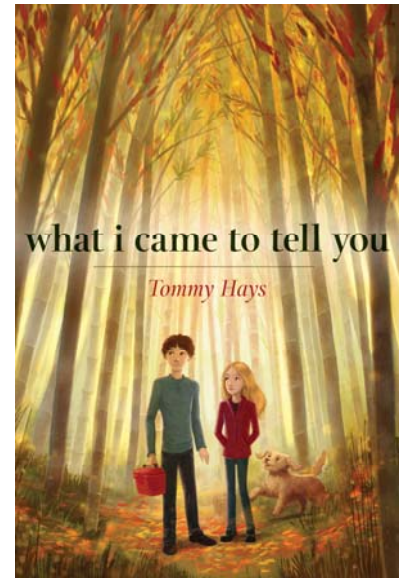


EGMONT  
USA

## What I Came to Tell You

by Tommy Hays



★ “Hays is a gifted storyteller, offering up an effective balance of credible emotion, understated wisdom, and gentle humor.”—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*, starred review

★ “Hays is especially strong at depicting the network of people, old and young, who help Grover and his family move through their grief and, along the way, save his beloved forest.”—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Hays’ story is filled with touching honesty and youthful wisdom, all of which help undergird Grover’s own discovery of the healing power of family, love, and art.”  
—*Booklist*

“Readers will be quickly and surely drawn in by quirky siblings Grover and Sudie, rooting for them to find a measure of peace and happiness in the wake of tragedy.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Set in Asheville, North Carolina, the story has a pleasing Southern flavor.”  
—*School Library Journal*

“Throw in some local politics, prejudice, budding romances, family tugs-of-war and an odd man who seems to linger everywhere, and you have a penetrating and complex story of loss and, ultimately, the rebuilding of a family. Tommy Hays’ first middle grade novel, *What I Came to Tell You*, is a thoughtful, tender look at a family devastated by grief.”—*BookPage*

### Discussion guide written by Pat Scales

Twelve-year-old Grover Johnston and his younger sister, Sudie, are left to grieve the death of their mother in their own way while their father retreats deeper into his work as director of the Thomas Wolfe home in Asheville. There is a bamboo forest near their home where Grover sets up a workshop and spends hours weaving beautiful tapestries from twigs, vines, and bamboo leaves. Then he and Sudie take the weavings to Riverside Cemetery and lovingly place them on their mother’s grave. Grover’s father sees his son’s art as a waste of time, and when Grover’s grades

decline, his father demands that he spend more time on schoolwork and less time in the canebrake. A mountain family, also dealing with the loss of a loved one, moves into a rental across the street and barges right into Grover's life and his beloved Bamboo Forest. In their own special way, this family changes the Johnston family and paves the way for Grover and his father to repair their relationship and move past their lingering grief.

- Describe the Johnston family. What did Grover's mother do to encourage family unity? Discuss how this unity is shattered when she dies. How is Jessie a parent figure for Grover and Sudie? Why is their father content to allow Jessie to take over this role?
- Dealing with grief is one of the main themes of the novel. People grieve in different ways. Compare and contrast how the following characters deal with their grief: Grover, Sudie, Walter Johnston, Emma Lee, Leila, and Matthew. What does Grover learn about grief from his relationship with Emma Lee? Discuss Grover's reaction when he sees his father crying. Debate whether Grover feels as if he has happened on a private moment. Why is crying important in the grieving process?
- Guilt is another underlying theme in the story. Why does Grover feel guilty about his mother's death? Discuss Grover's thoughts when he learns that Matthew, Jessie's assistant, was the driver of the car that hit his mother. How does Matthew spend the months after the accident seeking redemption? The inscription on Grover's mother's grave reads, "We Are Not What We Think" – The Buddha. How might this quote have special meaning for Matthew and Grover at the end of the novel? Matthew accidentally took Grover's mother's life. How does he give Grover his life back?
- Grover thinks that his mother seems more with him now that she is gone. How is this especially true when he's in his workshop in the Bamboo Forest? Discuss the symbolism of the teardrop Christmas ornament. How does it represent absence and presence? There are times when Grover feels "gone." How is this feeling related to his mother's death? Explain how Walter Johnston contributes to the "gone" feeling in his son.
- Anger is one of the stages of grief. Discuss how Grover and his father express their anger toward each other. Why does Grover's father smash Grover's workshop and the weavings? What is his father feeling when he returns to retrieve Grover's toolbox from the forest? Explain how Sudie deals with these fits of anger between father and son.
- Grover is stunned when Clay refers to his weavings as "art." How does this change the way Grover sees his work? Grover tells Emma Lee that he doesn't believe in God. Discuss what she means when she responds, "Maybe your

head doesn't, but your hands sure do." (p. 123) How is this an ultimate compliment from Emma Lee? At the end of the novel, Jessie invites people to see Grover's work. Explain the following quote: "The more people looked at his weavings, the more it felt like the weavings weren't his anymore." (p. 285)

- Contrast Grover's passion for his bamboo weavings with his father's passion for Thomas Wolfe. How do they both hide behind their passion? Neither father nor son understands the other's passion. At what point do they learn to appreciate each other's work?
- Discuss Grover's reaction when he hears his father and Leila in the guest room together on the night of the fire. Why does his father say that he was irresponsible and selfish to let that happen between him and Leila? Explain what he means when he tells Grover, "I should have been there." Debate whether his father is referring to the night of the fire, the day Grover's mother was killed, or all the times in between.
- Grover doesn't like the word "feel." Grover's father encourages him to speak with Miss Snyder, the counselor who took his mother's position at school. Explain why Grover thinks that Sudie needs Miss Snyder, but he doesn't. Discuss whether Grover is uncomfortable with Miss Snyder because she occupies his mother's office, or because he is reluctant to talk about his feelings. Explain Miss Snyder's skill in dealing with kids like Grover.
- Why does Grover feel that he has become one of those kids his mother reminded him to treat nicely? Describe how his relationship with peers changed after his mother was killed. How does Sam, his best friend, notice the changes in Grover? At what point does Grover realize that Sam is a bit jealous of Emma Lee and her family? What prompts this jealousy?
- Define prejudice. How do Ashley and her friends reveal their prejudice against mountain people? What connotations are associated with the word "hillbilly"? The students in Grover's class are surprised that Emma Lee isn't suspended for hitting Ashley. Why do you think the principal allowed Emma Lee to return to class? Grover tells Mrs. Caswell why Emma Lee hit Ashley. What does this say about Grover's character? Discuss Mrs. Caswell's method of dealing with Ashley's remarks.
- How do Grover and Emma Lee gain respect from the kids at school after the Christmas Waltz?
- How does the For Sale sign on the Bamboo Forest property represent another sense of loss to Grover? Why is he surprised to learn that his father

tried to buy the land from Commissioner Lunsford? How is this a turning point in his relationship with his father?

- Discuss the humor in the way Jessie saves the Bamboo Forest. How does Grover lose the forest when it's saved? Describe Grover's reaction when his father tells him that it was his artwork that really saved the forest. Explain how this revelation brings the Johnston family full circle.
- At the beginning of the novel, Grover's father says, "I want you to grow up." (p. 34) How does Grover grow up by the end of the novel?

### About the Author



Tommy Hays is the Executive Director of the Great Smokies Writing Program and Lecturer in the Master of Liberal Arts program at UNC Asheville. He teaches in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Murray State University.

His adult novel *The Pleasure Was Mine* was a finalist for the SIBA Fiction Award in 2006 and has been chosen for numerous community reads, including the One City, One Book program in Greensboro and the Amazing Read in Greenville, SC. The novel was read on National Public Radio's *Radio Reader* and South Carolina ETVRadio's *Southern Read*. His other adult novels are *Sam's Crossing*, which has been recently re-released, and *In the Family Way*, winner of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award.

A member of the National Book Critics Circle, he received his BA in English from Furman University and graduated from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. He lives in Asheville with his wife, Connie, and their two children, Max and Ruth.

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