



Where Things Come Back

By John Corey Whaley

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In the remarkable, bizarre, and heart-wrenching summer before Cullen Witter’s senior year of high school, he is forced to examine everything he thinks he understands about his small and painfully dull Arkansas town. His cousin overdoses; his town becomes absurdly obsessed with the alleged reappearance of an extinct woodpecker; and most troubling of all, his sensitive, gifted fifteen-year-old brother, Gabriel, suddenly and inexplicably disappears.

Meanwhile, the crisis of faith spawned by a young missionary’s disillusion in Africa prompts a frantic search for meaning that has far-reaching consequences. As distant as the two stories initially seem, they are woven together through masterful plotting and merge in a surprising and harrowing climax.

This extraordinary tale from a rare literary voice finds wonder in the ordinary and illuminates the hope of second chances.

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Where Things Come Back By John Corey Whaley Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Just when seventeen-year-old Cullen Witter thinks he understands everything about his small and painfully dull Arkansas town, it all disappears. . . .

In the summer before Cullen's senior year, a nominally-depressed birdwatcher named John Barling thinks he spots a species of woodpecker thought to be extinct since the 1940s in Lily, Arkansas. His rediscovery of the so-called Lazarus Woodpecker sparks a flurry of press and woodpecker-mania. Soon all the kids are getting woodpecker haircuts and everyone's eating "Lazarus burgers." But as absurd as the town's carnival atmosphere has become, nothing is more startling than the realization that Cullen's sensitive, gifted fifteen-year-old brother Gabriel has suddenly and inexplicably disappeared.

While Cullen navigates his way through a summer of finding and losing love, holding his fragile family together, and muddling his way into adulthood, a young missionary in Africa, who has lost his faith, is searching for any semblance of meaning wherever he can find it. As distant as the two stories seem at the start, they are thoughtfully woven ever closer together and through masterful plotting, brought face to face in a surprising and harrowing climax.

Complex but truly extraordinary, tinged with melancholy and regret, comedy and absurdity, this novel finds wonder in the ordinary and emerges as ultimately hopeful. It's about a lot more than what Cullen calls, "that damn bird." It's about the dream of second chances.

John Corey Whaley's *Where Things Come Back* Playlist



Where Things Come Back is based on the true story of the Lazarus Woodpecker: The supposed reappearance of the ivory-billed woodpecker is a true story that inspired expression in a variety of media. Author John Corey Whaley was inspired to write the book after he heard Sufjan Steven's "The Lord God Bird" on NPR. Here he provides a custom playlist--one he listened to while writing the book--and some background on each song choice, including the song that inspired the book. **Listen to his playlist.**

"We Won't Need Legs to Stand" by Sufjan Stevens

Aside from the obvious allusions to angels and the afterlife, this song has an eerie quality to it that speaks perfectly to the early parts of the story.

"The Lord God Bird" by Sufjan Stevens

This is the song that started it all...written about the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker in Arkansas with the

combination of a banjo and melodic singing that one may very well hear in a town like Lily.

"Staring At the Sun" by TV On the Radio

There is a particular desperation in this, one of my favorite songs, that seems to fit the mother character perfectly. The story wouldn't be the same without one moment when this song is quoted.

"Hope There's Someone" by Antony And The Johnsons

The lyrics in this song speak clearly for themselves-the hope that there is something else after this life and that second chances do exist... that maybe things do come back.

"Postcards From Italy" by Beirut

This song has a sort of whimsical playfulness that I think represents the more fantastical elements of Cullen Witter's story, especially in those moments where he seems to be completely in a world of his own.

"Trying My Best to Love You" by Jenny Lewis

I think this song is the perfect theme to Cullen's adventures in teenage love, something that doesn't come so easy to him.

"The Leaving Song" by Chris Garneau

I can't ever listen to this song without thinking about Cullen Witter searching for his missing little brother. The line "You are all I know" sums it up beautifully.

"All the Right Reasons" by The Jayhawks

Another whimsical, yet powerful theme to Cullen's search for meaning in his own existence and the hope of a better life.

"Welcome Home, Son" by Radical Face

Though the characters are conflicted with the "home" they've been born into, this song fits well into the overall theme of coming to terms with that struggle.

"Adventures In Solitude" by The New Pornographers

With the possible return of an extinct woodpecker in his town and the disappearance of a his teenage brother, this song and its title perfectly match up with Cullen Witter's own adventures in solitude throughout the story.

"I See a Darkness" by Bonnie "Prince" Billy

I love most of Bonnie "Prince" Billy's eerie, melodic songs, but this one in particular became the unofficial theme song for Gabriel, whose innocence and wise-beyond-his-years persona are threatened when he vanishes out of the lives of his loving family and friends.

"Home" by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros

I think this fun yet sincere song says so much not just about the story's setting, but also the recurring struggle of all of the characters to find a place they belong and reconcile their inabilities to find the things and people without which they never can feel at home.

"Flume" by Bon Iver

When I first heard this song, a son's ode to his mother and the love they share, I instantly thought of Cullen and Gabriel's mother and aunt, two women who must struggle with the possibility of a life without their sons.

Review

"Every now and then a book rises to the top. *Where Things Come Back* soars. Keep your eye on author Corey Whaley. That is, if you can see the stratosphere." (Ellen Hopkins, New York Times bestselling author of the Crank Trilogy)

"In this darkly humorous debut, Whaley weaves two stories into a taut and well-constructed thriller... Vulnerability balances Cullen's arch sarcasm, and the maelstrom of media attention lavished on the woodpecker offers an element of the absurd, especially when juxtaposed against the mystery of Gabriel's disappearance. The portentous tone and flat affect of Whaley's writing is well-suited to the story's religious themes and symbolism... as Whaley gradually brings the story's many threads together in a disturbing, heartbreaking finale that retains a touch of hope." (*Publishers Weekly*, April 11, 2011, *STAR)

"In a build-up that explores the process of grief, second chances and even the meaning of life, Cullen's and Cabot's worlds slowly intersect and solve the mystery of Gabriel's disappearance in this multilayered debut for sophisticated readers. Unexpected, thought-provoking storytelling." (*Kirkus*, April 15, 2011)

"The characters' reactions are palpable as their grief deepens and yet they continue to hope for Gabriel's return. Cullen is an eloquent, thoughtful narrator...the ending is worth the wait." (*School Library Journal*, July 2011)

"The author has managed to capture his characters' feelings of loss and despair with both compassion and empathy. The plot is extremely well thought out and encompasses the tangle of teenage relationships, friendships, and life experiences using humor and thoughtful language...authentic, small-town teenagers; and the main protagonist, Cullen, is well-developed and convincing. An unexpected ending brings about a moving close to the novel." (*VOYA*, June 2011)

"What will hold readers most is the moving story of Cullen's beloved younger brother, who suddenly goes missing, leading to mystery, heartbreak, and an astonishing resolution on the very last page...An intriguing, memorable offering teens will want to discuss." (*Booklist*, May 2011)

"[A] smart, darkly funny, and multilayered debut.... Whaley weaves numerous story lines and themes together with the confidence of a seasoned writer, resulting in a thought-provoking story about media, faith, and family." (*Publishers Weekly*, November 7, 2011, a "Best Books of 2011" selection)

About the Author

John Corey Whaley grew up in a small southern town. He has a BA from Louisiana Tech University and an MA in secondary English education. *Where Things Come Back* is his first novel.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Antonio Duncan:

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Jose Bell:

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Rochelle Barrick:

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