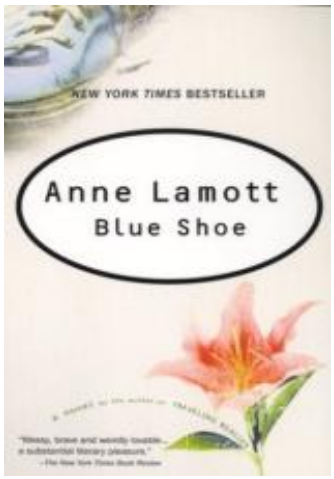
Blue Shoe

by Anne Lamott



About the Book

At the beginning of **Blue Shoe**, Mattie Ryder thinks that life cannot get any more complicated. She is newly divorced and living with her two children in her childhood home, which is infested with rats and too many unanswered questions from her past. While the rat problem can be cured with an exterminator, coming to terms with her past will require Mattie to unravel her family secrets and learn some painful truths, especially about her father.

The clues to his life are contained in a plastic bag that was recovered from the glove box of his old car. Inside are a paint key from a can of blue paint and a tiny blue rubber shoe. As Mattie comes to know it, the story of her father's world shocks her, but it also explains her mother's erratic behavior and distance while she was growing up.

What she learns will help Mattie come to peace with her own life as she finds love with a man with whom she can have an intimate and honest relationship, and accepts the emotional baggage that she carries as a part of herself instead of a burden.

Blue Shoe is an honest, irreverent and compelling story laced with self-deprecating humor, grace, and wit. As always, Anne Lamott creates characters with whom we can identify, as she explores the depths of human emotion.

Discussion Guide

1. Consider the blue shoe. What does it mean to each person who carries it**?**Alfred, Mattie, Daniel, Noah, and Ella? Discuss it in reference to what Mattie remembers reading about children of the Holocaust (page 38): "Then a social worker determined that if the children were each given a piece of bread to hold at night, they could fall asleep. This was not bread to eat, there was plenty of that when the children were hungry. No, this piece of bread was just to hold on to, to reassure the children through the night that they were safe now, that there would be bread to eat in the morning."

2. Isa takes wonderful care of people, especially strangers. She fights for underdogs, champions their causes. Is she trying to help the world in order to compensate for her lack of control in her own home? Why is she such a hero to others, while her daughter feels deprived? Are Mattie's feelings of neglect justified? Do you think Isa was a devoted or neglectful mother to Alfred?

3. Al says the following about the Ryders: "This is how it always ends up in our family, everyone just going off alone**?** doing whatever they feel like, and not honoring promises" (page 186). Is Al referring to his father's behavior? What impact did Alfred's behavior have on Mattie and Al as children and on who they are as adults, even though they did not learn the details about his life until they were adults?

4. Throughout **Blue Shoe** there are references to light and shadow and what they mean at different times of the year. The light, or its absence, affects Mattie's moods, and she is continually lighting candles or adjusting the light. "Mattie was so aware of the darkness in the fall. She put lights up everywhere, candles, white Christmas tree lights, a string of plastic fish lights that Al gave her. She loved the shorter days, frowning, lowering, Heathcliff days, and she liked the early nights, the wintery rawness in the air" (page 88). Discuss the meaning behind these references to light and shadow, to seasons changing.

5. Isa lived knowing that her husband loved another woman, who was the same age as her own child. "Isa had known all along, not only that Alfred had girlfriends: Isa had known all along about Abby and Noah, and knew still, somewhere deep inside her brain" (page 194). What effect did her husband's "wandering" have on Isa's life? Do you think his infidelity shaped who she was to Mattie and Al? If so, how?

6. Why does Mattie continue to have sex with Nicky after their divorce? Does sleeping with him kill her desire to get back together with him, as she suggests (page 59)? Or does she need to fill the holes of her childhood with some form of affection, even if it is the wrong kind? Dr. Nolan tells Mattie that when she feels disgust for herself, she keeps hope alive (page 86). Discuss this in reference to Mattie's relationships with her father, Isa, Nicky, and her children.

7. Lamott writes a particularly telling line about baggage in people's lives when describing how Mattie wishes William might view her. "She wanted him to see her as someone with just a few pieces of colorful carry-on luggage, instead of multiple body bags requiring special cargo fees and handling" (page134). How does Mattie's attempt to be someone else affect her relationship with William? How does her honesty with Daniel affect their relationship?

8. Mattie takes great pride in winning Daniel away from Pauline. Pauline's hate letters to Mattie, "gave her a sense of superiority, a sense of having won the guy for once: she was used to being the unsuspecting woman in the dark, or the daughter of the woman in the dark, the woman whom the man could not live without, but whom he didn't pick" (page 260). What does being picked mean to Mattie? Does it make her feel superior to Isa? Is there some vindication here for her own father's lying to her?

9. Discuss Isa and "Tilly." Why does Isa embrace this woman, who is actually the Yvonne she so hated?

10. Throughout the book Ella inflicts various pains upon herself, among other things repeatedly chewing on a sore on her wrist (page 81). Her physical pain is evident; discuss her emotional pain, and that of the other characters: Mattie, Harry, Daniel, Pauline, Isa, Noah, and Abby?

11. Discuss the role of faith in Mattie's life: faith in friends, faith in God, faith in family, faith in herself. Does it bring her the acceptance and the love that she feels are missing in other parts of her life? How is her faith tested, and how rewarded, in the novel?

Author Bio

Anne Lamott is the author of 20 books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers HELP, THANKS, WOW; DUSK, NIGHT, DAWN; TRAVELING MERCIES; and BIRD BY BIRD, as well as seven novels. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an inductee to the California Hall of Fame, she lives in Northern California with her family.

Critical Praise

"Anne Lamott?s is a cause for celebration. [Her] real genius lies in capturing the ineffable, describing not perfect moments but imperfect ones . . . perfectly. She is nothing short of miraculous."

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