

The Moments Between Dreams

by Judith F. Brenner



About the Book

Carol misses red flags about Joe's need for control before she marries him, dashing her dreams for herself and her family. Trouble escalates after their daughter, Ellie, is paralyzed by the polio virus and Joe returns from World War II. Carol realizes how brutal waking life can be, and she conceals bruises and protects her children the best she can.

THE MOMENTS BETWEEN DREAMS is a captivating story of a 1940s housewife who conforms to the rulebook of society until Joe pushes her too far. His constant intimidation shrinks Carol's confidence while she tries to boost Ellie's. Church-going neighbors in Carol's tight-knit Polish community are complacent, but Sam, a handsome reporter, stirs up Carol's zest for life. Despite impossible circumstances, Carol plans a secret escape. Along a risky path, she empowers her daughter to know no limits and teaches her son to stop the cycle of violence and gender discrimination.

Discussion Guide

1. The themes of courage and perseverance are prevalent throughout the novel. Social expectations are also explored. How were these themes used to move the story forward?
2. The story of Carol's life is mostly told through the lens of raising her children. How does growing up in an abusive environment affect Ellie, as a young woman, and Tom, as a young man? Is the effect different for each of them? Why or why not?
3. Since the 1940s, we have learned that intimate partner violence is not always male driven. Could the same story have been told if the genders were reversed? Why or why not?

4. Symbolism plays a large part in the telling of Carol's life. How does Carol's use of makeup change throughout the story, and how is it a symbol of her lived experience?
5. Driving is a major symbol of freedom throughout the story, as well. We see that Tommy is given a car as a graduation gift, but Carol and Ellie both have to learn how to drive in secret. Discuss more ways the author uses driving as a symbol for freedom and how it affects each of the main characters.
6. Discuss the role of religion in Carol's life and along her journey to personal freedom.
7. When Carol meets Tony at his office to discuss her options for leaving her marriage, she learns discouraging facts about the justice system's treatment of women during that time. How have things changed? How have they stayed the same?
8. Throughout the work, we see three different depictions of women in the 1950s: Carol, a housewife with children and an abusive husband; Anna, a housewife with no children but a supportive husband; and Polly, a single woman with a career and no children who marries later in life. What is the importance of this representation? How does it affect Carol's journey? How does it affect Ellie's growth into womanhood?
9. Discuss Ellie's journey as a young person living with a visible disability in the 1940s and '50s. How does it affect her growth and maturity? How has the climate changed for persons with disabilities in regard to access and assistance?
10. Discuss how shame plays into Ellie's feelings (about her limp and/or shoes) and Carol's feelings of shame (about her marriage and her visible marks).
11. Readers witness three notable funerals. What do each of these losses represent for Carol?
12. Carol is 26 when we meet her and 40 when the story ends. How does she change over the course of her story? How would you describe her transformation?
13. Do you think Joe followed through with his threat to tamper with the brakes, or was it the slippery roads and/or his fury while driving that led to his car accident? Does it matter?
14. We see that Carol has had strong male role models throughout her life. Why do you think she missed red flags early in her tumultuous relationship with Joe? Are tangible role models more important than verbal lessons on morality? Why or why not?
15. After Joe has his accident, we see disagreement amongst Carol's family about whether or not she should have gone to the hospital. What do you think about her decision? Was she wrong to stay behind? What would you have done?
16. Readers might notice the switch from past to present tense in the last chapters of the novel. How does this literary technique play with a shift in Carol's journey to healing and attitude toward her next chapter?

17. Excerpts from Anne Finch's "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" open and close this novel. What is your interpretation of this poem? How do these chosen excerpts reflect Carol's journey?

18. Discuss why you think that domestic violence resource groups are trying to shift the narrative from "Why didn't they leave (sooner)?" to "Why aren't abusers held accountable?" and "How can families (or society) stop the cycle?"

19. Discuss the limits of the Lautenberg Amendment (1996), which provides basic protections to domestic abusers and does not specify procedures for the surrender of firearms.

Author Bio

Judith F. Brenner owns Creative Lakes Media, LLC, a freelance writing and editing services company. She is the managing editor and publisher of Sharpeners Report, a national publication with paid circulation in a professional service and repair industry. Her personal essays have been published in Writers in the Know (WINK) literary magazine (available at winkwriters.com) and *Minnesota Parent* magazine. She completed the Iowa University Mini-MFA Workshop in 2019. Judith is a member of the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and the Professional Editor's Network. She resides in Minnesota with her husband and has two daughters.

Critical Praise

"From the minute I began reading *THE MOMENTS BETWEEN DREAMS*, I was captured, yanked into 1944 and the life of Carol Wozniak and her family, and struck by the similarities to the world we all live in today. It's flawlessly written and relatable. Put this book on your summer reading list."

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