Sweet Pea

by Kit de Waal



About the Book

A beautiful portrait of a seemingly ordinary woman?s life, transformed by extraordinary love.

When Paulette arrived in England as a young girl, she left behind a grandmother in St. Kitts who called her ?Sweet Pea,? taught her to cook, and admonished her to avoid temptation and embrace love and forgiveness, in that order.

Now, Paulette is 29 and within reach of her dream: a wedding, a baby and a little house. She has the man, handsome Denton, and a good job as an assistant nurse. But when tragedy strikes, her baby comes from Denton?s friend, a relationship that can?t last. Soon it?s just Paulette, grieving the life she almost had, and her son, Bird. It seems like enough, until another boy, the same age as Bird, appears. Now, there?s someone new to take under her wing and worry about, someone who calls her Sweet Pea and makes her laugh.

Through friendships, motherhood and connections that emerge in the most unexpected places, Paulette discovers strength in everyday acts of kindness.

A luminous and lyrical novel of the trials of life and the compassion that can follow, SWEET PEA introduces readers to an indelible heroine who never turns away from her capacity to love.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with Paulette beginning her day. How does the author establish her character? What do we learn about Paulette and her wishes for the future, her thoughts about Denton, and about herself?

2. Compare what we know about Denton and Garfield, and their treatment of Paulette. Can you explain the way Paulette acts towards each man? Does your opinion of Paulette change because of her different treatment of them?

3. The idea of home is important to Paulette, and throughout the novel we are shown different homes, different living spaces. Discuss the way Paulette orders her home and what it reveals about her. Compare that with the other homes we see --- Maggie?s or Frank Bowen?s, or what we know of Garfield?s home, and how they reflect their owners.

4. Discuss Paulette?s evolving relationship with Frank Bowen, or ?Shirt & Tie,? as she calls him. Paulette is understandably upset with him, but how does her treatment of him evolve over the course of the novel? Does your opinion of him change as we learn more about his past?

5. Paulette makes very clear to Frank?s grandson, Nellie, that she is not his ?Mum.? However, in that same scene she thinks to herself that ?it?s like the two of them know each other from some other time, like they have found each other again.? What does she mean by this, and how does this sentiment manifest throughout the novel?

6. How does the island of St. Kitts influence Paulette? What stays with her about the island and her childhood? What does she mean when she says, ?No one would recognize the girl she left behind in her bedroom at the foot of the hill??

7. In Chapter 26, Paulette and Bird go over to Nellie?s house and discover him in a surprising situation. Do you understand what he?s doing and why? What do you think about the advice that Paulette gives him?

8. When Garfield announces that he?s moving to the U.S. and taking Bird with him, Paulette blames Nellie and Frank for Garfield?s decision. Do you agree with her? Do you think she?s fair in her treatment of Frank throughout the novel?

9. What does Paulette learn when she goes to visit Bird and Garfield in Texas? Discuss her experience in the restaurant, where she?s ?sitting at the table and sitting above the table at the same time.? What does she mean? How do you feel about the way she?s treated by Bird here?

10. What role does Paulette?s neighbor, Maggie, play in the story? Do you think Maggie is right to voice her opinion of Bird at the end of the novel? Do you agree with her?

11. At one point, Paulette remembers a sermon she heard in church on St. Kitts. ?Sometimes, says the minister, you?re looking in one direction and life catches you from behind.? How much of Paulette?s life is an example of life catching her from behind, and how does the way she reacts improve her lot or make her more miserable?

12. By the end of the novel, Paulette remembers early advice she received: ?Granny would say, ?Let what comes, come, and let what goes, go. No use fighting it.?? Would you say this is the message of the novel? Do you think Paulette followed this advice in her own life?

Author Bio

Kit de Waal is the author of MY NAME IS LEON, which was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and won the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award; THE TRICK TO TIME, which was longlisted for the Women?s Prize for Fiction; SUPPORTING CAST, a short-story collection; and WITHOUT WARNING AND ONLY SOMETIMES, a

memoir. SWEET PEA, published in the UK as THE BEST OF EVERYTHING, was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. She lives in the United Kingdom.

Critical Praise

?This is a novel bursting with plot, but it?s also distinguished by lucid prose, heartfelt emotion, and moments of levity.?

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