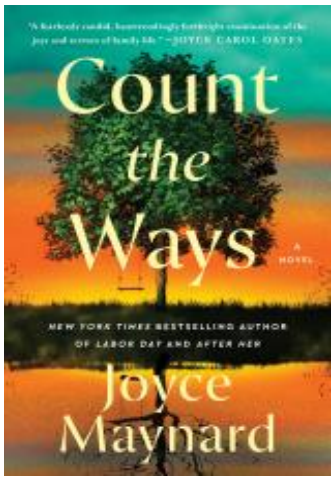
Count the Ways

by Joyce Maynard



About the Book

In her most ambitious novel to date, *New York Times* bestselling author Joyce Maynard returns to the themes that are the hallmarks of her most acclaimed work in a mesmerizing story of a family --- from the hopeful early days of young marriage to parenthood, divorce and the costly aftermath that ripples through all their lives.

Eleanor and Cam meet at a crafts fair in Vermont in the early 1970s. She?s an artist and writer, he makes wooden bowls. Within four years they are parents to three children, two daughters and a red-headed son who fills his pockets with rocks, plays the violin and talks to God. To Eleanor, their New Hampshire farm provides everything she always wanted --- summer nights watching Cam?s softball games, snow days by the fire, and the annual tradition of making paper boats and cork people to launch in the brook every spring. If Eleanor and Cam don?t make love as often as they used to, they have something that matters more. Their family.

Then comes a terrible accident, caused by Cam?s negligence. Unable to forgive him, Eleanor is consumed by bitterness, losing herself in her life as a mother, while Cam finds solace with a new young partner.

Over the decades that follow, the five members of this fractured family make surprising discoveries and decisions that occasionally bring them together, and often tear them apart. Tracing the course of their lives --- through the gender transition of one child and another?s choice to completely break with her mother --- Joyce Maynard captures a family forced to confront essential, painful truths of its past, and find redemption in its darkest hours.

A story of holding on and learning to let go, COUNT THE WAYS is an achingly beautiful, poignant and deeply compassionate novel of home, parenthood, love and forgiveness.

Discussion Guide

1. In Chapter 3, Eleanor muses, ?Sometimes you leave a place because you don?t like being there. Sometimes you have to leave because you love it too much.? (p.21) What does it say about Eleanor that she walked away from her home --- the home that represented all that she longed for: family, love and security? What elements actually make a ?home??

2. When Eleanor was growing up, she named her parents? bouts of unpredictable behavior ?Crazyland.? Years later, whenever Eleanor was overwhelmed by her emotions, she, too, entered Crazyland. Can you relate to the things Eleanor did while she was in Crazyland?

3. Eleanor spent years unable to forgive Cam for Toby?s accident. What do you make of Eleanor?s resentment toward Cam? Should she have let go of her anger? Would you have?

4. Long-term relationships require work, commitment and sacrifice. Is it inevitable that passion and love eventually fade? As their children --- and they --- got older, could Cam and Eleanor have found a new type of love, one that was more accepting of each other and their circumstances? Cam was able to accept the accident; the children were able to accept the divorce. Yet Eleanor could not find peace and acceptance for many years. Why?

5. Do you think Eleanor made the right choice by ?protecting? her children from the truth of their father?s affair with Coco? How much should children be told about the reasons behind their parents? divorce?

6. In Chapter 34, Eleanor said, ?For me, being a feminist means manifesting the strength and confidence and tenacity to pursue whatever it is you most want to do with your life. In my case, the goal was having a family. I?m doing that. If I don?t get to make art that much at the moment, I can live with it. Nobody gets everything in life. You have to make compromises.? (p. 169) Do women today still face the same struggles Eleanor did in the 1980s? Do women still have to choose between staying at home or having a fulfilling career? Were Eleanor?s struggles endemic to all women, or were they a result of her traumatic upbringing?

7. Was Toby?s accident Cam?s fault? Was it fair of Eleanor to blame her husband for what happened? What does ?fair? mean in a marriage? In a family?

8. Do you think Eleanor made the right decision in ending her relationship with Timmy Pouliot?

9. On page 242, we read: ?He [Cam] wasn?t nostalgic about their past... Eleanor remembered everything and never let go.? How much did this difference in attitude doom their relationship? What caused the end of their marriage --- Cam?s affair with Coco? Toby?s accident? Or were Eleanor and Cam headed for divorce no matter what?

10. What do you think of Ursula?s reaction when Eleanor tells her that Cam had been sleeping with Coco? When an adult child stops speaking to their parent, is that ?child? being immature or setting fair boundaries? Do children owe their parents a relationship or forgiveness?

11. If a child of yours came to you to say he or she felt a need for gender transition, how would you feel? How do you think you would deal with the news, and with your relationship going forward?

12. Why does the story keep returning to the image of the cork people? What do you think the cork people represent?

Author Bio

Joyce Maynard is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 14 novels and five books of nonfiction, as well as the syndicated column "Domestic Affairs." Her memoir, AT HOME IN THE WORLD, has been translated into 18 languages. Her novels TO DIE FOR and LABOR DAY were both adapted for film. She is a fellow of MacDowell and Yaddo artists' residencies.

When not running her hotel/retreat center, Casa Paloma, in Guatemala --- where she mentors women in the telling of their stories --- she makes her home in Northern California and in the state of New Hampshire.

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