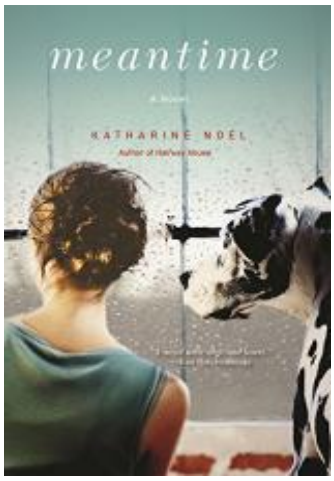
Meantime

by Katharine Noel



About the Book

Katharine Noel --- the award-winning, critically acclaimed author of HALFWAY-HOUSE --- returns with a wise and moving second novel about the bond between two sisters whose stable lives are suddenly uprooted.

Claire Hood has never had a typical upbringing. When she was nine, her father fell in love with a married woman, and the two households agreed to live under one roof. Nicknamed ?the Naked Family,? they were infamous in the community for their eccentric, free-spirited lifestyle. Now, Claire and her stepsister Nicole are both in their 30s and living in San Francisco. Nicole has set her mind to having a baby on her own, and Claire?s husband, Jeremy, longs to start a family as well. But Claire wants to avoid an ordinary existence at all costs.

When Jeremy becomes seriously ill, his high school sweetheart, Gita, is a bit too eager to lend a hand in his recovery. As Claire?s suspicion of their relationship grows, she feels increasingly distant not only from the people she loves, but also from the kind of person she'd imagined herself to be. Faced with Nicole?s impending motherhood and Jeremy?s increasing closeness with his ex, Claire must resolve lingering childhood hang-ups and decide what she?s willing to sacrifice for independence.

MEANTIME is a heartfelt, insightful story of how individuals shape and reshape their families while discovering their truest sense of self. With humanity, grace and humor, Katharine Noel examines the complex, delicate connections between spouses, siblings, parents and children.

Discussion Guide

Questions and Topics for Discussion:

1. Noel writes about the shadows cast by the past in the present, and the ways in which people are shaped by their

childhoods. Begin your discussion by talking about the importance of the opening scene between Claire and Nicole. How did it set the tone for the rest of the story? Were you surprised to find that Claire and Nicole had grown close? Or did you recognize the scene as a defining moment in their relationship?

2. The main plot charts the gradual disintegration of Claire?s marriage, and yet the novel is much more multifaceted than that. Discuss the many themes and concerns at its core, such as sisterhood, motherhood, adulthood and independence. Find examples throughout the story that speak to each theme, and identify additional central concerns.

3. ?Over my second Scotch, I found myself?playing up the eccentricity of my life in a fake-bored way I?d mostly outgrown?. I felt that old pleasure of watching a version of myself come clear, like a photograph surfacing through the wash: brave and offhand, ironic and intimidating? (p. 37). Talk about how Claire?s ?Naked Family? childhood affected her, and the strategies she used to survive. Do you think coping mechanisms eventually become a significant part of who you are, deeply rooted in your personality?

4. Claire has spent much of her life watching, keenly observant and self-aware, learning from what she sees to develop her identity and her perception of others. What is her ultimate ideal for herself? Does she ever realize this? How does her self-perception change over the course of the novel?

5. Discuss the ways that Claire?s work as a furniture restorer defines her. What does it reveal about her personality? Consider this statement: ?You can?t just patch unsound furniture; you have to rebuild from scratch.? Could this philosophy also describe her approach to the people and relationships in her life?

6. ?Sometimes it wasn?t clear where I left off and Jeremy began? (p. 101). In light of this statement, consider Claire and Jeremy?s relationship. What draws them to each other? Are there any indications that their marriage will fail? How well do you feel you know Jeremy? Everything we learn about him is filtered through Claire?s eyes. Is there, perhaps, another version of Jeremy?

7. Consider the reasons why Nicole?s resolve to have a baby intensifies every time one of her relationships ends. What do you think she hopes for? How would a baby fulfill that desire? Compare her needs with Claire?s reluctance to have children.

8. Discuss the ways that San Francisco, especially The Mission, reflects Claire?s personality. Find examples of how the weather and the light parallel her mood.

9. Jeremy?s brush with death becomes the catalyst for the marriage?s breakdown. Examine Claire?s response to his illness and recovery. What does the incident reveal about Jeremy?s needs and desires? What do you think Jeremy wants most from the relationship?

10. Think about Gita and the role she plays in the narrative. What does she represent to Jeremy? To Claire? How are Claire and Gita similar, and how are they different?

11. Claire constantly pretends that nothing bothers her. Find examples of this emotional detachment throughout the story. Does it help her or harm her? Identify the moments when she begins to realize the futility of indifference.

12. As the marriage starts to crumble, Claire loses the sense of self that she has carefully constructed over the years. ?I found myself looking at my clothes every time I needed steadying: yes, *this* is who I am? (p. 129). Do you feel that she?s gradually able to let go of the past and forge an independent identity?

13. ?It seemed suddenly like the grain of sand marriage formed around wasn?t the big life decisions but instead the petty details that consumed one?s time? (p. 171). Discuss what this epiphany means to Claire, and whether or not you agree, in terms of her marriage, and marriage in general.

14. ?Once a relationship started to slip there was only one way it could go? (p. 130). Identify some moments in Claire?s youth that might have led her to make this statement.

15. Why do you think that Jeremy leaves Claire for Gita? Will he and Gita will be happy together?

16. Do you believe Jeremy when he claims that the end of his relationship with Claire is not caused by Gita?

17. Consider the role of communication and miscommunication in the novel, the ways in which one wrong word can make an irreversible impact. Reread the shower scene (pgs. 189-192) and discuss the disconnect between what Claire wants to say and what she actually says.

18. ?The purity of the pain on her face shocked me. Here it was at last, naked between us. We weren?t friends. Or no, weirdly, we were- --- at that moment, maybe we were more aligned than ever? (p. 197). What does Claire mean by this?

19. Revisit the moment when Claire abandons Nicole at the hospital. Do you think her leaving was a choice? Or was it involuntary, out of panic? How did you feel about Claire?s behavior? Were you able to accept it, or did you condemn it?

20. ?I knew she was crying because she had to forgive me anyway,? Claire thinks as she visits Nicole and baby Alice. Examine the parallels between Claire?s relationship with Jeremy and her relationship with Nicole. Does her ability to apologize to Nicole indicate that some emotional growth has occurred?

21. Think about this quote and discuss how it could apply to Claire, Nicole and Jeremy: ?I?ve been wondering if maybe everyone wants to be complicated, but wants everyone else to be simple? (p. 258).

22. At the end, Claire is living with Nicole, helping to raise her child. Consider how much she has changed over the course of the novel, and chart her process of self-discovery. How do you envision Claire?s future?

Further Reading:

Ian McEwan, ON CHESIL BEACH; Rachel Cusk, AFTERMATH; Elizabeth Berg, OPEN HOUSE; Jane Smiley, ORDINARY LOVE AND GOOD WILL; James Salter, LIGHT YEARS; Iris Murdoch, THE NICE AND THE GOOD

Author Bio

Katharine Noel teaches at Johns Hopkins University. Her first novel, HALFWAY HOUSE, was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice and winner of the Kate Chopin Writing Award as well as the Ken/NAMI Award. Her writing has won grants from the Rona Jaffe, Henfield-Transatlantic, and Barbara Deming foundations, and she was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Critical Praise

"An unflinching autopsy of the heart, laying bare the raw emotions that push us to reconfigure, again and again, our senses of family.?

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