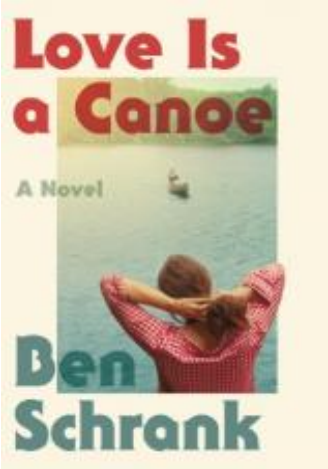
Love Is a Canoe

by Ben Schrank



About the Book

A smart, funny, tremendously satisfying novel, **Love Is a Canoe** explores the fragile nature of love and marriage through the eyes of an aging author whose 1971 book on relationships made him a beloved guru to thousands of readers. Now a widower, Peter Herman passes the time with a woman he admires but doesn?t love. Reflecting on his long but sometimes turbulent marriage, Peter begins to question the advice he has doled out over the years. Then he receives a call from an ambitious young editor at his publishing house. She wants to spark new interest in his classic book by sponsoring a contest for struggling couples. The prize? A session with Peter, who can surely keep any relationship afloat. His tale alternates with the story of Emily and Eli, Brooklynites coping with jealousy, self-doubt, and the demands of their careers. As their story lines begin to merge, the characters deliver a stirring meditation on the hopes and fears that make us human.

Discussion Guide

1. How did your impressions of Eli and Emily shift throughout the novel? How does their marriage compare with Peter and Lisa?s?

2. What does the novel say about love in the twenty-first century? Have expectations for relationships changed very much since the 1960s and ?70s?

3. How were Emily and her sister, Sherry, affected by their mother?s experience as a wife?

4. Discuss *Marriage Is a Canoe* as if you had chosen it for your book group. Is Peter?s advice relevant to your situation? What inspiration can you take from his grandparents Hank and Bess? What metaphors, besides a canoe, would you use for marriage?

5. Peter and Helena talk candidly about the illusions and untested advice contained in *Marriage Is a Canoe* . Do self-help books have to be steeped in facts and reality in order to be helpful? Was Emily harmed by the fantasy of a watertight marriage?

6. In ?Stolen Bases,? Peter tells the story of his friend Johnny, whose parents had a rough marriage but whose problems were easily sorted out by Hank. Why did Peter?s parents struggle so much in their relationship, despite the great role models of Hank and Bess?

7. What are the essential differences between Jenny and Emily? What does Eli need from each of them? Would you have stayed with Eli for as long as Emily did? Are he and Peter evidence that monogamy is unnatural, especially for men?

8. How did the success of the book help and harm Peter and Lisa?s marriage? How does Peter?s enterprise compare with Eli?s ambition for Roman Street Bicycles? How involved do spouses need to be in each other?s professional lives?

9. What kept Peter and Lisa together for so many years, despite severe disappointments, especially financial ones? How would the story of their marriage unfold if it were described from her point of view?

10. How does Belinda figure in Peter?s life? How does he see his role as a parent? When Eli and Emily considered becoming parents, what were their motivations?

11. During the contest award dinner, Peter prefers harmony and reconciliation, quashing any unpleasant topics that Eli and Emily try to raise. Does he prove to be a good counselor? What would you have discussed with him if you had won the contest?

12. Why is it hard for Peter to commit to moving west with Maddie? What was he ultimately looking for in a relationship?

13. Why is Stella so intent on pleasing Helena? What does the **Canoe** project teach Stella about business and about love? What do you predict for her future with Ivan?

14. Reread the novel?s conclusion (the introduction to the revised, annotated, and retitled edition of Peter?s book). What do you make of the statement that ?love is not so fickle and mean --- not as tough as marriage can be,? and the idea that love is distinct from marriage?

Author Bio

Ben Schrank is president and publisher of Razorbill, a Penguin imprint that is home to many award-winning and *New York Times*?bestselling books for children and young adults. Ben is also the author of the novels CONSENT and MIRACLE MAN. He wrote ?Ben?s Life,? a monthly column for *Seventeen* magazine, in the 1990s. He grew up in Brooklyn, where he lives with his wife and son. For more information, please visit the author?s website, www.benschrank.com.

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