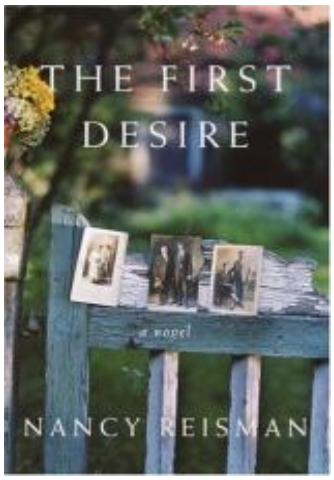
The First Desire

by Nancy Reisman



About the Book

1929. Buffalo, New York. A beautiful July day, the kind one waits for through the long, cold winters. Sadie Feldstein, née Cohen, looks out her window at the unexpected sight of her brother, Irving. His news is even more unexpected, and unsettling: their elder sister, Goldie, has vanished without a trace.

With Goldie's disappearance as the catalyst, **The First Desire** takes us deep into the life of the Cohen family and an American city, from the Great Depression to the years immediately following World War II. The story of the Cohens is seamlessly told from the various perspectives of siblings Sadie, Jo, Goldie, and Irving --- each of whose worlds is upended over the course of the novel, the smooth veneer of their lives giving way to the vulnerabilities and secrets they've managed to keep hidden --- and through the eyes of Lillian, the beautiful woman their father, Abe, took as a lover as his wife was dying. But while Abe's affair with Lillian stuns his children, they are even more shocked by his cold anger in the wake of Goldie's disappearance.

The First Desire is a book of great emotional power that brings to life the weave of love, grief, tradition, and desire that binds a family together, even through the tumultuous times that threaten to tear it apart.

Discussion Guide

1. The First Desire mainly revolves around a family. Do you think the meaning of family shifts over the course of the novel? How is the Cohen family as a whole changed by the end of the novel? Does the house itself-its structure and atmosphere-take on particular meanings for the family members or for you as a reader?

2. In **The First Desire**, each chapter highlights stories and voices of different characters. How do you see the chapters working together to form a novel? The novel offers many of the characters' perspectives and life experiences but doesn't offer the father's view. Why do you think the author has chosen not to show Abe's point of view? Similarly, Celia is the

only Cohen sibling not given chapters of her own. In your reading, do Celia's perceptions and her interpretations of events, presented by the others, serve as a kind of shadow narrative throughout the novel? Are there other effects? How do the perspectives of the characters grow and/or change over the course of the novel? What incidents or family developments best explain the transformation?

3. What do Sadie's conversations with Irving reveal to you about the members of the family? What do you learn about Sadie as she prepares to visit the house on Lancaster and from her conversations with Celia, her father, and Jo? How does the crisis bring out her ambivalent feelings about the family and her role in it? What insights do the descriptions of her marriage provide about the way she conducts herself?

4. To what extent are the family dynamics shaped by Jewish culture? Is the way Abe treats his daughters a reflection of his background and the traditions of a Jewish household? How does it differ from the way he treats his son, Irving?

5. Jo refers to herself as "the spare daughter." Is her position in the family self-imposed, a result of her attitudes and behavior, or does the family structure leave her little choice? How does her sense of self relate to her fascination with the movies and with "girl bandits"? In your view, what is the significance of her infatuation with Lucia Mazzano? In what ways are her feelings doubly transgressive? Does her attraction to a woman surprise you?

6. Consider the mothers in **The First Desire**. How do you think the absence of Rebecca Cohen affects each of her children? In your view, why is Sadie the only daughter to become a mother? How would you describe her as a mother? Can you imagine what Rebecca might have been like as a mother? If so, what moments or details enable you to picture her? How do you see the relationship between Lillian and her mother, "whose love is the color of bruises"? Had Lillian married Abe, do you imagine her relationships with Abe's children would have changed? If so, in what ways?

7. How does Irving's position as the only boy and the youngest child in the family affect his character? Do his sisters and his father contribute to his choices about everything from drinking to women to "borrowing" money from the store? To what extent does the tenor of the times explain his behavior as a young man? Why do you think he adopts another name when he is trying to pick up women? Why might it be "easier to be Irving in England [during World War II] than it was in the States"?

8. Is Goldie, in a similar way, marked by being the oldest child in the family and the only one not born in America? Do her memories of her arrival with her mother in 1901 and the need to adjust to life in a new place help to explain why she became the woman she is?

9. The First Desire is set in Buffalo in the first half of the twentieth century. In what ways do place and time seem significant? How do the characters react to and feel about the landscape, weather, and atmosphere of Buffalo? Do the seasons play into the storytelling of the novel? Do you think **The First Desire** could take place in the present day, or do the characters and experiences seem rooted in their time?

10. What impact does the war have on the relationship between Abe and Irving? In your view, do the similarities between father and son increase over time? If so, how? Why?

11. After Abe's death, Sadie found "the world for a time drained of color." How do you think the characters view, deal with, and accept death? Why does Abe force his family to sit shivah for Goldie? Why do you think Goldie feels that "the

living die and the dead surreptitiously live"?

12. In your view, why does Goldie select Irving to renew her contact with the family? Why does Irving fail to tell the rest of his family that he has heard from Goldie? Would the interactions among the sisters have been different if they had learned about Goldie's fate earlier in the novel?

13. What do you think Goldie has gained, and what has she lost, by leaving her family? What distinguishes her new life from the lives of her siblings in Buffalo? In what ways does her decision to go to California illuminate the social mores and era presented in the novel? Consider, for example, the passages describing her departure and her reactions to California.

14. Jo, Celia, and Sadie all conjure up explanations for Goldie's disappearance. In light of what you learn about Goldie by the end of the book, which sister seems to see her most clearly?

15. Discuss the theme of betrayal in **The First Desire**. How is each of the following a betrayal-the mother's death; the father taking a lover; Goldie's disappearance; Irving taking on a non-Jewish identity; Jo getting Lucia fired? Describe some of the other examples of betrayal in the novel. What are the causes and consequences? Is silence a betrayal?

16. Reisman separates the sections of the novel by dates, rather than simply presenting a straightforward running narrative. How does this structure affect your experience of the book? How might it influence your understanding of the characters? The way the plot unfolds?

17. Niagara Falls is referred to throughout the book, beginning with the suggestion that Goldie might have gone there on the day she disappears. What meanings does Niagara Falls seem to have for these characters? For you as a reader? (Does it suggest, at certain moments, a sense of foreboding? A sense of freedom? Several possibilities at once?)

18. The title of the novel is taken from Goldie, who says, "...**The First Desire** was to be with her mother, the second to be invisible." Is this relevant to Goldie alone, or do other members of the family seek invisibility in one way or another? Is invisibility, or escape, a way of dealing with insecurities? With failure? Is it linked to love? Protection? Other emotions or impulses?

Author Bio

Nancy Reisman is the author of **House Fires**, a short story collection that won the 1999 Iowa Short Fiction Award. Her work has appeared in, among other anthologies and journals, *Best American Short Stories 2001*, *Tin House*, and *The Kenyon Review*. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. She lives in Ann Arbor, where she currently teaches creative writing at the University of Michigan.

Critical Praise

"Reisman writes beautifully, a prose of restraint and grace. The achievement of this novel is that you are completely

inside it from the moment you begin . . . This is a story that has the shape of life as it is truly lived."

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