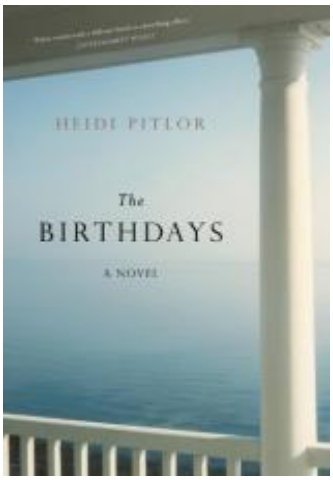
The Birthdays

by Heidi Pitlor



About the Book

The Birthdays tells the unforgettable story of a unique family on the brink of a new generation and examines modern-day marriage, pregnancy, and parenthood. On an island off the coast of Maine, the Miller family reunites to celebrate the father?s seventy-fifth birthday. Each of the adult children is expecting his or her own first child. The eldest, Daniel, grapples with the fact that his wife had to be artificially inseminated. Jake, the middle child, discovers that his wife is carrying twins after many trying years of infertility treatments. Hilary ? the free-spirit youngest daughter ? arrives in Maine five months pregnant with no identifiable father in sight. Their coming together sets off a series of fireworks, and, after the weekend, none of the Millers will emerge the same.

Discussion Guide

1. Compare the ways in which the women who have married into the family interact with Ellen and Joe. Why do you think Liz connects with her in-laws, while Brenda doesn?t seem to?

2. At one point there is an exchange between MacNeil and Ellen where Ellen says of Daniel, ?He could have been a real artist.? MacNeil replies, ?He is a real artist.? Is MacNeil, a relative outsider, able to make a better assessment of Daniel? Does this relate to Ellen?s inability to understand what it is exactly that Jake does for a living?

3. What role do age and age differences play in each of the relationships? For example, Brenda is much younger than Daniel?how does this affect the way they relate to each other? How is Ellen?s affection for MacNeil, and for Joe, different from the affection expressed between the younger couples?

4. In addition to this, discuss the role of generational differences in the book. How do the parents? expectations for their children affect the children?s own wants and goals? To what degree have Ellen?s and Joe?s philosophies on life rubbed off on their children?

5. Discuss which characters you most identify with and why. Is it easier to feel sympathetic to those whose difficulties are externally caused or accidental (like Daniel) than to those whose situation is largely due to their own choices (like Hilary)?

6. Do you agree with Brenda and Daniel?s decision to use an anonymous sperm donor (and artificial insemination)? If you found yourself in a similar situation, would you choose this solution?

7. Likewise, Jake and Liz have gotten pregnant with the help of modern science. Do they seem to have grappled with much of a moral crisis in making this decision? What do you make of our society?s embrace of reproductive technology?

8. Discuss Pitlor?s narrative approach. What is the effect of her telling the story told from all the different points of view?

9. Pitlor uses metaphor frequently. Discuss some of the most significant metaphors in **The Birthdays**. For example, does Joe?s turtle signify anything? What is the role of the art of Corcoran?

10. Why do you think Pitlor chose to set the book on an island? What role does the setting play? How can setting add to a story?

Author Bio

Heidi Pitlor is the author of the novels THE BIRTHDAYS, THE DAYLIGHT MARRIAGE and IMPERSONATION. She has been the series editor of *The Best American Short Stories* since 2007 and the editorial director of Plympton, a literary studio. Her writing has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Huffington Post*, *Ploughshares* and the anthologies IT OCCURS TO ME THAT I AM AMERICA: New Stories and Art and LABOR DAY: True Birth Stories by Today?s Best Women Writers. She lives outside Boston.

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