

The Way Back to Happiness

by Elizabeth Bass



About the Book

No one could blame Bev Putterman for becoming estranged from her sister. No one but Bev, anyway. Growing up, Diana was difficult and selfish yet always their mother's favorite. And then came the betrayal that took away the future Bev dreamed of.

Yet if Diana caused problems while alive, her death leaves Bev in a maelstrom of remorse. She longs to provide a stable home for Diana's fourteen-year-old daughter, Alabama. But between her commitment-phobic boyfriend and her precarious teaching position, Bev's life is already in upheaval without an unruly teenager around.

All Alabama knows about Aunt Bev is what her mother told her --- and none of it was good. They clash about money, clothes, boys, and especially about Diana. In desperation, Alabama sets out to find her late father's family. Instead she learns of the complicated history between her mother and aunt, how guilt can shut down a life --- and most important, how love and forgiveness can open a door and make us whole again...

Discussion Guide

1. The book features the evolving relationship between a girl, Alabama, and her aunt Bev, who steps in to serve as guardian after Alabama's mother dies. In your own life, has there been someone other than your parents? such as an aunt or uncle, cousin, or teacher? whose guidance made a huge difference to you?

2. Alabama and her best friend, Stuart, both see reflections of real life in fiction?especially GREAT EXPECTATIONS by Charles Dickens and THE OLD MAID, a Bette Davis movie. Was there ever a work of fiction, a movie, or a song that resonated so strongly with you that you felt it guided you or changed your life?
3. Bev steps into Alabama's life during a difficult time. What mistakes does Bev make? Are they forgivable?
4. Alabama dislikes her aunt at the beginning of the story, but her feelings are based on secondhand prejudices passed to her by her mother. Did you ever misjudge a person based on hearsay and come to like them later?
5. Bev is crushed when she's turned down for NASA's first teacher in space program, and she views this as proof of her bad luck. Has there ever been a disappointment in your life that actually turned out to be a lucky break?
6. Did you take home economics in school? Do you remember any projects you did for class?
7. Alabama gets caught up in a practical joke she soon regrets. Have you ever taken part in a prank that came off well . . . or one that backfired?
8. Alabama has to confess to having done something bad to Bev when she discovers that her partner in crime went on to bully Stuart. Yet Stuart just wants to let the matter drop. In confessing and telling on Kevin, is Alabama doing the right thing? Or should she have honored Stuart's wishes and said nothing?
9. Did you ever take part in a talent show or some other public competition?
10. One challenge Alabama faces in her new life is adjusting to a small town after living in cities all through her childhood. When you were in school, did you have to switch schools often? Did you ever relocate to a place that seemed foreign to you?
11. Letters play an important role in THE WAY BACK TO HAPPINESS, which is set in 1985. Obviously, much of this correspondence would be done via e-mail today. Is there anyone you still correspond with by "snail mail"? Do you think anything has been lost by the switch to e-mail?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Bass grew up the youngest of four siblings in rural Texas, where she spent summers watching old movies and dreaming of living in a town big enough to have an Icee machine. She now resides in Montreal with her husband.

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