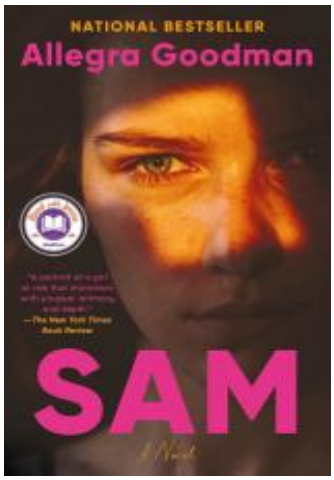
ReadingGroupGuides
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Sam

by Allegra Goodman



About the Book

What happens to a girl?s sense of joy and belonging --- to her belief in herself --- as she becomes a woman? This unforgettable portrait of coming-of-age offers subtle yet powerful reflections on class, parenthood, addiction, lust and the irrepressible power of dreams.

?There is a girl, and her name is Sam.? So begins Allegra Goodman?s moving and wise new novel.

Sam is seven years old and living in Beverley, Massachusetts. She adores her father, though he isn?t around much. Her mother struggles to make ends meet, and never fails to remind Sam that if she studies hard and acts responsibly, adulthood will be easier --- more secure and comfortable. But comfort and security are of little interest to Sam. She doesn?t fit in at school, where the other girls have the right shade of blue jeans and don?t question the rules. She doesn?t care about jeans or rules. All she wants is to climb. Hanging from the highest limbs of the tallest trees, scaling the side of a building, Sam feels free.

As a teenager, Sam begins to doubt herself. She yearns to be noticed, even as she wants to disappear. When her climbing coach takes an interest in her, his attention is more complicated than she anticipated. She resents her father?s erratic behavior, but she grieves after he?s gone. And she resists her mother?s attempts to plan for her future, even as that future draws closer.

The simplicity of this tender, emotionally honest novel is what makes it so powerful. SAM by Allegra Goodman will break your heart but will also leave you full of hope.

Discussion Guide

1. What was your biggest takeaway from SAM and its titular narrator? What was most compelling to you about Sam?s

story? How, if at all, did you identify with Sam?s personal challenges and desires?

2. For Sam, climbing is ?not just a sport; it?s an art.? What does she mean by that statement? How does Sam express herself, and her unique vision, through the art of climbing?

3. Declan notes that climbing requires ?half knowledge, half instinct...and a little bit [of] experience.? Discuss climbing as a metaphor for coming-of-age in this novel. You may also wish to factor in Sam?s burgeoning interest in geology. What does it take for Sam to feel grounded in her world?

4. Family instability is a major factor in Sam?s life (and theme in this book). Her home life is the exact opposite of Halle?s, for example; it?s also quite different from the multigenerational structure of Justin?s. What does the novel say about what families look like? How does Sam?s upbringing shape, disadvantage or motivate her?

5. Talk about the two fathers at the heart of SAM. Is Mitchell a sympathetic character? How do you feel about Jack? Do either of these men?s struggles --- with such issues as employment and substance abuse --- resonate with you, and how?

6. What does Sam show us about the pursuit of the American Dream? What are the risks and rewards of following your heart? Finding your passion? What sacrifices do the adults in this novel, from Courtney and Adam to Beth and Ann, make (or not) on behalf of their children?

7. Sam?s mother tells her not to be superstitious. ?You make your own luck,? Courtney says. But Sam isn?t so sure; she thinks that ?other people?s luck can crush you.? Do each of their beliefs hold true throughout the course of the novel? How or why not? Which, if at all, do you believe?

8. We are taught, as young readers, that there is a moral to every story. Do you believe that fiction, by and large, is meant to teach us something important about the world and ourselves? And, if so, what do you think Allegra Goodman intends for us to take away from SAM?

9. If you had the chance to ask the author one question about Sam --- about the writing process, the characters or the plot --- what would it be?

10. What kind of future do you imagine for Sam beyond the final chapter of this book?

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.

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