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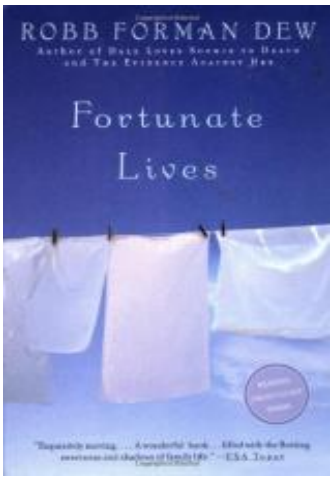
Fortunate Lives

by Robb Forman Dew



About the Book

It is another summer of transition for the Howells family ? Dinah, Martin, and their children, the characters whom Robb Forman Dew so memorably introduced in her National Book Award-winning first novel, Dale Loves Sophie to Death. With the impending departure of eighteen-year-old David for his first year at Harvard, Dinah struggles against a nearly paralyzing sense of loss. At the same time, the arrival in town of an earnest and naively manipulative young woman begins to expose the surprisingly fragile construction of the Howellses' determinedly fortunate lives.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens as Dinah Howells is sitting down to respond to the Harvard Freshman Dean's request for a letter describing her son David. How do Dinah's attempts at drafting letters change in the course of the novel, and what insight do these attempts afford us about Dinah's state of mind and her feelings towards her son? What do you think she is feeling as she confronts the impending departure of her oldest child?

2. David himself undergoes a transforming summer. What prompts the changes in his attitude, his shifts in perception and perspective on his life and his family and friends? How do you think his first year at Harvard will unfold?

3. Dinah and Martin responded to the death of their son Toby by grieving in very different ways. Can you explain how their respective methods of coping affected their lives and personalities? Do you think one way of coping is "healthier" than another?

4. Owen Croft is a sad but dramatic figure in Martin Howells's life. How does he act as a catalyst for Martin's grief, pain, and rage? Do you think Martin's experience would have been different had someone other than Owen been responsible for Toby's death?

5. How did Toby Howells's death alter the relationships between Dinah and Martin Howells and their two surviving children, David and Sarah? Do you think Toby's death altered the way Dinah and Martin thought about their role and their responsibilities as parents?

6. Netta Breckenridge evokes diverse reactions from the various members of the Howells family. Why do you think the Howellses accept this stranger and her daughter into their home so easily, and what is it about Netta that prompts such strong emotion from each of them? How does Netta alter the dynamic of the family?

7. The title of the novel is **Fortunate Lives**. Do you think the Howellses' lives are more or less fortunate than most other people's? Do the physical circumstances of their lives influence the effects of the losses that the Howellses must cope with?

Author Bio

Robb Forman Dew is the author of the novels DALE LOVES SOPHIE TO DEATH, for which she received the National Book Award, THE TIME OF HER LIFE and FORTUNATE LIVES. She also penned the *Washburn Trilogy* (THE EVIDENCE AGAINST HER, THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER and BEING POLITE TO HITLER), which chronicles the evolution of American family life through the 20th century, as well as a memoir, THE FAMILY HEART. She lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts, with her husband, who is professor of history at Williams College and the author of several books of Southern history.

Critical Praise

"Absorbing reading throughout. . . . Robb Forman Dew is one of our premier chroniclers of the everyday."

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Publication Date: January 2, 2003
Paperback: 304 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 0316890685
ISBN-13: 9780316890687