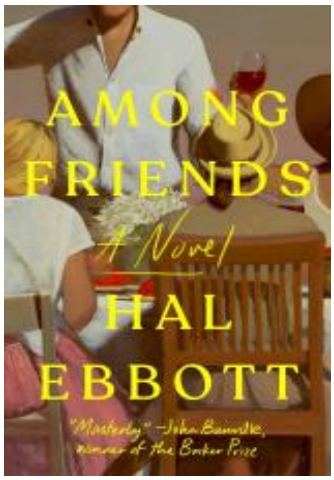
Among Friends

by Hal Ebbott



About the Book

What begins as celebration gives way to betrayal, shattering the trust between two families.

It?s an autumn weekend at a comfortable New York country house where two deeply intertwined families have gathered to mark the host?s 52nd birthday.

Together, the group forms an enviable portrait of middle age. The wives and husbands have been friends for over 30 years, their teenage daughters have grown up together, and the dinners, games and rituals forming their days all reflect the rich bonds between them.

This weekend, however, something is different. An unforeseen curdling of envy and resentment will erupt in an unspeakable act, the aftermath of which exposes treacherous fault lines upon which they have long dwelt.

Written with hypnotic elegance and molten precision, and announcing the arrival of a major literary talent, Hal Ebbott?s AMONG FRIENDS examines betrayal within the sanctuary of a defining relationship, as well as themes of class, marriage, friendship, power, and the things we tell ourselves to preserve our finely made worlds.

Discussion Guide

1. AMONG FRIENDS centers on the decades-old friendship between two families, their lives intimately intertwined until a shocking act of betrayal tears the fabric of their connection. Author Hal Ebbott offers a meticulous illustration of how such a foundational friendship evolves, and the powers that it holds over the actions of the individuals within it. What is it about Amos and Emerson, when they meet in college, and as they continue together over time, that explains the strength of their bond? Do those qualities make them more or less likely to remain friends over time?

2. The book begins with a quote from Jean Renoir: ?The real hell of life is that everyone has their reasons.? How do you read this quote in the context of the events of the book? Is it earnest --- to understand all is to forgive all --- or is it cynical?

3. Discuss the role of humor in AMONG FRIENDS. Amos and Emerson have a shared language of jokes, traditions and pranks. Emerson admires Amos? humor, though for Amos, being funny might be a coping strategy: ?Here his mind went, scurrying in search of thoughts and tasks, observations and quips.... Look at me, the show was meant to say, how easy, how casual. It was all hope, fearful and empty.? How does humor connect the two friends? What does it obscure?

4. In some ways, Emerson and Amos? bond is as much about the past as it is about the present. What is the role of nostalgia for these characters? Does nostalgia conceal as much as it reveals?

5. Many of the novel?s relationships are highly implicated in power relations --- of gender, class, wealth and age. How do these relationships present themselves so as to hide these power dynamics? What is Amos? role in participating in them? What is his need?

6. How does Anna?s experience and perspective exist within the narrative? What complexity is added when we see the events of the book from her point of view? Why do you think the book chooses not to stay in her perspective later on?

7. How can we understand Claire?s attitude toward her daughter? How can we differentiate this from her attitude toward the men in the novel, especially Emerson? What questions about Claire remain unanswered and why?

8. The narrative voice sometimes hints at inevitability, a future not yet known by the characters but understood by the author. For example, Anna carries a sketchbook with thick, expensive pages because ?she wasn?t ashamed of it yet. She still believed it might play a role in who she?d become.? Is there something tragic about the novel --- an inexorable working out of a predestined fate? How does this device reflect the other characters and events?

9. Emerson?s physicality is described with unique and witty precision: ?He entered clothes like opinions, with the graceful assurance of someone who has not questioned their choices.? What role does the presence of the idealized male body play in the book? What are the characters? views of aging and beauty?

10. Discuss the role of wealth and class in AMONG FRIENDS. What is the relationship between money and power? How does wealth strain some relationships and bolster others?

11. What similarities do you see between Anna and her father, Amos? In what ways is Amos more at ease with his daughter than with his wife, Claire? Describe Anna?s coping mechanisms. How do they parallel her father?s own actions during his youth? What might these parallels mean?

12. Compare the marriages of Retsy and Emerson, and Claire and Amos. How are these relationships different, and why do you think that is?

13. What are Claire?s and Retsy?s roles in the events and betrayals of the book? What does loyalty mean for each of them?

14. AMONG FRIENDS explores a defining and substantive relationship between two men from different backgrounds. Friendship between men is rarely depicted in contemporary literature. Why do you think that is? How does AMONG FRIENDS add to or complicate our picture of male friendship?

15. How do you understand the end of the novel? What do you think the future holds for these characters?

Author Bio

Hal Ebbott is a writer living in New York. AMONG FRIENDS is his first novel.

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