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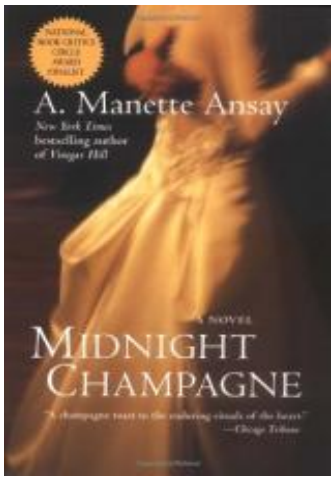
Midnight Champagne

by A. Manette Ansay



About the Book

April Liesgang and Caleb Shannon have known each other for three short months, so their Valentine's Day wedding at a chapel near the shores of Lake Michigan has both families in an uproar. As the festivities unfold (and the cash bar opens), everyone has an opinion and a lively prediction about April and Caleb's union, each the reflection of a different marital experience.

Meanwhile, at the nearby Hideaway Lodge, a domestic quarrel ends in tragedy. As April and Caleb's life together begins, death parts another man and woman in angry violence -and as the two stories gradually intersect, their juxtaposition explores the tangled roots of vulnerability and desire. By the time the last polka has been danced and the bouquet tossed, Midnight Champagne has cast an extraordinary spell. From its opening epigraph from Chekhov - "If you fear loneliness, then marriage is not for you" - to its final moments in the honeymoon suite, A. Manette Ansay weaves tenderness and fury, passion and wonder into a startling tapestry of love in all its paradox and power.

Discussion Guide

1. A. Manette Ansay begins her story with a quote from Chekhov: "If you fear loneliness, then marriage is not for you." Why has she chosen this particular epigraph? Identify moments in the novel in which you hear echoes of this quote.

2. Midnight Champagne is organized around chapter headings that identify key moments in a traditional wedding celebration: Ceremony, Reception, etc. Discuss the ways in which these divisions function in terms of both plot and theme.

3. The narrator moves from one point of view to another. How would Midnight Champagne be different if Ansay had written it in first person rather than in third person omniscient? Through which character's point of view did you feel most connected with the events? Though the novel istold from multiple perspectives, do you feel that the story "belongs"

to one character or set of characters more than another?

4. The opening chapter of Midnight Champagne establishes what appear to be two unrelated stories: the story of April and Caleb's wedding, and the story of an anonymous married couple at the Hideaway Lodge. At what point do these two stories begin to intersect? Why does Ansay include them together in a single novel?

5. The subject of Midnight Champagne is a wedding, yet, ironically, Ansay lets the actual exchange of rings occur off-stage. Why do you think she makes this choice? Where are other places where, at key moments, she shifts to a parallel scene?

6. The ghost of the red-dressed Gretel Fame haunts the Hideaway Lodge. What is her role in this story? What other kinds of hauntings occur throughout the book?

7. Hilda Liesgang's penny is only one in a series of recurring images. Can you identify others? Have any taken on new meaning(s) by the end of the novel?

8. Discuss the parallels between Barney and the man from suite thirty-three; April and the woman from suite thirty-three; Mary Fran and Hilda. What is the effect of these mirrored stories on the book as a whole?

9. Why do you think April withholds the details of her relationship with Barney, not just from her family, but from Caleb as well? What is the effect of her revelation on Caleb? On their relationship?

10. Why do you think Ansay chose to include several children's points of view? How will Stanley and Lacey look back on this night?

11. Ansay begins the novel by writing, "The fields are the featureless white of amnesia. Fenceposts and windbreaks divide them like the clean lines of desire." What role does the blizzard play in Midnight Champagne? How does the Midwestern landscape reflect the internal landscape of these characters' hearts and minds?

12. The Chicago Tribune, in a review of Midnight Champagne, describes it as 'a lovely evocation of one of the greatest human mysteries: romantic love and the desire to connect in what many would argue is an outdated institution.' Do you think Midnight Champagne makes this argument? What, in your opinion, is the novel really about?

Author Bio

A. Manette Ansay is a graduate of Cornell University's MFA program. Her acclaimed first novel, **Vinegar Hill**, won a **Friends of American Writers Prize** and was cited as one of the Best Books of 1994 by the **Chicago Tribune**. Her story collection, **Read This and Tell Me What It Says**, was awarded the **Associated Writing Programs Short Fiction Series**. She is the 1992 winner of the **Chicago Tribune's Nelson Algren Prize** and a 1993 recipient of a **National Endowment for the Arts** grant. Her stories, poems and essays have appeared in many publications, including **The North American Review**, **Story** and **The Pushcart Prize XIX: Best of the Small Presses**. She lives with her husband and daughter in Florida, where she teaches in the MFA program at the University of Miami.

Critical Praise

"a champagne toast to the enduring rituals of the heart. . . I think it is rare for a contemporary novelist to write on the subject of love without substituting hollowness and witty cynicism for larger complexities, and whose tender pokes at the traditions and rituals associated with marital bliss implicate the reader right along with the characters. It's also refreshing to have characters who talk in the idiom of real people, and not like actors trading snappy TV sitcom witticisms. What could have been plot soup in the hands of a lesser writer is transformed into a lovely evocation of one of the greatest human mysteries: romantic love and the desire to connect in what many would argue is an outdated institution. Ansay shows with fluid and graceful prose the uncharted paths of ordinary flawed human hearts enacting an age-old ritual. "

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