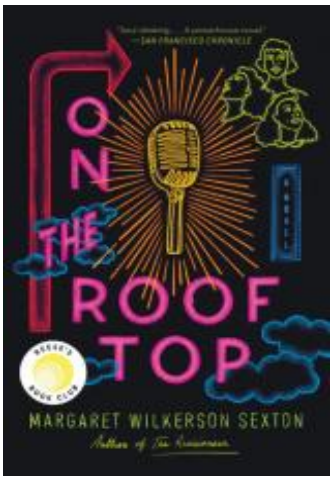
On the Rooftop

by Margaret Wilkerson Sexton



About the Book

A stunning novel about a mother whose dream of musical stardom for her three daughters collides with the daughters? ambitions for their own lives --- set against the backdrop of gentrifying 1950s San Francisco.

At home they are just sisters, but on stage they are The Salvations. Ruth, Esther and Chloe have been singing and dancing in harmony since they could speak. Thanks to the rigorous direction of their mother, Vivian, they?ve become a bona fide girl group whose shows are the talk of the Jazz-era Fillmore.

Now Vivian has scored a once-in-a-lifetime offer from a talent manager, who promises to catapult The Salvations into the national spotlight. Vivian knows this is the big break she?s been praying for. But sometime between the hours of rehearsal on their rooftop and the weekly gigs at the Champagne Supper Club, the girls have become women --- women with dreams that their mother cannot imagine.

The neighborhood is changing, too: all around the Fillmore, white men in suits are approaching Black property owners with offers. One sister finds herself called to fight back, one falls into the comfort of an old relationship, another yearns to make her own voice heard. And Vivian, who has always maintained control, will have to confront the parts of her life that threaten to splinter: the community, The Salvations and even her family.

Warm, gripping and wise, with echoes of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton?s latest novel is a moving family portrait from ?a writer of uncommon nerve and talent? (*New York Times Book Review*).

Discussion Guide

1. ON THE ROOFTOP uses church hymns and songs throughout the novel in various ways. All of them have special and spiritual meanings for the characters. Are there any songs that are special to you? What makes them powerful?

2. How would you describe the relationship between the three sisters --- Esther, Ruth and Chloe --- in your own words?

3. There are many different kinds of love displayed in ON THE ROOFTOP, from familial to romantic to communal. What type do you think is most important and why?

4. On page 75, Mr. Franklin says to Vivian, ?There?s two different types of people in the world...two types only: people who know how to call up a desire, and command it into stone, and people who don?t.? What do you think he means by this? Do you agree with him?

5. Ruth is the first sister to stray from the family?s plan of being star singers; she has a baby with her husband. Have you ever had a life event take you somewhere completely unexpected? If you had the chance, would you do things differently?

6. Each sister has her own unique dream, and, more importantly, so does their mother. Do you think dreams should only be about your own desires, or should they take the wishes of others into account? Why or why not?

7. Vivian dreams of success for her daughters and wants them to have a better life than she did, but ultimately, all of them have different priorities. What do you think defines being successful? Do you think each of the girls finds success at the end?

8. One of the major themes of the novel is learning how to adapt to the changes of a rapidly moving society, even when some of those changes are not positive. Music, food, faith and family are the constant tools that the characters utilize to make this new world work. What tools or rituals do you have in your life to help you with change?

9. Towards the end of the novel, on page 269, Freddy says, ?Now I see we can?t escape forward movement. It?s coming. Even if we don?t bend to it, it?s here.? How would you describe each character?s reaction to the future that is unfolding?

10. Throughout the book, the Fillmore neighborhood is being impacted by gentrification and targeted by unfair city planning, and as a result, an entire population of people must leave their community for good. How do you think the experience of losing their family home affects each of the family members? What do you think the lives of Vivian and the sisters would have been like a year later if they were able to stay in San Francisco?

Author Bio

Margaret Wilkerson Sexton studied creative writing at Dartmouth College and law at UC Berkeley. Her most recent novel, THE REVISIONERS, won a 2020 Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize and an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work and was a national bestseller as well as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Her debut novel, A KIND OF FREEDOM, was longlisted for the National Book Award. She lives in Oakland with her family.

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