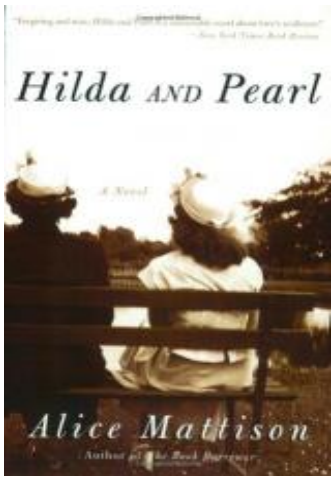
# Hilda and Pearl

by Alice Mattison




## About the Book

Frances Levenson is an only child living in McCarthy-era Brooklyn. Her mother Hilda and her aunt Pearl seem as if they have always been old friends-the closeness that joins them together seems impenetrable. In Frances's lonely world of preadolescent fears and betrayal, the trust between the two women is unquestioned.

But when she finds a pair of baby shoes hidden in her mother Hilda's bureau drawer, she begins to unravel a secret involving her parents, her aunt Pearl and her uncle Mike. The questions begin: Why did Hilda distractedly refer to a "first pregnancy" one day? Isn't Frances her only child? Whose scuffed baby shoes are they? Why do her father and uncle argue so much when he and Pearl come to visit?

In **Hilda and Pearl**, Alice Mattison creates a story that is gripping at every turn, one whose setting is so familiar that its inherent tragedy touches deeply. She tells the universal story of friendship-its hesitant beginnings, tentative advances, and disheartening setbacks-with quiet sensitivity and understanding. Both the story of a young girl confused by her changing world and the unfolding past of her mother and aunt, **Hilda and Pearl** resonates deeply, revealing in beautiful, clear language the complexities of friendship and loss.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Compare Frances and Lydia's friendship with Hilda and Pearl's. Is Frances and Lydia's relationship a typical childhood friendship? Will Frances have similar female friendships as her mother and aunt's or will the '60s and '70s have profound effects on her possibilities?

**2.** How have relationships and expectations between husbands and wives changed since the time when Hilda and Pearl took place? How are they the same?

**3.** Do you think Pearl will ever tell Simon who she thinks his real father is?

**4.** Pearl and Mike's romance is not particularly romantic. Pearl doesn't want to work at her father's candy store so she gets married instead with very little fanfare around the event. Does Pearl and Mike's future together hold any promise?

**5.** Discuss the relationships between the mothers and their children in Hilda and Pearl: Pearl and Frances, Hilda and Adam, Mrs. Levenson and her sons, and Frances's friend Lydia and her mother. How much influence do these mothers have over their children?

**6.** Frances is an observant little girl, on the cusp of adolescence. Will she ever fully understand the complicated relationships of her parents and aunt and uncle? What do you see in her future-will she become a homemaker like her mother or get caught up in the culture of the '60s and '70s?

## Author Bio

Alice Mattison grew up in Brooklyn and studied at Queens College and Harvard. Her collection of intersecting stories, *Men Giving Money, Women Yelling*, was a New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year. She is also the author of *Hilda and Pearl* and *Field of Stars*, two collections of stories, *Great Wits*< and *The Flight of Andy Burns*, and a collection of poems,*Animals*. She has been published in *The New Yorker, Glimmer Train, Southern Humanities Review, North American Review, Boulevard*, and the*Threepenny Review*. She resides in New Haven, Connecticut and teaches fiction in the Bennington Writing Seminars, a low-residency Master's program at Bennington College in Vermont. She is currently at work on her next novel as well as a new collection of short stories.

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