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A Reunion of Ghosts

by Judith Claire Mitchell



About the Book

Meet the Alter sisters: Lady, Vee and Delph. These three mordantly witty, complex women share their family's apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. They love each other fiercely, but being an Alter isn't easy. Bad luck is in their genes, passed down through the generations. Yet no matter what curves life throws at these siblings --- and it's hurled plenty --- they always have a wisecrack, and one another.

In the waning days of 1999, the trio decides it's time to close the circle of the Alter curse. But first, as the world counts down to the dawn of a new millennium, Lady, Vee and Delph must write the final chapter of a saga lifetimes in the making --- one that is inexorably intertwined with that of the 20th century itself. Unspooling threads of history, personal memory and family lore, they weave a mesmerizing account of their lives that stretches back decades to their great-grandfather, a brilliant scientist whose professional triumph became the sinister legacy that defines them.

Funny, heartbreaking and utterly original, A REUNION OF GHOSTS is a magnificent novel about three unforgettable women bound to each other, and to their remarkable family, through the blessings and the burdens bestowed by blood.

Discussion Guide

1. How does The Alter Family Tree affect your entry into the novel?

2. Consider each of the sisters --- Lady, Vee and Delph --- who narrate most of the novel. How are they similar and different? How is their living together healthy? How not?

3. In Chapter 1, the sisters present a ?chart? of family suicides and claim that the ?tidiness of the rows and columns? help balance the emotional feeling of ?life as forever chaotic.? Does it? Can organizing and listing difficult experiences make them less powerful?

4. What is potentially valuable or challenging about a family legacy?

5. Heinrich Alter states that ?being Jewish is his culture, but being German is his faith.? How do the other characters of the novel struggle with being Jews with German ancestry after World War II?

6. As a child, Lenz Alter was ?mournful,? and bad at most things he tried, yet he eventually wins the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. How does such a transformation take place?

7. How does the sisters? humor and love of wordplay and puns balance the sadness and suffering explored in the novel?

8. Consider the structure of the novel, which moves backwards and forwards in time. What are the effects of this?

9. Albert Einstein?s theories about time serve as a way for the sisters to consider their largely unpleasant lives. What did Einstein say about the nature of time? How is that helpful to the sisters?

10. Delph, the youngest sister, at 19 years old, says she?s not interested in ?soup,? the sisters? euphemism for romantic and sexual involvement with men. Why isn?t she? Consider Lady?s relationship with Joe Hopper and Vee?s with Eddie Glod.

11. In their wonderings about what might have happened to the father who left them, the sisters find the fantasy of his being killed by their mother the most satisfying and interesting. How might such a drastic fantasy make emotional sense? In what ways might fantasy be helpful in the face of great trauma?

12. What does the sisters? Great Grandmother Iris Emanuel bring to the novel? What?s the value of the letters she writes to chemistry professor Richard Lehrer, even after he has died?

13. The sisters believe they are the last Alters subject to the family curse --- ?The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons to the third and fourth generations.? What might this Biblical idea mean?

14. Albert Einstein?s first wife Mileva talks to Iris about the challenge of being married to genius. How might great intelligence affect intimate relationships like marriage?

15. After the painful loss of Richard Lehrer, Iris passionately instructs her son Richard about surviving: ?The worst happens, and people go on.? And yet she takes her own life. How might you explain such conflict, such apparent hypocrisy?

16. Both Lenz Alter and Albert Einstein do profound scientific work that eventually provide a force for genocide. To what extent is each responsible? What ethical responsibilities should scientists have?

17. Thinking of both an ad for Lord & Taylor and the horrific image of clothes worn by Jews in concentration camps, Richard thinks ?Thank God for the human capacity to hold both kinds of pajamas in our heads at once.? What might he

mean?

18. At one point Vee mimics and criticizes one of the many academics writing about Lenz and Iris. What is she upset about? To what extent should academic research involve empathy or emotional understanding? What are the limits of studying historic figures and their behavior?

19. After her bilateral mastectomy and chemotherapy, Vee thinks about the ?body as narrative,? and the ?face as biography.? In what ways is this true?

20. In the face of Vee?s cancer the sisters claim that repression is a ?gift,? and of great value. To what extent can such profound pain and fear be ?tamp[ed] down??

21. What is the nature of coincidence? Fate? Carl Jung?s idea of synchronicity?

Author Bio

Judith Claire Mitchell is the author of the novels THE LAST DAY OF THE WAY and A REUNION OF GHOSTS. She teaches creative writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is a professor of English and the director of the MFA program in creative writing. She has received grants and fellowships from the Michener-Copernicus Society of America, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Wisconsin Arts Board and Bread Loaf, among others. She lives in Madison with her husband, the artist Don Friedlich.

Critical Praise

?What if the man who invented chemical weapons was also a grandfather, and what if his great-grandchildren grew up to be three hilarious, introverted, deeply-haunted sisters? And what if those sisters co-wrote a fascinating, funny and deeply sad 350-page suicide note? Then you?d have A REUNION OF GHOSTS. This is a triumphant, beautiful and devastating novel about coincidences, family and the sins of our fathers.?

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