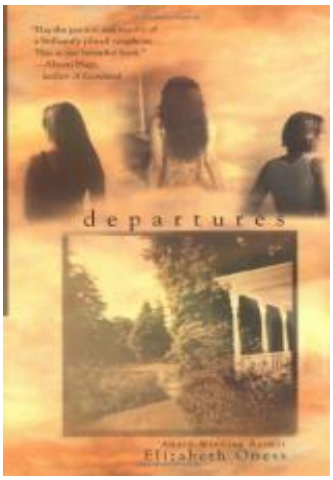
ReadingGroupGuides
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Departures

by Elizabeth Oness



About the Book

It is only when their mother disappears, leaving word with each of her daughters that she will be out of the country, sisters Pagan, Prana, and Zhikr are shaken. A single parent, their mother has always been a stable, constant presence and each of them needs her now. Pagan's second pregnancy has turned into a harrowing nightmare. Prana is devastated when her long affair with a married man starts to fall apart. And Zeke has become?reluctantly?the only sober caretaker for her soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend's daughters.

In their mother's absence, the sisters piece together fragments of her past to realize what it might have cost her, a child of the sixties, to sacrifice her free?spirited ways in order to raise them in a comfortable Westchester town. In the face of difficulty?and without her mother's presence?each sister must reflect her mother's resolve and do what is necessary to preserve herself.

Discussion Guide

1. Each daughter's name carries its own meaning, relating to a stage of her mother's spiritual seeking. What traits in each woman's personality seem true to her name? What personality traits are in contrast to their names? How does each woman feel about the name she's been given? How do you think their mother chose their names?

2. Each daughter faces her own crisis. How do experiences with their mother affect how each deals with her own crisis? What have they learned from the difficulties their mother faced in her life?

3. Zeke discovers that her mother has taken a picture of all three of them with her when she left. Why do you think the mother chose that specific picture? How does the picture capture each woman?

4. What has held Prana back from finding an artistic path that would satisfy her?

5. Do you think Prana's affair with Stephen has anything to do with the fact that Marco abandoned her? How has she dealt with the fact that her father abandoned the family? How is this different from what her sisters face in dealing with the death of their father? How do they view Marco's leaving? Do you think it is easier to deal with the death of a loved one, or abandonment by someone you love?

6. Why do you think the mother leaves in such a secretive way, and why did she send a separate message to each of her daughters by different means, worded so differently?

7. What does the mother remember about her youth? What does she remember about her mother, and how do those memories affect how she feels about her father?

8. What qualities or characteristics make Bert attractive to Zeke? Why are these qualities appealing to Zeke and what do they say about Zeke's personality? Do you think that Zeke and Bert will ultimately have a romantic relationship? Why? Why does Zeke agree to take care of Marcie?

9. Pagan has a physical fear about the abortion, but she also faces a moral struggle. What is at the heart of the moral struggle, and how does it affect her marriage? How does the abortion affect her relationship with her sisters? How does it affect how she feels about Maud?

10. Before she finds out the news about her baby, Pagan tells Tommy, "This is it Tommy. This is the last time." Why does she say this? Is it the physical hardship of pregnancy? Do you think she will change her mind? Does the abortion damage their marriage? If so, how? If not, why not?

11. Pagan finds a prayer when she's first dating Tommy. What does it reveal about him? What does it mean to Pagan in terms of religion and how she feels about Tommy's beliefs? How does the prayer relate to Tommy's reaction to the bad news about the baby, and the decision to abort it? Why does Tommy want to start going to church again?

12. How are the three women different by the time their mother returns? How have they changed in the time she's been gone? What have they learned about themselves and about her? Will their relationships with her be different now?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Oness, whose story collection **Articles of Faith** won the 2000 Iowa Short Fiction Award, directs marketing and development for the literary press which she runs with her husband. She also teaches English at the Winona State University in Minnesota. She grew up in Chappaqua, New York.

Critical Praise

"A gutsy writer."

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