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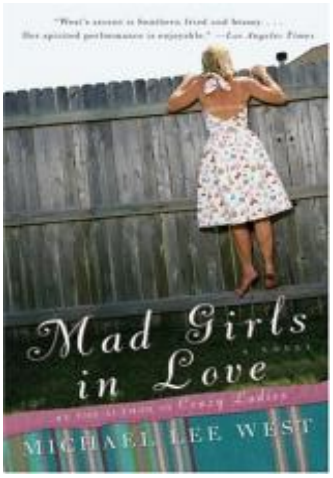
Mad Girls in Love: A Novel

by Michael Lee West



About the Book

Michael Lee West's indomitable G.R.I.T.S. (Girls Raised in the South) are back --- enduring rough times with all the grace and outrageous flair expected of true Southern heroines.

Bitsy Wentworth --- fleeing yet another relationship nightmare in a ?borrowed? red Corvette, with her baby daughter and a recently acquired ?demon child? --- has an APB out on her for attempted murder (she broke her ex-husband's nose with a frozen slab of ribs that she purchased at the Piggly Wiggly). Her mama, Dorothy, is writing letters to First Ladies from inside the Central State Asylum, while Aunt Clancy Jane has completed her inevitable progression from hippie to local Crazy Cat Lady. Three generations of unforgettable Crystal Falls, Tennessee, women -- and the men they attract, enrage, and confound -- are courageously plowing through tumultuous lives of compound disaster . . . and hoping the chaos the next wrong step leads to won't be insurmountable.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

Michael Lee West's debut novel, **Crazy Ladies**, as been called "one of the best-loved Southern novels to come along in the last twenty years." In the sequel, **Mad Girls In Love**, she's picked up the lives of the characters, adding a new, unforgettable cast: Bitsy Wentworth; her mother, Dorothy McDougal; her Aunt Clancy Jane; cousin Violet; and Bitsy's daughter, Jennifer Leigh. When the novel opens in 1972, Bitsy is a self-proclaimed "girly girl, who, over the course of the next 22 years, overcoming life's ups and downs, develops into a worldly blonde beauty. **Mad Girls in Love** is a book about the many types and degrees of love, most notably between mothers and daughters, and the art of forgiveness.

Questions for Discussion

1. Chapter One opens with 18-year old Bitsy Wentworth hitting her spoiled, wayward husband with a package of frozen baby back ribs. Then, panicking, she absconding with his Corvette, Gucci luggage, and their baby daughter. Discuss the events leading to this desperate act. How does Bitsy's age and immaturity affect her decision to run away? Discuss how these events impact the mother-daughter relationship for the next two decades. Bitsy tries to broaden her horizons by way of superficial gestures (echoing her aunt's coping mechanisms) by memorizing the dictionary, learning French, trying to mimic Julie Christie's voice, and listening to classical music. On an application to beauty school, when asked to list her hobby, Bitsy wrote "putting on make up." Discuss the arc of Bitsy's character growth. Which events served as effective catalysts for growth?

2. Throughout the novel, Bitsy's mother, Dorothy (who has spent several years in a state mental hospital), writes letters to First Ladies, among others, peppering them with advice about parenting, food preparation, and men --- not her area of expertise. Although the Presidents' wives never answer, Dorothy views the women as kindred spirits, and continues to write. Later, she sends taped messages. These missives accomplished several goals. What purpose did these letters serve for Dorothy? How did they convey current events and the passage of time? Through the letters, we come to understand how Dorothy's relationship with her mother, Miss Gussie, influenced her relationship with her daughter and sister. Discuss how the letters filled an emotional and social void, and how they acted as comic relief, as well as a coping mechanism.

3. Forgiveness is a main theme in **Mad Girls in Love**. Also explored are the limits of forgiving and forgetting. After Bitsy loses custody of her daughter, she holds herself responsible. The wealthy, alcoholic Wentworths, who are raising Jennifer Leigh, alternately spoil and neglect the child; they train her to despise her mother. Bitsy perseveres, trying to forge a relationship with her daughter. At one point, all contact is cut off, and Bitsy, at Dorothy's suggestion, begins writing letters to her daughter. All of the missives are returned. Clancy Jane buys Bitsy a rosewood box, where Bitsy stashes the letters for the next 22 years. Discuss how, over the course of the novel, Bitsy must learn to forgive herself and others. After she discovers her second husband's (Dr. Louie DeChavannes) affair, Bitsy suffers a miscarriage. On page 352 she writes a letter to Violet: "I asked the nurse for a dictionary, and I turned to the Fs and looked up the definition of forgiveness. I'd ached for it after I lost Jennifer...if I expected to be forgiven, then I must forgive." Discuss how this epiphany impacts Bitsy's further behavior. How does Bitsy show that she has become a woman capable of overlooking others; flaws? And how does she draw the line between forgiveness and becoming a doormat? itsy isn't the only character who grapples with forgiveness. It is also a major task for Dorothy, who must come to terms with her sibling rivalry. On another level, Violet walks a fine line between forgiving and forgetting-after a neglectful childhood, Violet hides in the world of academia, putting emotional and geographical distance between herself and her mother. Is she successful? Finally, does Jennifer Leigh have the capacity to forgive her mother for real and imagined crimes? How many times must one forgive a person before it becomes a negative force, undermining the spirit?

4. On page 179, Crystal Falls, Tennessee is suffering a dry spell, and Clancy Jane decides they need to do a rain dance. She organizes the women --- including Dorothy and Jennifer Leigh --- and encourages them all to imagine "watery things." As the women spin in a circle (page 181), Jennifer laughs and says, "Dance, Mama. Dance." It begins to rain, making a lasting impression on little Jennifer Leigh. This pivotal scene represents the delicate mother-daughter dance. Discuss how Jennifer remembers this dance on her wedding day and how the memory becomes a counterpoint to her damaged childhood.

5. The different types and degrees of love are woven through the novel: the love between siblings; men and women;

mothers and children --- even the love for cats. With the exception of Dorothy, all of the women seek, and expect to find, romantic love. Who succeeds? Who fails? No matter what happens, Bitsy's love for her daughter serves as a counterpoint to the Wentworths' overindulgence and neglect. Her maternal affection is unwavering despite many stumbling blocks. In another twist, Dorothy must understand and decode the patterns of maternal love, coming to understand how she'd patterned herself after her mother, Miss Gussie, who seemingly showed preferential treatment to Clancy Jane. Discuss how Dorothy's love for her son, Mack, is obsessive, and how her interference impacts his life. By the end of the novel, does she come to appreciate and admire Bitsy? Clancy Jane was a much-adored child, but she has difficulty expressing love for others. When Violet was a child, Clancy Jane neglected her; by the time Violet leaves for medical school, the self-absorbed Clancy Jane is finally hit with the realization that her nest is empty. On page 263, after she and Bitsy get Violet settled in a Memphis apartment, Clancy Jane is hit with the realization that her daughter has grown up. She says, "I'm so proud of Violet. But the bottom of my world has fallen out...she will never again live with me full time. I have lost her." Discuss how Clancy Jane fills her empty nest by collecting stray cats, ignoring the impact this behavior has on her husband, Byron. The obsessive cat collecting is contrasted when she becomes a Buddhist and empties the house of unnecessary objects. Finally, she buys a remote mountain-top house. Discuss how her superficial solutions only deepen her problems. How does her own difficult personality disrupt her marriage?

6. Another theme in the book is the danger of self-indulgence. The Wentworths are alcoholics who dress Jennifer Leigh in pint-sized Pucci dresses, and Louis Vuitton purses are used as diaper bags. Clancy Jane is a binge-drinker, refuses to serve meat to her family, and collects cats. Bitsy's second husband, Louie, is a ladies' man, and at least one incident has tragic repercussions. On page 352, in a letter to Louie, Violet wrote: "If you give into your every desire, you will be left with nothing of value." How does an abundance of self love affect Clancy Jane? How does the lack of it affect Dorothy? Discuss how over-indulgence shapes certain characters' lives.

7. Bitsy wants her second marriage to be happy, and she forgives Louie for his affair. They spend one summer in England, inviting Jennifer Leigh for what is ultimately an unpleasant visit. While her relationship with Jennifer Leigh flounders, Bitsy's resurrected marriage seems almost perfect. She gains sophistication and polish, along with a burgeoning career as an interior designer. She acquires much needed self confidence. When she discovers that Louie has been unfaithful again, she refuses to be shattered. In contrast to the book's opening, hitting her unfaithful husband with baby back ribs, she spews champagne over the lovers. Then, later in the book, she leaves Louie and New Orleans, taking only her box of letters and a Spode teacup. Contrast this scene with the earlier scene when she leaves Claude. Discuss how she builds a new life in London as a designer and finds true love with a much younger man, Ian Maitland. She also continues to grow into a interesting, non judgmental woman. On page 443, she says, "I spent my days selecting fabric, color, and textures...it seemed to me that objects seldom brought peace of mind, but I kept my opinions to myself. It wasn't my place to define another person's happiness." Compare this with the Wentworths, who define their lives with brand names?Gucci, Chanel, Manolo Blanick?imprinting this lesson onto Jennifer Leigh.

8. Popular song titles appear through out the novel. Much of the music helps place the time frame, but the titles also center around love and/or insanity. For example, "*Silver Springs*" is about parents and children growing older (and also men and women), and being faced with insurmountable obstacles. Sometimes the songs' act as a code, shedding hidden meaning and insight into the characters and their situations. Other examples to discuss are: "*One Less Bell to Answer*," "*Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes*," "*She Moves Through the Fair*," "*Crazy Love*," and "*Time Is On My Side*."

9. Dorothy dreams about a day in 1938, when she went shopping with her mother, Miss Gussie. It was only days before

Clancy Jane was born. They step into a jewelry shop, and Dorothy accidentally breaks a Spode cup and saucer. To Dorothy's horror, Miss Gussie buys the broken cup, along with several new one. How does the child Dorothy misunderstand this gesture? Dorothy awakens, then finds the old cup and mails it to her daughter. How does this link three generations of mothers and daughters? Does this dream act as a catalyst for Dorothy to forgive her mother?

10. "Letters from Home" begin on page 402. In addition to Louie's letters, many of the missives show Jennifer Leigh growing up in a troubled home; other letters were obviously written by Jennifer and mailed to Dorothy, who periodically sent bundles of letters to Bitsy for safekeeping in the rosewood box. After seeing the movie "Valley Girl," Jennifer Leigh instructs her mother to call her "Jen." Her vocabulary changes. She ends up with a drinking problem and accidentally runs over an old man. How do these letters contract to Dorothy's? While standing in the airport, preparing to leave for Europe, how do the Wentworths react when the clerk explains that Jennifer's passport has expired? Discuss the impact of a child growing up in an alcoholic home. Jennifer seems to have everything a girl could want --- a BMW, designer clothes, fabulous job. How did the early loss of her mother shape her character? How did the selfishness of the Wentworths impact Jennifer?

11. Each time Bitsy is about to experience character growth, something breaks or shatters. For example, in Chapter 1, during her struggle with Claude, a Fostoria goblet is smashed. Also, Claude's nose is broken. When she discovers Louie's infidelity, a crystal ice bucket breaks. Discuss how this symbolism heralds important changes in her life, and in the lives of her family. While you read the novel, how many broken/damaged objects did you find, and did they correlate to an important milestone?

12. Over the years, Bitsy has saved her letters to Jennifer Leigh. Those letters, along with her prized Spode teacup, travel with her. For a wedding present, Bitsy buys Jennifer and Pierre a china tureen and fills it with the letters. On page 522, when Jennifer is walking down the aisle with her father, she thinks about the letters: "Taking another step forward, Jennifer glanced furtively at her mother, thinking that grace and good looks were inherited. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd misjudged the woman. Lat night she had found [her mother's] letters stuffed in the Fitz & Floyd tureen, and she'd stayed up past midnight reading them." Project into the future. Do you think the letters will serve as a healing force between this mother and daughter? How do these letterscontrast to Dorothy's comical missives to the First Ladies?

13. Many of the romantic relationships fare badly. Clancy Jane falls in love with a fireman, Tucker O'Brian, who helps her come to terms with her Zen decorating and cat collecting. After he dies on a boating holiday, she must learn to live alone and love herself. Violet finds her true soulmate in George Atherton and appears to have a stable, thriving relationship. If she had stayed in Crystal Falls, would she have grown? Discuss Violet's belief that she had to transcend her childhood in order to find herself. Bitsy finds love in an unexpected place?and with a much younger man. Both Ian and George seem to be "nurturing" men. Why would Bitsy and Violet be attracted to men who act motherly?

14. The novel ends with Jennifer Leigh's wedding smashed. Not only is it raining, the caterer delivered her ice sculpture --- which was supposed to be a giant heart --- to a reception for a naturalist who specialized in squirrel photography. A ice chipmunk was delivered to Jennifer's wedding. When her groom, Pierre, proves to be a cad, she pushes him into a fountain. Then she dances in the rain with her mother and makes a silent wish: "Let me be just like this woman." How does this bode for the future? Looking back over the novel, has Jennifer Leigh shown any possibility for redemption? Does she possess her mother's capacity for forgiveness? Looking ahead to the future, will Bitsy and Jennifer Leigh have a strong mother daughter relationship?

Author Bio

Michael Lee West is the author of six novels, including CRAZY LADIES, MAD GIRLS IN LOVE, AMERICAN PIE and SHE FLEW THE COOP, as well as a food memoir, CONSUMING PASSIONS. She lives with her husband on a farm in Lebanon, Tennessee, with three bratty Yorkshire Terriers, a Chinese crested, assorted donkeys, chickens, sheep, and African Pygmy goats. Her faithful dog Zap was the inspiration of a character in MERMAIDS IN THE BASEMENT.

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