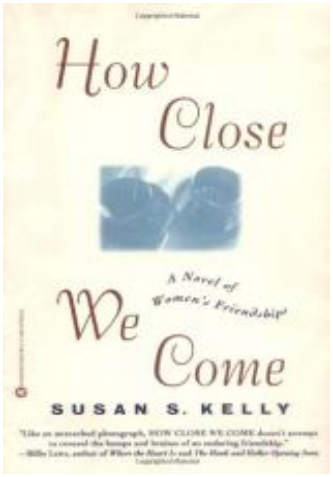
ReadingGroupGuides
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How Close We Come

by Susan S. Kelly



About the Book

For ten years, Pril Henderson and Ruth Campbell have been closer than sisters-inseparable companions and next-door neighbors whose children are also best friends. Then, without warning, Ruth leaves for vacation with her children and never returns. Nor does she call or write to explain. Pril is hurt, angry, and lonely.

Worse, Ruth's husband soon names Pril as his witness in custody proceedings, and she is faced with a terrible choice. Does she testify against her closest friend? Or does she side with this woman she loves but who has inexplicably shattered her family?

Discussion Guide

1. Who is the needier woman in the novel, Ruth or Pril? Why? Is Ruth's departure an act of kindness or cruelty? Do you think it's true, as Pril says, that in marital arguments it's often not the topic of the fight but the way the battle is waged? Ruth is a hero to some women, a villian to others. Why? Is she sympathetic? That is, can the reader feel empathy with her, understand why she leaves?

2. What are the catalysts for Ruth's departure? Suppose you found yourself in a situation such as Pril, when she discovers that she's been basically tricked into accompanying Ruth to have her abortion. What would your reaction be?

3. What is it, indeed, that binds this particular friendship? What are other "binding" reasons behind female friendships?

4. Ruth and Pril share everything, from recipes to sex. Do men's relationships function along the same lines? How would your husband, or most men you know, react if they knew they were being discussed so intimately?

5. Some readers argue that Ruth is lesbian. What do you think?

6. The author wanted Ruth and Pril to feel shame at Roslyn's suicide. Why? Do you know a Roslyn? Is she happy?

7. Pril feels excluded from Ruth's feminist group, from her riding life. Finally, Ruth severs the relationship altogether. In what other ways do women betray each other?

8. Ruth struggles to "be" someone outside her marriage. If you're married, can you define who you are without using the word "married"? Do you think Ruth and Pril reunite? Under what circumstances? Whose "side" are you on? Why?

9. Susan Kelly likes to say that she writes about "necessary sadness." In fact, "a current of sadness" is a phrase she finds a place for in everything she writes. Did you notice it? What does she mean?

Author Bio

The real me lives in a two-story house with husband, a black lab named Tar, two teenaged sons and a daughter who reads Charlotte's Web, The Little Princess and other books aloud to me with such innocent poignancy that I weep. I tend a flower bed that looks tolerable considering it lies in the hazardous zone beneath the teenagers' basketball goal.

The real me has no studio or office, only a corner nook in my bedroom so small that whenever the door opens it bangs into my chair. On the wall is the requisite bulletin board with the requisite quotes and pictures (Faulkner's Nobel Prize Speech, the last page of The Great Gatsby, two New Yorker cartoons, a Willa Cather quote: There are all those early memories, one cannot get another set...) The real me is addicted to 44 ounces of Diet Coke daily, a decidedly self-destructive habit given that I have only one kidney due to a horseback riding accident when I was 11.

You wouldn't look twice at the real me in the grocery story. I'd be the one checking out what everybody else is buying, and eavesdropping on conversations (best line overheard in grocery story: "The days of shopping like a lady are over."). I talk a big game about moving somewhere like New Hampshire (the state slogan amuses me - live free or die) or Massachusetts, in hopes John Updike's vocabulary might osmose into me (if osmose is a verb), but actually, you couldn't dynamite the Real Me out of the south. I love every 100 degree day and tobacco leaf and redneck accent in it.

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