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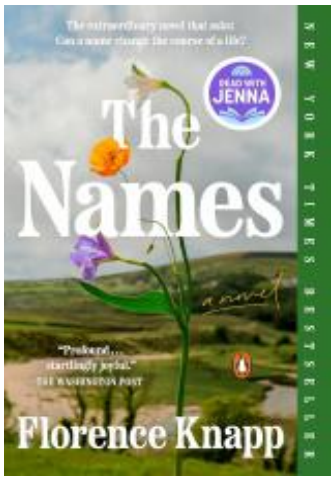
The Names

by Florence Knapp



About the Book

The extraordinary novel that asks: Can a name change the course of a life?

In the wake of a catastrophic storm, Cora sets off with her nine-year-old daughter, Maia, to register her son's birth. Her husband, Gordon, a local doctor, respected in the community but a terrifying and controlling presence at home, intends for her to name the infant after him. But when the registrar asks what she'd like to call the child, Cora hesitates.

Spanning 35 years, what follows are three alternate and alternating versions of Cora's and her young son's lives, shaped by her choice of name. THE NAMES explores the painful ripple effects of domestic abuse, the messy ties of family, and the possibilities of autonomy and healing.

With exceptional sensitivity and depth, Florence Knapp draws us into the story of one family, told through a prism of what-ifs, causing us to consider the "one...precious life" we are given. The book?s brilliantly imaginative structure, propulsive storytelling, and emotional, gut-wrenching power are certain to make THE NAMES a modern classic.

Discussion Guide

1. According to the author?s glossary of names, ?Cora? means ?the core of the story,? and yet Cora is less present in some storylines. Do you think Cora is the heart of the novel --- or her son? Whose story feels most central? Or is it some of each? And how do you see the characters relating to the literal meanings of their names?

2. At one point, Gordon Jr. observes that though he ?can?t even explain it to himself...he has always wanted to be called Luke.? Have you ever wished your name were different? Are there certain names that you feel called to or that you innately dislike?

3. Did you find yourself rooting for one of the boys? storylines over another? Why?

4. Which boy has the better life? And which narrative offers the best life for the other characters? Which storyline feels likeliest?

5. Maia?s relationship with her brother is significantly different in each storyline. How do the parental dynamics at play affect the relationship between the siblings?

6. Consider the role of loneliness in the novel. How does isolation complicate Cora?s life? Her children?s? Conversely, where do instances of friendship and kindness alleviate the family?s suffering?

7. The unnamed vet who helps Cora in Gordon Jr.?s story reappears as Felix in Bear?s. Did you spot any other shared elements or characters in the narratives? What did all three stories have in common?

8. In Gordon Jr.?s storyline, Maia suppresses the uncomfortable truth of her mother?s abuse. How does the theme of truth play out in each iteration of the story?

9. In Bear?s narrative, Cora ends up in a happy relationship with Felix and finds a true friend in Mehri. In Julian?s story, he learns not to fear conflict with Orla, and Sílbhe finds Cian; in all stories, Maia makes her way --- eventually --- to real love. How do these alternative demonstrations of love intersect with the abuse at the core of the novel?

10. Depictions of masculinity are many and varied throughout the novel. How do the story?s male characters fall prey to toxic masculinity or become trapped by it? Which characters represent masculinity in a positive way?

11. Bear, Julian and Gordon Jr. all contend with the fear that they?ve inherited their father?s predisposition toward violence. What do you think we inherit from our families? From our names?

Author Bio

Florence Knapp has previously written a nonfiction book about a centuries-old method of quilt making, as well as contributing to a book for the Victoria and Albert Museum, PATCHWORK & QUILTING. She lives just outside London with her husband and their dog, Nell. Their two children have now flown the nest. THE NAMES is Knapp?s debut novel and has been translated into more than 20 languages.

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