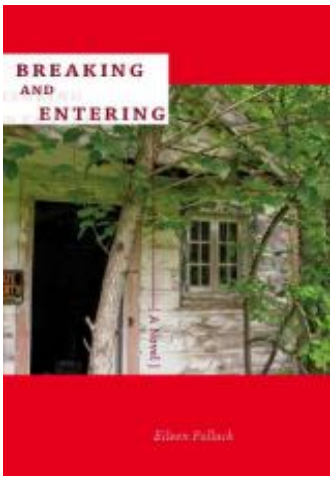
Breaking and Entering

by Eileen Pollack



About the Book

Set against the tragic events of the Oklahoma City bombings, **Breaking and Entering** follows Christian/Jewish couple Louise and Richard Shapiro as they move from California to rural Michigan with their daughter Molly in an attempt to save their marriage. They find their core beliefs about life and love tested as school counselor Louise?s students blame Satan for their homosexuality while Richard?s new buddies gather arms to defend themselves against enemies at home and abroad. Which of them gets to say what?s ?right? in this uncertain new America? The lessons **Breaking and Entering**has to teach us about communicating across ideological divisions are vital today. Pollack?s pitch-perfect writing, inventive plot, and fully-fledged characters will keep you engrossed long into the night as she paints a picture of individual Americans struggling to listen to one another.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do Louise and Richard decide to move to Michigan? Do you think that the death of Richard?s client and the accident in which he sets fire to the forest are the only reasons? Do you find it hard to believe that anyone would move from California to Michigan? Why? What does that say about the way in which you view the Midwest? The West Coast? America?

2. Louise claims that she moved to Michigan for Richard and Molly?s sakes. Is that true? What has she lost in leaving California? Does she have anything to gain? Richard charges her with being narrow-minded and not giving Midwesterners a chance. Does he have any ulterior motives in making this charge? Is their any truth to his accusation?

3. What new values does Louise encounter when she starts her job in Potawatomi? Does everyone at the school share these values? Are there any reasons that Louise might find it more difficult than most of her colleagues to fall in line with the prevailing political and religious values at her school? What are the prevailing values at the school you attended as a child? The schools your children now attend? How does the majority treat the students, teachers, and staff members who don?t share the prevailing world-view?

4. What are the prevailing political and religious views in the city, town, or neighborhood in which you live? Does everyone share those values? If not, how does the majority treat the minority? In what ways do you and your neighbors manage to get along, even if you don?t share the same political and/or religious views? Are there instances in which you don?t get along?

5. Why does Richard want to work at the prison? Do you find this surprising? Why does he want to hang out with Matt and Floyd and the other members of the militia? Does his behavior fit your view of most Jewish-American men? Why or why not? In what way might his behavior be explained by the fact that his father and uncle are Holocaust survivors?

6. What are the surface reasons for Louise and Richard?s marital difficulties? The deeper reasons? Is one person entirely right and the other entirely wrong? Does each person have some right on his/her side?

7. Early in the novel, Richard accuses Louise of wanting to be taken care of. Is this a fair accusation? Who else in the novel wants to be taken care of? Who in the novel takes care of whom? Who fails to take care of whom? Who wants to be taken care of by the government? By a Higher Power? Who doesn?t? How does this idea relate to the larger political and religious themes of the novel?

8. Do Louise and Richard and Molly see their new neighbors accurately? What are their misperceptions? Blind spots? Do their new neighbors see the Shapiros accurately? What are their misperceptions and blind spots? Which blind spots and misperceptions might you share? Are there people who live in your city, town, or neighborhood who scare you? Why? Do you think your fears are well founded? Are there people in your town who might be scared of you? Why? Do those fears have any basis in reality?

9. What do you know or remember about the Oklahoma City bombing? Timothy McVeigh? Until the events of 9/11, the bombing in Oklahoma City was the most destructive act of terrorism ever to take place on American soil. One hundred and sixty-eight adults died, including nineteen children Molly?s age or younger; 680 additional victims were severely wounded. Why do we so rarely discuss this event? In what ways is Breaking and Entering a historical novel? Do you think that any of the political, religious, or cultural conditions explored in this novel are still relevant to contemporary American society?

10. What do you think of Louise?s decision to leave Molly with Em rather than with Dolores? What other choices does she have? What would you have done in her position?

11. Do you think Louise is at all justified in having an affair with Ames? What is the basis of their mutual attraction? What do you find admirable about Louise? What are her flaws? What do you find likable or unlikable about Richard or Ames? Do characters need to be likable for a novel to be enjoyable? Why might the author have chosen to present her three major characters (Louise, Richard, and Ames) as such flawed human beings? What might your response have been if she had presented these characters in an entirely admirable light?

12. How do you judge Matt Banks?s character? Floyd Goodman?s? Barney Sipp?s? Ira Rosenkrantz?s? Does your impression of any of these characters change over the course of the novel? In what ways? Why do you think the author chose to present these four characters in this manner?

13. One of the novel?s major themes has to do with passion in its various forms?political, religious, romantic, sexual. Where in these characters? lives do you see passion of some kind working in a beneficial way? Where do you see a character?s passion to be destructive? Where in your own life do you see passion to be a beneficent, life-enriching force? Where and how might such a passion turn destructive?

14. Given that slightly more than half of the American electorate voted for a left-leaning black Democrat for president in the 2012 election and that slightly less than half of the electorate voted for a white Republican who claimed to represent a conservative Christian constituency, how divided do you think Americans still are? How dangerous do you think far-right militias really are in our country? Far-right extremists like Timothy McVeigh? Left-wing extremists? Given our differences, how do we usually manage to get along so well and keep our government functioning? How and why do we sometimes fail?

Author Bio

Eileen Pollack grew up in the Jewish Catskills, the setting for her two collections of short fiction, **The Rabbi in the Attic** and **In The Mouth** (winner of the 2008 Edward Lewis Wallant Award; Silver Medalist, *ForeWord* Book of the Year) and her first novel, **Paradise, New York**. She is also the author of a work of creative nonfiction, **Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull** (a 2003 WILLA finalist award winner). Eileen Pollack has received fellowships from the NEA, the Michener Foundation, and the Rona Jaffe Foundation. Her stories have appeared in journals such as *Ploughshares, SubTropics,* and *Agni*. Her novella "The Bris" was chosen by Stephen King for **Best American Short Stories 2007**. Her stories have received two Pushcart Prizes, the Cohen Award for best fiction of the year from *Ploughshares*, and similar awards from *Literary Review* and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. **Breaking and Entering** is her second novel, and won the 2012 Grub Street Book Prize. Eileen Pollack is the Zell Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan and lives in Ann Arbor.

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Publication Date: January 10, 2012
Genres: Family, Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 384 pages
Publisher: Four Way
ISBN-10: 1935536125
ISBN-13: 9781935536123