Karen Spears Zacharias's *Mother of Rain*

*Mother of Rain* is the first volume in Zacharias’s Christian Bend trilogy, which follows an Appalachian community in the Carolina hills from the 1920s up to WWII. The story is told through multiple points of view: through the eyes of Burdy Luttrell, Maizee and Zebulon Hurd, Leela-Ma Lawson and her husband Doc. The story deals with the idea of accepting people as they are and the collateral damage of trauma and war that destroys lives—the PTSD that can come from many sources, not just war alone. As you read, watch for these references in the story. Burdy Luttrell, a Melungeon, is the first narrator and sets the tone for the book as she tells her Aunt Tay’s story of the town of Irwin’s attempt to hang an elephant for murder. Aunt Tay tells Burdy about the complexity of human nature: “Well, Burdy, that’s the confusing thing about people. They like dancing with the Devil. They pretend to be scared of him, like they don’t want nothing to do with him, all the time they’s flirting with him” (4-5). How is this opening vignette in the book a metaphor for the story that follows? What does Aunt Tay mean when she says, “There’s something wrong with trying to make a being live contrary to its nature” (5)? Explore the meaning of Melungeon; why do you think Zarcharias chose to reference a group that was never accepted well in Appalachia and always looked down upon?

When Maizee is ten years old, she returns home from school with her favorite “library” book in hand, to find her mother Nan, who has suffered a stroke, lying face up in the flowerbed, between the bluebells and lilac bushes, the chickens pecking away at her blue eyes. The rage of the child, who battles with the chickens in the garden until her Daddy discovers her, is deeply ingrained and internalized, and after Nan's funeral, her father Sam Daggart, a police officer, determines to do what with Maizee? Why does Maizee say she will never cry?

Aunt Leela-Ma, Nan’s sister, and Doc are childless. Leela doesn’t think much of Burdy Luttrell, with her dark skin, green eyes, and coming from that strange community over beyond Snake Hollow Ridge—half breeds, Leela calls them. Burdy was known to have “the sight,” and some think her a witch, but not Tibbis Luttrell. Tibbis adored Burdy, was from one of the wealthiest Scot-Irish families in Christian Bend, but when Burdy is twenty-five, he is senselessly shot in the back with an arrow by a boy who wanted to see what dying was like. Burdy and her head-strong daughter Wheedin live at the edge of the community, and Maizee, who always belived that Wheedin “knew what it felt like to be an outsider too” (54), becomes friends with Wheedin. On Decoration Day, as the adults are clearing the graves, what happens to change Maizee's life? What happens to Wheedin that changes her life?

Up until this point, Maizee has been a quiet child and a joy for her uncle and aunt, who are not without some guilt at having lost Leela’s sister but gained Maizee Delight, as Nan had referred to her daughter Maizee. On June 3, 1940, Maizee and Zeb marry, she just seventeen and he twenty-one. The day is propitious, as it is also the date for the Dunkirk evacuation. Though a cloud has hung over Maizee’s young life, she thinks standing beside Zeb, the love of her life; “. . . some of life’s greatest treasures are born of great sorry” (62). What does Maizee's comment say about the nature of the Universe, God, and our lives as we try to operate in this complex world?
Google the term *schizophrenia*; at what age and point in life does this illness sometimes strike people? What part does trauma or PTSD play in its progression? How does pregnancy and *post-partum* depression fit into this medical scenario? Zeb describes Maizee this way: “. . . she seems bewitched . . . . I can't describe it good, but she’s got this quare look, like somebody took an eraser and wiped her clean of any remembrances. Like maybe Maizee’s gone off somewhere and a haint took up house inside her” (104). Maizee tries to counter the voices in her head through scripture and song (85), and Burdy’s ways and soothing herbs help; but the voices are relentless. As they try to cope with Maizee, Leela and Burdy become friends.

When Rain is still a baby, he contracts Scarlet Fever, which doesn’t affect his heart but does affect him how? How do Maizee and Zeb find out about the after-effects of this childhood disease? What does the “spider’s web” mean to Burdy, when she encounters it on the day of Rain’s first birthday (118-120)? What other symbols do you find in the book and what do they mean: Horseshoe Falls, the Chestnut tree, the Hitty doll Maizee loves, the patchwork quilt given to Zeb and Maizee as a wedding gift? What else do you find?

When the Japanese **attack on Pearl Harbor** on November 7, 1941, the country is outraged and motivated into action, even in the mountains of Appalachia, which has offered its young people to our country’s wars to greater degree than most other parts of the country. **Zeb is loath to leave Maizee**, though she has a rich support system in Christian Bend with both Leela and Burdy watching over her and Rain, but **Zeb feels he must serve**. He goes to Columbus, Georgia, to Fort Benning for basic training and then on to Fort Bragg before deployment where he becomes close to his **Sargent Harootunian**. Zeb is part of the **D-day Normandy landings on June 6, 1944**, a paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines to prepare the way for the Allied invasion, near Bayerux, France. What he sees in the hours that he is part of the invasion and what he does is revealed to him as “the horror, the horror”! When Maizee receives word that he is dead, what does she do and why? Burdy says of Maizee, “I seen the darkness coming. . . . I saw it headed this way, like a cloud of starlings swooping in and perching on Maizee’s roof” (227). All the pieces are in place for Zarcharias’s readers to experience the winds and the wretchedness of war, which will follow this family long after they received word that Zebulon Hurd is dead.