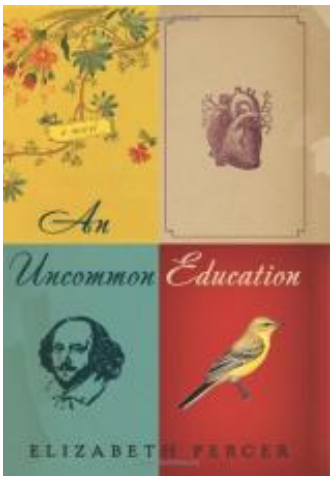
An Uncommon Education

by Elizabeth Percer



About the Book

Shy, introspective Naomi Feinstein has dreamed of a prestigious future in cardiology ever since her father?s heart attack scare. For her, a career in medicine seems to be the only way she can create order in her messy life and perhaps one day save her mother, a deeply depressed woman who rarely has the strength to leave her own bedroom. Alienated at school, Naomi spends afternoons studying with her father, poring over textbooks, and dreaming of Wellesley College. But when her next-door neighbor, Teddy, her confidant and only friend, abruptly departs from her life, it?s the first devastating loss from which Naomi is not sure she can ever recover, even after her long-awaited acceptance letter to Wellesley arrives.

Even Wellesley is not all Naomi imagined it would be. Among hundreds of other girls, she is consumed by loneliness and competition where she had expected solidarity and security --- until the day she sees a girl fall into a frozen lake.

This is Naomi?s introduction to Wellesley?s mysterious Shakespeare Society, the college?s oldest club, filled with secret rituals and Wellesley?s most unconventional and passionate students. Within ?Shakes,? Naomi is finally able to open herself up to her peers, reflecting a little less and living a little more. Detaching from the past, and so much of what defines her, Naomi?s new world is exciting and liberating, until an accusation brings a scandal with irreversible consequences for Naomi and her new friends. Naomi has always tried to save the ones she loves, but part of growing up is learning that, sometimes, saving others is a matter of saving yourself.

Poignant and wise, **An Uncommon Education** is a heartbreaking and compelling portrait of a young woman?s quest for greatness, filled with the complicated ties of family and friendship, and the ultimate importance of learning to let go.

Discussion Guide

1. In the opening paragraph, Naomi says, "I suppose it was one of many talismans, real and imagined, I began collecting around that age to help me believe that what I told myself just might be true." What are some of the talismans that Naomi carries with her throughout the novel? Which ones would you categorize as real and which would you consider to be imagined?

2. The novel opens at the John F. Kennedy National Historic Site, and Rose Kennedy and her daughter Rosemary come to play a role in Naomi's coming-of-age. What parallels can be drawn between the relationship that Naomi and her mother share, and the relationship of Rosemary to her mother, Rose Kennedy?

3. At the end of the chapter 2, Naomi foreshadows the story with the line, "I had tried and failed to save three of the people I most loved: two who, at very different times in my life and in very different ways, became the sort of friends we think we might never be able to live without, and then my mother, who in the end might have saved me." Could Naomi have saved Teddy or Jun? Is Naomi's mother a savior?

4. Naomi and Sol look to Wellesley College as a beacon of enlightenment and hope. What are the places in your own life that have served as similar sources of inspiration?

5. An Uncommon Education raises important issues about women's education. What conclusions can be drawn about women's education and Naomi's college experience? Did the novel reinforce or dispel any preconceived notions of all-women's colleges?

6. At the novel's opening, Naomi takes a letter belonging to Rosemary Kennedy that references Amelia Earhart. Does Earhart personify any themes of the novel?

7. How does the Shakespeare Society shape Naomi's character evolution? How would Naomi's time at Wellesley have been different without Shakes?

8. Toward the end of the novel, when Naomi encounters Phyllis, Phyllis claims, "You're a credit to the school. You should present at the alumnae research conference." To which Naomi replies, "They ask for significant findings." What does Naomi mean by this? Has Naomi discovered any "significant findings"?

9. When Naomi's parents come to see her perform in **Troilus and Cressida**, Naomi remarks, "Our brief, strained exchange made me want to walk out the door after him and back into my old life." How do you relate to the experience of the feeling of wanting to return to a former self?

10. What is the significance of an "uncommon education"? What are some of the milestones of Naomi's college education, and are they fairly commonplace, or is there anything unique about them, singularly or collectively? Describe your own "uncommon" education --- formal or informal.

Author Bio

Elizabeth Percer is a three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and has twice been honored by the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Foundation. She received a BA in English from Wellesley and a PhD in arts education from Stanford University, and completed a postdoctoral fellowship for the National Writing Project at UC Berkeley. She lives in California with her husband and three children. ALL STORIES ARE LOVE STORIES is her second novel.

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