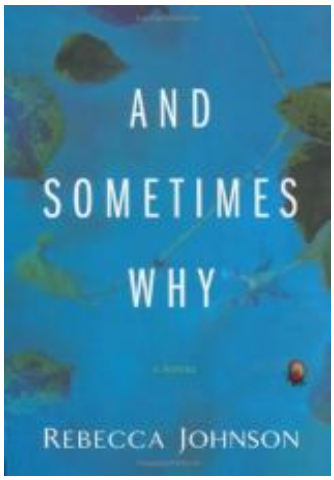
And Sometimes Why

by Rebecca Johnson



About the Book

The McMartins? last daily breakfast together is like any other. Teenage sisters Helen and Miranda bicker over who gets to use the family car, while their English professor father, Darius, attempts to defuse the situation with a duel of wits. The girls? mother, Sophia, reflects on the comforts and disappointments of a twenty-two year marriage that has produced two children who are at once uniquely themselves and indisputably the product of the parents who raised them. Helen, vivacious and popular, has her mother?s looks and adventurous spirit, while willfully antisocial Miranda holds the world at bay with an erudite superiority inherited from her father. Now on the cusp of adulthood, both girls have begun taking new risks as they attempt to define who they are. For Miranda, this means tentative steps into a social life, which soon lead to her first taste of romance. For Helen, younger but more experienced, it means a secret relationship with a man more than twice her age --- a relationship that comes to light in the wake of devastation.

And Sometimes Why takes a magnifying glass to the choices that define a life, and the twists of fate that can rearrange them. Specifically, how a traffic accident triggers a chain of events that upends the lives of a disparate group of people living in Los Angeles. In that one moment, a colorful spectrum of characters emerges: Harry Harlow, a TV game show host with a dwindling career and a passion for something to believe in beyond the gilt Hollywood façade; Anton, a novice filmmaker who fancies himself the Next Big Thing, despite his unemployment; and Misty, who is falling lower in the ranks of young actresses who are perhaps selling more than their souls to make it in LA.

Meanwhile, from the moment Sophia, Darius, and Miranda receive word that Helen?s been taken to the hospital in critical condition, they are forced to examine their own lives. From Darius and Sophia accepting the realities of their marriage to Miranda?s letting her guard down long enough to find love, the family is propelled with new vigor toward the future, even as they reconcile with the past. In turn, they?re each able to shake the security of their well-worn paths and reach the both terrifying and liberating conclusion that, ultimately, change can herald as much joy as it can pain.

Discussion Guide

1. And Sometimes Why centers on a tragedy, but the tone is far from melancholy. Were you able to find levity in some scenarios? How do you think this fits in with the central themes?

2. Early on, Sophia reflects that she and Darius have each chosen one of their daughters as theirs to ?protect? ? Helen is hers, Miranda is his. How does this dynamic evolve over the course of the story? How does it affect the outcome?

3. The author includes several characters who can?t quite get things right: Harry, who strives for importance after a failed acting career; Anton, who aspires to greatness in film; and Misty, who just wants to be famous. What do these characters add to the book? What is their thematic relationship with the McMartins?

4. How does the trajectory of Harry?s fish-pool venture parallel the main plot? Did you see this storyline as an entertaining aside, or did you feel that it had larger meaning and purpose in the novel?

5. As Helen?s condition persists, a rift develops between Darius and Sophia: She thinks they need to be more realistic about Helen?s prospects, while he believes they need to hold out hope. With which character do you most sympathize? How do you think you would approach such a dilemma?

6. At one point in the story, Sophia remembers an Israeli scholar she met at one of Darius? faculty dinner parties. The man asked, ?When you come to a red light in the middle of the night? Do you stop?? After Sophia says that she does, he tells her that America is ?a country of sheep.? How does this fit into the larger themes of the book? Do you agree with his assessment?

7. Near the end of the novel, Miranda kills a fox she finds suffering in a trap. Though she is initially repelled by the experience, she quickly comes to realize that ?a body without life [is] an empty container. Nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to weep over.? How did you feel about this scene and what it says about Miranda?s character trajectory?

8. The author intentionally leaves some uncertainty at the end of the novel. For instance, it?s not clear whether Darius and Sophia reunite. Do you feel that each character?s story is resolved? What do you imagine happens in these characters? lives after the book ends?

9. Why do you think the author chose to end the book with a final tape recording from Helen?s friends?

Author Bio

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