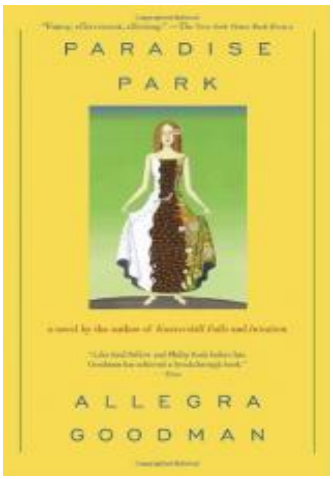
ReadingGroupGuides
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Paradise Park

by Allegra Goodman



About the Book

Allegra Goodman has delighted readers with her critically acclaimed collections **Total Immersion** and **The Family Markowitz**, and her celebrated first novel, **Kaaterskill Falls**, which was a national bestseller and a *National Book Award* finalist. Now, in her much-anticipated new novel, Goodman introduces one of the most endearing, exasperating, indomitable heroines in modern literature: Sharon Spiegelman.

Abandoned by her folk-dancing partner, Gary, in a Honolulu hotel room, Sharon realizes she could return to Boston--and her estranged family--or listen to that little voice inside herself. The voice that asks: "How come Gary got to pursue his causes, while all I got to pursue was him?" Thus, with an open heart, a soul on fire, and her meager possessions (a guitar, two Indian gauze skirts, a macramé bikini, and her grandfather's silver watch) Sharon begins her own spiritual quest. Ever the optimist, she is sure at each stage that she has struck it rich "spiritually speaking"--until she comes up empty. Then, in a karmic convergence of events, Sharon starts on the path home to Judaism. Still, even as she embraces her tradition, Sharon's irrepressible self tugs at her sleeve. Especially when she meets Mikhail, falls truly in love at last, and discovers what even she could not imagine--her destiny.

Discussion Guide

1. What first pushes Sharon on her spiritual quest? What elements in her past life do you think contributed the most to her present journey?

2. For a long time Sharon is searching for a glimpse of God. What is getting in the way of that search as she struggles forward? Why is her quest thwarted time and time again?

3. Why do you think she was so willing at first to just go along with Gary's ambitions? Is this common for many women? Why?

4. What is the difference between her explorations of other religions and her exploration of Judaism? How are her teachers different?

5. Although a search for God is very much on Sharon's mind, it doesn't prevent her from doing things most religions consider "immoral," such as living with Kekui or sleeping with Brian. Why do you think she doesn't feel guilty about these actions? What distinction does she make between morality and God?

6. What is Sharon hoping to find while researching birds with Brian or farming with Kekui? A spiritual revelation? Something else?

7. Once in a while Sharon still slips into telling lies about her parents or her past (see p. 205). Why do you think that is?

8. Sharon has a hard time reconciling her spiritual quest with Wayne in the second half of their relationship. Wayne is very supportive of her efforts -- what's missing for her?

9. Why are Mikhail and Sharon able to leave the Hasidic community so easily when the complications in their marriage contract come up?

10. What has Sharon found in Mikhail that she didn't find in her previous relationships?

11. How much responsibility do you think Sharon's parents have for her struggles to find meaning in life? Would things have been different for her if she'd found more support at home, or was her behavior determined by her personality?

12. After spending so much time exploring Judaism, why isn't it important for them to have a Jewish wedding?

Author Bio

Allegra Goodman?s new book is THIS IS NOT ABOUT US. Her novels include ISOLA (a Reese's Book Club pick), SAM (a "Read with Jenna" Book Club selection), THE CHALK ARTIST (winner of the Massachusetts Book Award), INTUITION, THE COOKBOOK COLLECTOR, PARADISE PARK and KAATERSKILL FALLS (a National Book Award finalist).

Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere and has been anthologized in *The O. Henry Awards* and *Best American Short Stories*. She has written two collections of stories, THE FAMILY MARKOWITZ and TOTAL IMMERSION, and a novel for younger readers, THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ISLAND. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe* and *The American Scholar*.

Raised in Honolulu, Goodman studied English and philosophy at Harvard and received a PhD in English literature from Stanford. She is the recipient of a Whiting Writer?s Award, the Salon Award for Fiction, and a fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced study. She lives with her family in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Critical Praise

"With Sharon Spiegelman, Goodman has created a Huck Finn for the modern age, drifting down the river of American spirituality."

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