other characters in the play, we learn that there is more to Eugene than initially meets the eye. More so, there is more to him than Eleanor initially remembered. When she mentions that she identifies Eugene with his childhood firecracker stunt, he reminds her that he is also the person who saved the Whitaker twins from drowning in the local lake during the graduation picnic; he may not have been the most motivated student, but he recites off several lines of Coleridge that he memorized long ago in Eleanor's class with sheer enthusiasm. His only explanation is that those words just always stayed with him.

THE PLOT

At the onset of the play, we encounter Grace Bodell, seated at Eleanor Bannister's kitchen table. Eleanor is agitated and evasive as she bustles in and out of the kitchen whilst Grace, who has arrived with the excuse of borrowing a can of pineapple, fishes for information about what Eleanor had been up to the previous day. Eventually it becomes clear that a drifter has been seen in town, approaching "single women" for work as a handy man. As Grace questions Eleanor about her erratic behavior of late, it also becomes clear that she saw Eleanor uncharacteristically coming through the thicket on her way back from her rental house dressed only in a night gown the day before. Eleanor admits that not only had she met the drifter, Abel Brown, but that she had paid him sixty-five dollars to fix a hole in the roof of the out building. Worse still, she had gotten into his truck to assess the damage in a state of undress and he was returning later that evening for supper. The scene ends with Eleanor in a tizzy over Abel's impending return and Grace both titillated and terrified on behalf of her friend. Eleanor insists that now that her roof is fixed, her relationship with Abel Brown is at an end just as Grace points out that "the Groverdell stalker" is currently mowing Eleanor's lawn.

The next scene opens later that evening. Abel Brown is playing "Beautiful Dreamer" on Eleanor's father's old violin rather badly. He has brought a ready-made dinner and a bottle of wine with him. In the course of the conversation Eleanor corrects his grammar and maintains an air of condescension, which Abel takes with impressive good humor and surprising intelligence. When things turn flirtatious, Eleanor attempts to pay Abel for repairing her roof, mowing her grass, and fixing her air conditioning system in order to send him on his way on the grounds that she has neighbors. Abel dismisses the prying eyes of Grace Bodell across the way and proposes that he do further repairs on her "honeymoon cottage." Eleanor bristles at referring to her rental house as such. When Abel presses her about renovating the honeymoon cottage so that she can move into it and rent out the

larger house for a profit, she becomes highly emotional. She states that she prays that it will be struck by lightning and burnt to the ground every time a storm comes to town. Abel backs off. Eleanor pays him for his work which he accurately reads as a dismissal. He is not defeated however. He notes that the campground where he is parking his camper has a phone, which she should call if she ever needs “a good kiss” before exiting.

Scene Three occurs two days later. Grace appears on the porch, peering through the windows and knocking repeatedly. She leaves briefly and Eleanor appears disheveled and preoccupied in her nightgown. Eleanor unlocks the door for her agitated friend who enters with two newspapers and a cake server. Grace is dressed in her Sunday best and her hair is quaffed in a stereotypically large Texas do. We learn that Grace almost called the police when Eleanor failed to retrieve her newspaper for the past two days and failed to come to church—something which has *never* happened before. Eleanor, in her agitated state over Abel Brown, was not even aware that it was Sunday.

Eleanor breaks down when she confesses that Abel Brown is no longer at the campground or anywhere else in Groverdel. Since his departure, she has come to recognize the house surrounding her as a tomb (as noted previously by Abel Brown). Grace tries to comfort her, claiming that her agitated state is just a “lapse” like the time she volunteered to chaperone a school trip to the natural history museum last year and couldn’t catch her breath. Eleanor confesses that the incident was actually a panic attack, brought on by the fact that she felt the dinosaurs were watching her and welcoming her as one of their own. From that point on, she felt as if she were unravelling and that everyone in Groverdel could see it. She confesses to having to leave Dewey’s funeral for fear of an outburst and drove to the middle of a field where she cried for an hour. Eleanor explains that although Abel Brown was the catalyst for her current state, she has been feeling like she had lost herself for some time now.

Grace attempts to calm her, confessing that she was briefly attracted to a local butcher who had beautiful lips after her husband, Roger, had died. The butcher, like Abel, had left town at some point, and Grace had gradually recovered. This admission has the opposite effect of calming Eleanor. Rather, Grace recedes into the background as Eleanor is transported from her living room to the Planetarium of the Natural History Museum where she had her panic attack last fall. She is surrounded by stars. Eleanor reverts to teacher mode, telling unseen chattering students to keep with their partners and listen as an amplified voice speaks on the evolution of mankind. The evolutionary narrative states that in building walls to protect themselves, people have become isolated, “lazy, vain, and foolish.” The sound of Abel playing the violin comes through the hallucination and Eleanor covers her ears. Grace appears again and tells Eleanor that she is dreaming. She repeats that a woman Eleanor’s age needs to keep a balance. When Eleanor asks how old she is, Grace directs her to the sign in front of her house. The museum recording comes back in as if reading the sign, “Eleanor Bannister—the oldest living woman in all of Texas.” Eleanor realizes that she is a museum display. Grace repeats that Abel Brown is gone, but that she will find herself again. All she needs is time. “Time” is repeated by both women almost as if in refrain as Grace fades into the background and Eleanor is left alone in the cosmos. The museum recording ushers the imaginary group toward the exit. Eleanor recedes into the background and the kitchen re-emerges.

Scene Four occurs at noon two days later. Lights come up on Abel Brown sitting at Eleanor’s kitchen table. Eleanor enters from the porch carrying groceries and car keys. She is a jumble of anger and joy at seeing him. We learn that he was briefly detained by the police after Grace Bodell called them when she saw him at Eleanor’s rental house. Turns out, he was fixing the step that he had previously put his foot through. After a chat with Officer Claymire, a former student of Eleanor’s, Abel sent him on his way. Eleanor acquiesces to Abel making her a sandwich and he broaches the subject of the honeymoon cottage again. This time Eleanor agrees to let him fix it up, but stipulates that he can park his trailer out back rather than sleep in the cottage. He agrees and when Grace phones yet again, Eleanor invites her to dinner so that she can properly meet Abel Brown. Presumably in shock, Grace hangs up on Eleanor. Abel finally kisses Eleanor and the lights go down on their embrace to end Act I.

Act II picks up in the afternoon three days later. The kitchen appears to be in much better shape than in the previous act. The curtains have been changed, the table expanded, and the porch has been cleared. Eleanor sits at the table with officer Eugene Claymire. We learn that Abel has left suddenly after Eleanor had given two checks

that totaled to two thousand dollars for renovation materials. Eleanor wishes to report Abel for theft and fraud, but Eugene isn't so sure. He notes that Abel left a brief note and that everyone around town had grown to like him since his arrival there. When Eleanor presses Eugene about just how well he knows Abel, he goes through a brief history and mentions that Abel had a wife, daughter, and granddaughter in Oklahoma. In shock, Eleanor opens the refrigerator and takes several deep breaths. Oddly calm, she returns to the conversation and explains that she checked with the bank and both checks for one thousand dollars had been cashed. When she asks Eugene her impression of her as a teacher, he fondly remembers her as strict and proudly rattles off a few lines of Coleridge that she had drilled into him years ago. Eleanor begins to cry and Eugene attempts to lighten the mood, by telling her about his daughters. When Eleanor states that her strongest memory of Eugene involved him lighting firecrackers in the faculty bathroom, he responds that he also saved the Whitaker twins from drowning at their graduation picnic. This forgotten piece of information moves Eleanor. Eleanor says that she would like to meet his daughters and Eugene beams with pride.

Grace enters. She has retrieved some of the clothes Eleanor had donated to charity amidst Abel's arrival and her interrelated housecleaning kick. She attempts to lure Eleanor out to twice-monthly dominos that night and then emotionally blurts out that she is so sorry that this has happened, but so thrilled that Eleanor came to her for help. Grace is clearly validated that she is the one Eleanor reached out to. When Grace calms down, Eleanor confesses that the lightness of spirit Abel's presence seemed to conjure had stayed with her despite his sudden departure. When Grace admits that she was a little jealous of the romance, Eleanor confides that he is married. Grace is stunned, but Eleanor is surprisingly upbeat, both about being jilted and by being robbed. She proclaims her intention to sell the rental house. She also explains that the panic that she has been carrying around since the episode in the museum has mysteriously left her. She also confesses that she may have undervalued Grace's friendship. Grace agrees, but graciously forgives her. The two make plans to go to the cemetery the following day, so Eleanor can visit her parents' graves and Grace her husband's. They sit together, at peace. Grace reiterates that Eleanor's father built the most beautiful house on the block and Eleanor agrees stating, "It's the nicest house in Groverdell. And he built it for me."

The sound of Abel Brown whistling "Beautiful Dreamer" cuts through the women's calm repose. Eleanor shows no reaction, but Grace is quick to defend her friend, stating that the police are on his tail. Abel is nonplussed as he notes that he had just run into Eugene Claymire and assured him that everything was fine. Eleanor finally stirs, dismissing Grace so that she and Abel can speak alone. Grace leaves reluctantly, snubbing Abel on the way out but also thanking him for the blackberries he has picked up for them. Eleanor remains quiet. She finally notes that Abel has incorrectly parked his trailer behind her house as they "are no longer in agreement." Abel tries to explain that something came up in Oklahoma, but Eleanor cuts him off, demanding that he return the money she had advanced him immediately. When he states that that is impossible she calls him a liar. He presses on, explaining that when he settles permanently in Groverdell, he will be bringing someone named Abigail. Eleanor interprets Abigail as a rival, but it turns out that she is Abel's nine-year-old granddaughter, who he is rescuing from a bad situation.

Eleanor finally explodes over the fact that she has newly discovered that he is married. Abel explains that he is married, but only in the technical sense. We learn that he had a younger brother named Jim, who was only nine when their mother died and they had never known their father. Abel left school early to join the army. He returned to Oklahoma and bought a house using the G.I. bill. His brother Jim, who had gotten into a lot of trouble while Abel was away, followed in his older brother's footsteps and joined the army as well. He died overseas two months later. Quickly thereafter a woman showed up at Abel's door stating that she was carrying Jim's child. Abel married the woman and acted as a father to the baby girl, Mary Kate, or Kit. Eleanor softens, stating that if the story is true, Abel did a very honorable deed. Rather than being bolstered, Abel is racked by guilt when he explains that the marriage soon unraveled and he took to the road which was detrimental to Kit. He admits that he got spooked after the dinner that he and Eleanor had had with Grace and that when the message from Oklahoma came that Kit had run off and gotten into trouble with the police, he was momentarily relieved that he had to go. He explains that his taking in Abigail is an attempt to make amends this time around.

Eleanor's anger has cooled but she is uninterested when Abel asks her to consider re-instituting their previous arrangement. She states that she is selling the cottage as is and asks him to take the symbolic leaf out of the table. Defeated, Abel states that he will be leaving Groverdel. He remains quiet, and when Eleanor asks him what's wrong, he flies into a rage, stating that she is the most frustrating person that he has ever encountered in her life; not only did she judge him, but she cursed him, called him names, and reported him to the police. He reports that everyone around town keeps telling him what a level-headed person Eleanor is, but he has yet to meet the person that they are describing. Rather, she is the very definition of insolence. When he states that he has no idea what Bill Taylor sees in that "Old Crow" Grace Bodell, Eleanor flies to her friend's defense before being distracted by Abel's revelation that Bill Taylor has had a crush on Grace for the past thirty years. When he ends his rant by screaming, "I'M NOT AN UNHAPPY MAN!" Eleanor responds that she is "NOT AN UNHAPPY WOMAN!" with equal ferocity. They end in a standoff. This time Eleanor is the first to break it. She gingerly confesses that she has felt the same sense of "lighting up" since Abel appeared to out of nowhere to entirely disrupt her life. Abel counters that he is from Oklahoma, not nowhere and although he has been wandering the roads while she has stayed put, maybe that is what they needed to bring them to this point stating, "Every love story has the exact same start Eleanor. Two people finally meeting." Eleanor is dazed by his use of the word love. She enquires about the building materials which Abel shows her are waiting in his truck. Abel also confirms that Abby is waiting in Oklahoma. Eleanor states that he should stay. She formally accepts his proposal to renovate her rental house. They perform a binding handshake and the play ends with Eleanor stating that she is glad to have finally met the real Abel Brown.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. People often collapse their identities with their profession or career. We see that Eleanor is having a kind of identity crisis when she retires. How are the other characters identified within the play? Do certain aspects of their identity take precedent over others (their job, their relationship status, certain aspects of their past)? How does the way they see themselves differ from the way others see them?
2. The play is largely realistic, but at the end of Act I we are suddenly transplanted to a planetarium in the natural history museum where Eleanor is having a kind of dream or hallucination in which she finds herself on exhibit as the oldest woman in Texas. What is the significance of this moment? How does the sudden break from realism effect the way we view the play as a whole?
3. Much of Eleanor and Abel's relationship is based on the fact that they appear to be opposites in many ways. From the beginning of the play to the end, does their apparent opposition seem to grow or are they more similar than they initially realized?
4. Groverdel Texas appears to be an extremely small community where everyone knows one another. What are the potential positives and negatives of living in a small community?