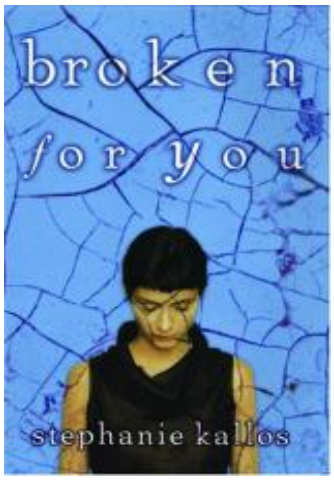
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Broken for You

by Stephanie Kallos



About the Book

Broken for You is a debut novel of infinite charm and tremendous heart that explores the risks and rewards of human connection, and the hidden strength behind things that only seem fragile. With a riotous energy that recalls the works of John Irving and Anne Tyler, Kallos brings to life a delightful set of characters --- among them an old woman who converses regularly with her porcelain collection; a young woman who can fix a leaky sink but can't stop her own tears from falling; a Yeats-loving bowling enthusiast; and a woman who survived a world war with her sense of humor (and her affinity for Hawaiian shirts) intact.

When we meet septuagenarian Margaret Hughes, she is living alone in a mansion in Seattle with only a massive collection of valuable antiques for company. Enter Wanda Schultz, a young woman with a broken heart who has come west to search for her wayward boyfriend. Both women are guarding dark secrets and have spent many years building up protective armor against the outside world. But as the two begin their tentative dance of friendship, the armor begins to fall away and Margaret opens her house to the younger woman. This launches a series of remarkable and unanticipated events, leading Margaret to discover a way to redeem her cursed past, and Wanda to learn the true purpose of her cross-country journey. Along the way, a famous mosaic artist is born, a Holocaust survivor is reunited with her long-lost tea set, and a sad-eyed drifter finds his long-lost daughter.

Funny, heartbreaking, and alive with a potpourri of eccentric and irresistible characters, **Broken for You** is a testament to the saving graces of surrogate families, and shows how far the tiniest repair jobs can go in righting the world's wrongs.

Discussion Guide

1. How is Margaret portrayed in the beginning? Who is this woman who is entombed in a vast, carefully dusted house with her father's collection? An unlikely heroine, she is an old, peculiar recluse. How is her diagnosis an inciting force for change? Talk about her growing appreciation of the uncommonness of common things.

2. In the clamor of the first armload of plate crashing, Wanda "suddenly knew that she had found a home with someone who was as deeply aggrieved and crazy as she was. It was tremendously comforting" (p. 133). How does the Hughes house, truly a sanatorium, provide a haven and structure for these women to pass through madness to sanity? Can you think of other books or plays that explore the same theme?

3. When Wanda reflects on her life in the theater, she says, "You're part of this intense family for a while, and then everyone moves on" (p. 165). How does Troy shift the rules? What is different about the steady accretion of people at the Hughes house?

4. How much is it possible to know another person? What are the limitations imposed on characters in **Broken For You**, both by accidents of history and by their own actions? Even with breakthroughs of knowledge and trust, do any characters keep a part that is private? Which ones? Margaret and Wanda, for instance, close as they are, each retain core secrets until almost the end. Why? And what are the secrets? Why does M.J. Striker withhold his own secret and recognition so long?

5. What do we learn about Margaret's mother? How does she function in the book? Were you reminded of Noel Coward's **Blithe Spirit**? In her visitations, what is her value to Margaret? There is high comedy in her mother's shenanigans. "Oh, Margaret really! You must enjoy this hoopla while you can. Believe me when I tell you it's no fun being part of a scandal after you're dead" (p. 289). Is Margaret working something else out in these spectral appearances? (The visits of Daniel are fewer and very different. How?)

6. Did you find conflicts between traditional values and newer ones? Where? Which characters grow larger or more sympathetic from being challenged by younger people? Does the converse hold?

7. How is the theme of the quest important in the book? Which characters commit themselves to seeking someone lost? What are the results? Who abandons the quest and why? Are there surprising rewards?

8. Parenting is explored in various characters' stories. Discuss Oscar, Margaret, and Michael as parents. Others? How is the idea of surrogate parenting developed? How successful is it?

9. "Once the door is open...you can't shut it again, impose limits, set degrees of openness..." (p. 126). In what ways do Margaret and Wanda, and later Gus and M.J. irrevocably make themselves available and vulnerable to life?

10. What does it mean to bear witness in this book? "Margaret had been given the privilege of bearing witness to Wanda's life" (p. 126). What other characters participate in this act? What are the larger ramifications of bearing witness, and why does it matter? For instance, why does it matter to honor the dead and find out their stories and try to fulfill their wishes?

11. Talk about the title. To how many characters and things and ways of life does it pertain? What is meant by a "dissolution of borders" on page 269?

12. How is the star motif expanded in the book? Think about the star imagery from Margaret to l942 school children in Europe. (See page 282 for some of Margaret's own thoughts on the subject. And see page 290 for a further amplification of the symbol.)

13. "The Hughes Collection Scandal: Desecration or Deification?" (p. 278). What do you think about the central occupation in the book? Art? Or half-crazed mayhem? What do Wanda's pieces say about her as an artist? What does the media criticism of her work say about the art? "Consider the artist's point of view" (p. 293). Do you accept the premise that salvation or restitution may come through destruction and loss --- and moving on? Which characters find their own salvation through building up others?

14. How does the Crazy Plate Academy serve as a culmination of the process that has gone on through the book? "Sorting was like beachcombing on a shore where every pebble is precious and time is boundless. And the familiar way everyone chatted --- so many hands in constant, purposeful, attentive motion --- gave Margaret the feeling of being at a quilting bee, a barn raising, or a wake" (pp. 327-328). What do these activities, certainly disparate, have in common?

15. How does the fact that neither Margaret nor Wanda is Jewish affect their joint efforts vis-à-vis the Holocaust victims and memories? When does expiation for her Nazi-sympathizer father become important for Margaret? Do you agree that "at the center of this controversy is the concept of worth: what we as humans value --- and why" (p. 280)? When Margaret is researching Irma's past in Paris, she realizes "Bodies had been shattered and things had not" (p. 313). How directly does her involvement in the making of tesserae correct this imbalance? Does the appearance of the Jewish patron Babs Cohen add credibility to the undertaking? Discuss other times Judaism appears in the novel. Think about, for instance, Sam Kosminsky singing in Hebrew at dinner, the background imagery of Kristallnacht (p. 227), the museum in Paris, and Bruce singing the blessing.

16. Irma Kosminsky is the most vocal proponent for doing mitzvahs. What are some of them? How do you explain her life-affirming resilience and sense of humor? How does she explain it? In a conversation with M.J. we hear: "Why bother, Mrs. K?...We both know you're going to win" (p. 274). Apart from Scrabble, how else does Irma "win" in the book?

17. Discuss Stephanie Kallos' definition of a relationship: "a marvel of construction, built up over time and out of fragments of shared experience...Maybe we feel such a strong kinship with pique assiette because it is the visual metaphor that best describes us; after all, we spend much of our lives hurling bits of the figurative and literal past into the world's landfill --- and then regret it. We build our identities from that detritus of regret. Every relationship worth keeping sustains, at the very least, splintered glazes, hairline fractures, cracks. And aren't these flaws the prerequisites of intimacy?" (p. 295). Do you find this an alarming view of human behavior? Or do you find it oddly comforting?

18. What is the significance of the Sevre chocolate service? How is the mystery resolved? What is the story of the single teacup? "It was like that all through the war, things like that, little things that people did" (p. 321). What ultimately is the fate of the tete-a-tete?

19. How is the poetry of Yeats interwoven in the book? Why in particular should it be Yeats who recurs?

20. What were the funniest parts of the book for you? Think of Irma, with her dry survivor wit as well as her bolder humor. Recall Maurice whose clumsiness is a boon in the Hughes house. And Margaret's outrageous mother. Talk about other moments of high or low comedy.

21. How are love and sex recurring symbols of healing and joy? Think about specific relationships, those that survive and those that don't. Describe M.J.'s loves, both as Striker and as O'Casey. How do you compare young love to that of older people? Why does Wanda wait so long to accept Troy as her lover? What does the parenthood of Susan and Bruce say about love, sex, and family?

22. The china, both whole and in pieces, generates stories, such as the ice-fishing ninety-two-year-old Alta Fogle: "Maybe this is true. Maybe not. You can never be sure: all objects in the Hughes house have to have meaning, and if their past is not known, stories are invented" (p. 337). In Chapter Thirty-two, the narrator addresses the reader directly, as if one were M.J. Striker approaching the Hughes house. "Pay attention. Let your mind embrace metaphors. It's your first clue about what goes on here" (p. 337). How do these quotations help us understand multiple levels of the story? Is the making of mosaic art also a metaphor for writing stories, the novel, for instance?

23. Did you find the dream sequences effective in conjuring up the memories and surreal perceptions of the injured Wanda and the dying Margaret? As a reader was it hard for you to suspend disbelief in a kind of free fall? Have you encountered magic realism in other books? In the third dream sequence, Margaret approaches Wanda. "Be happy...We're worth more broken" (p. 348). How is the last line of Margaret's dream magically apt? "The balloon arcs up forever, into the night sky, past millions of glittering stars" (p. 350)?

Author Bio

Stephanie Kallos is the author of BROKEN FOR YOU, which was selected by Sue Monk Kidd for the *Today Show* Book Club and was a national bestseller, and SING THEM HOME, one of *Entertainment Weekly*?s 10 Best Novels of the year. She lives in Seattle with her family.

Critical Praise

"Theater veteran Kallos debuts with a dazzling mosaic of intersecting lives and fates...Kallos has a rare, deft way with whimsy, dream sequences and hallucinations. Comparisons to John Irving and Tennessee Williams would not be amiss in this show-stopping debut."

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