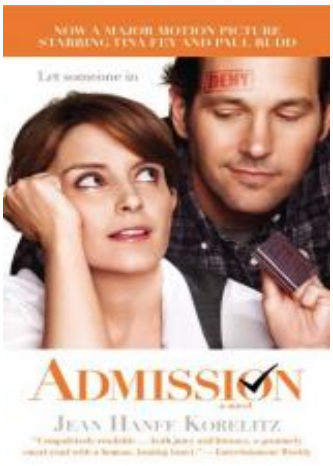
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Admission

by Jean Hanff Korelitz



About the Book

"Admissions. *Admission*. Aren't there two sides to the word? And two opposing sides...It's what we let in, but it's also what we let out."

For years, 38-year-old Portia Nathan has avoided the past, hiding behind her busy (and sometimes punishing) career as a PrincetonUniversity admissions officer and her dependable domestic life. Her reluctance to confront the truth is suddenly overwhelmed by the resurfacing of a life-altering decision, and Portia is faced with an extraordinary test. Just as thousands of the nation's brightest students await her decision regarding their academic admission, so too must Portia decide whether to make her own ultimate admission.

Admission is at once a fascinating look at the complex college admissions process and an emotional examination of what happens when the secrets of the past return and shake a woman's life to its core.

Discussion Guide

1. Dean of Admission Clarence Porter tells Portia that she needs ?a little shaking up? (page 7). How does his statement foreshadow the ?shaking up? that Portia?s life will undergo as the rest of the novel unfolds?

2. The title of this book is a play between the definitions of ?admission? (to let something in, as in college admissions) and ?admission? (to let something out, as in a confession). John muses on page 73, ?Aren?t there two sides to the word? And two opposing sides.? How does each side play out in Portia?s story?

3. On page 141, as Portia scans the birth dates of this year?s applicants, she thinks, ?So it?s here?As if she hadn?t been waiting, and for years, for just this moment.? What exactly has Portia been waiting for? In what ways has her life to this point wrapped itself around the anticipation of this moment?

4. In Chapter 15, when Jeremiah remarks on Portia?s unusual name, she tells him that her mother named her after the character in **The Merchant of Venice**because Susannah hoped that her daughter would grow up to be very wise. Do you think Portia?s name fits her? In what ways does she live up to and/or depart from the dreams that Susannah had for her?

5. Portia has a soft spot for unconventional applicants like Simone and Jeremiah, in part because she feels that she is able to identify with their needs and anxieties. In what ways is Portia herself a misfit? How does this affect her social and professional interactions?

6. How would you characterize the relationship between Portia and her mother? Are they more similar than Portia imagines? In what ways are they different?

7. On page 299, Portia finds herself defending the justice of the admissions process to Diana. ?Fair is kind of an imprecise concept,? she says. What has been your experience with the college admissions process? Do you agree with her argument that ?fairness? is not the most useful concept with which to measure admissions decisions?

8. At different moments in the book, both Helen and Diana discount Portia?s competence as an admissions officer on the basis of the fact that she did not come to her job by means of formal training. In both instances, Portia finds herself struggling to explain the abstract nature of what makes her qualified to do what she does. How do you feel about the fact that a career affecting so many people so profoundly does not have an established education/ training track?

9. Early on in the book, Portia laments that nobody really cares about her --- all they care about is what she does for a living. And yet on page 319, she blames herself for her own isolation: ?How she had managed to fool anyone?mystified her?Because the price of her gift for evasion was to have no one, not one person, who understood how horrible she felt.? Do you agree with her self- assessment? How much of Portia?s loneliness is a result of her own defensive retreat from the world, and how much of it is a product of circumstances beyond her control?

10. A major theme in this book is the grief that accompanies losing a child --- whether to abortion, adoption, or even just to the process of growing up and leaving home for college. How do the various parents that we encounter in the book --- Portia, Mark, John, Susannah, Deborah, and the innumerable parents of college- bound seniors --- respond differently to the process of letting go of their children?

11. The internal lives of young people feature prominently in this book. Their voices, in the form of ?excerpts? from college essays, begin each chapter and form the measure of Portia?s life as the story follows her through one full admissions season. What do you think Portia finds in the company of young people that she is unable to get from adult society? How do Portia?s interactions with teenagers like Caitlin, Jeremiah, and Simone affect her own sense of direction and purpose?

12. Portia?s decision at the end of the book goes against conventional standards of ethical behavior and ultimately costs her way of life. What would you have done in her situation? How does Portia?s act compare to the behavior of the parents of applicants, which she has sometimes disparaged?

13. As Portia leaves her office at the end of the Chapter 31, she takes only her copy of the Sylvia Plath poem ?The Applicant? with her. Why do you think she chooses to keep this particular piece of her old life? Has the significance of the poem?s words changed for her since we first encountered it on page 321? If so, how?

14. The last scene in the book sees Portia returning home to visit her mother. In what ways does the story as a whole serve as a ?homecoming? process for Portia?

Author Bio

Jean Hanff Korelitz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels THE LATECOMER; THE PLOT and its follow-up, THE SEQUEL; YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN (which aired on HBO in October 2020 as "The Undoing," starring Nicole Kidman, Hugh Grant and Donald Sutherland); ADMISSION (adapted as a film in 2013 starring Tina Fey) *;* THE DEVIL AND WEBSTER; THE WHITE ROSE; THE SABBATHDAY RIVER; and A JURY OF HER PEERS, as well as INTERFERENCE POWDER, a novel for children. Her company BOOKTHEWRITER hosts Pop-Up Book Groups in which small groups of readers discuss new books with their authors. She lives in New York City with her husband, Irish poet Paul Muldoon.

Admission
by Jean Hanff Korelitz

Publication Date: January 15, 2013
Genres: Fiction
Mass Market Paperback: 656 pages
Publisher: Grand Central Publishing
ISBN-10: 145552980X
ISBN-13: 9781455529803