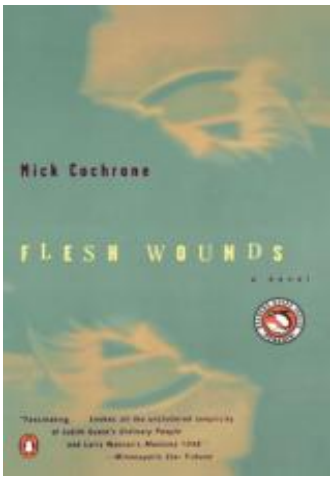
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Flesh Wounds

by Mick Cochrane



About the Book

Flesh Wounds, Mick Cochrane's lucid portrait of an American family caught in crisis, begins from the point of view of Hal Lamm, a salesman who is being arrested for the molestation of his thirteen-year-old granddaughter Becky. But what begins as Hal's story becomes that of his wife, his children, and his grandchildren -- the people who have most suffered the consequences of his actions, and the ones forced to come to terms with their knowledge. By the end of the book, in fact, Hal seems to have all but faded from view, not just for the reader, but for his family, most of whom have come to make peace with their conflicted feelings toward him.

More than a story about incest though, **Flesh Wounds** is largely a book about family relations, and the tangled, tender, painful, ambivalent nature of our feelings toward those who have both loved us the most and hurt us the most. How, for instance, can Hal's grown-up daughter Ellie -- also a victim of Hal's sexual abuse -- find a way not only to forgive an emotionally absent mother who turned a blind eye to her husband's misdeeds, but ultimately to forge a warm and loving relationship with her? How can his grown son Cal begin to connect with his anger toward his father -- enough to physically assault the aging, defenseless Hal -- only after the birth of his daughter? And how do different members of the family respond to such a resounding crisis, especially when it will force them either to reshape the way they feel about themselves and those related to them, or to reject the notion so vehemently -- as Maureen and Geoff do -- that they must constantly ward off reality in order to keep their beliefs intact.

Like a handful of other brave and brilliant novels, such as **Ordinary People** and **A Thousand Acres**, **Flesh Wounds** shatters the myth of the perfect family -- the glossy apple-pie image many people aspire to -- to get beneath the surface and expose the messy, scattered complexities that are at the heart of each family. Cochrane reveals not only the often devastating acts that take place behind closed doors, but also the astounding tools of the human psyche: to deny an unmistakable reality if it serves our purposes; to protect ourselves from pain, even if it means causing more pain for others; and, as only a courageous few will do, to look the truth unflinchingly in the eye while others must look away.

Discussion Guide

1. In **Flesh Wound,** Mick Cochrane broaches the painful subject of incest. How do you think he handled it? Did it seem realistic? Was it difficult for you to read about?

2. In the beginning of the book, Phyllis is protective of Hal, helping him escape from the police, not seeming to be angry or accusatory toward him. Explain how she emerges from an almost invisible character to become the protagonist. How and why does her attitude toward Hal change throughout the book? Is Phyllis a likable character?

3.In discussing Ellie's obsession with her furniture restoration class, Cochrane writes: "It was the act of restoration above all that fascinated her: scraping and burning and sanding away layer after layer and discovering finally the wood beneath, smelling it, letting it breathe, after all those coats of paint and stain and shellac and God knows what.... Recently she had heard about dipping things ... she had even dreamed once of being dipped herself, burned pink as a newborn in a frothy cauldron and emerging clean and raw" (p. 28). How does this symbolism relate to Ellie's past and current struggles?

4. Each chapter in the book comes from a different character's point of view. How does this balance out the story? Discuss the different ways each child sees Hal.

5. Maureen claims that Hal never touched her. Do you believe this, and if not, what makes you question it? How does her attitude toward the men in her life make it easy to see why she would forgive Hal or block out the memory of his abuse?

6. At one point in the story, Ellie partially blames her mother, his sidekick, for Hal's abuse. How do Ellie's feelings for her mother change by the end of the book? How does the fire bring Phyllis and Ellie closer together?

7. Does Hal ever acknowledge the damage he's done to his family? How do you think he views himself? Do you ever feel sympathetic toward him, and if so, why?

8. How does Grace's birth change Calvin's feelings toward his father? What makes him lash out at Hal on his front steps?

9. When Phyllis gets her car washed, she imagines her [car's] undercarriage being eaten away, the metal slowly corroding, dark spots forming (p. 103). How is this a foreshadowing of the ending of the book? How do you feel about Phyllis's illness? Does she seem at peace with her life in the end?

10.. How is this a foreshadowing of the ending of the book? How do you feel about Phyllis's illness? Does she seem at peace with her life in the end? **10.** What prompts Ellie to slip the note under Hal's door? What makes her finally forgive him and how does her forgiveness free her? How does the note make Hal feel?

Author Bio

Flesh Wounds

by Mick Cochrane

Publication Date: February 1, 1999
Mass Market Paperback: 288 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0140277226
ISBN-13: 9780140277227