Off Course

by Michelle Huneven



About the Book

From the acclaimed author of BLAME comes a daring novel of romantic crossroads --- and the high price of impossible love. It?s the early 1980s, and Reagan?s trickle-down fiscal policies are gaining traction in the national psyche. Cressida Hartley, a 28-year-old Ph.D. candidate in economics, has moved into her parents? shabby vacation house in the Sierras, hoping to finish her dissertation about art in the marketplace. Instead of finding solitude, she finds herself immersed in an intriguing mountain community. She?s easily seduced by a burly lodge owner, and she finds part-time work through a local contractor. As her dissertation becomes less and less inspiring, Cress meets Quinn Morrow, a talented, handsome, married carpenter. Ignoring her family?s attempts to intervene, Cress becomes consumed by a precarious quest that will test her heart and soul.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the novel?s title. Did Cress drift off course, or was her original course simply a false path? When has your life seemed to veer off course?

2. How does Michelle Huneven use money as a metaphor throughout the novel? What makes the Reagan era an appropriate backdrop for Cress?s immersion in economics, with her tightfisted father and indulgent mother, no less? How was Quinn affected by his father?s despair over the Noah Mountain debt?

3. Does life in the Meadows ultimately liberate Cress? Would you thrive in a small-town community, or would it feel stifling to you?

4. What makes Jakey so generous? Is he ever truly greedy?

5. How is Sharon?s role in the family different from Cress?s? Throughout the novel, what shifts occur in the sisters?

relationship?

6. How do the carpentry and home building depicted in the novel reflect the lives of the characters? What ?new construction? is occurring in Cress?s family, and in Quinn?s?

7. What did Sylvia Hartley?s early days as an actress help her discover about the realities of the world offstage?

8. How is Cress affected by the image of the bear, both the live one outside the A-frame and the bearskin rug she buys in chapter 18, as well as the bear Quinn recalls from his youth? What does the rugged land teach Cress about her own instincts?

9. Discuss the questions of morality raised in the novel. Is Cress a sort of thief, as some accuse her of being? Who endures the greater share of the town?s judgment: Quinn or Cress? How does DeeDee?s relationship with a younger man compare to Quinn?s affair?

10. Would you have said yes to Quinn?s proposal? How does Cress?s situation compare to your most intense experiences in love?

11. How did you react to the outcomes Quinn and Sylvia experienced? To what degree was Cress merely a bystander in their marriage, despite the opinions of Quinn?s mother?

12. Do you agree with the therapist?s assessment in chapter 25 about Cress?s Oedipus-for-girls (Electra) experience? What did it take for Cress to resolve her feelings of emptiness and longing?

13. How does OFF COURSEenhance the themes of conscience and fate explored in other novels by Huneven that you have read?

Author Bio

Michelle Huneven is the author of ROUND ROCK, JAMESLAND, BLAME, OFF COURSE, SEARCH and BUG HOLLOW. Her books have been *New York Times* Notable Books and finalists for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the recipient of a Whiting Award for Fiction, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a James Beard Award, and a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She received her master?s in fine arts from the Iowa Writers? Workshop and teaches creative writing at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

?Sensitive, reflective and uncomfortably true to life, with a wonderfully rich cast of supporting characters.?

?*Kirkus Reviews* starred review

?Michelle Huneven is a writer of extraordinary and thrilling talent.?

?Richard Russo

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