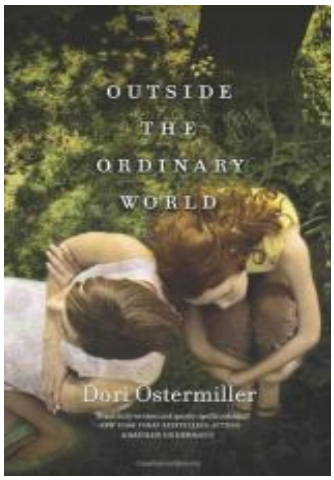
Outside the Ordinary World

by Dori Ostermiller



About the Book

Sylvia Sandon always swore she wouldn't become her mother. But one August morning, she finds herself walking the same prodigal path as the fervently religious yet faithless Elaine?into an affair she feels powerless to resist.

Against the backdrop of California brushfires and fundamentalist Christian mores, 12-year-old Sylvia agreed to hold a secret that would devour her family's dream of happiness. She fled her home as the 1970s burned out. Now struggling to create a better life in small town New England, Sylvia nonetheless feels caught in the coils of history: she confronts the embers of own her dying marriage, the all-consuming needs of two daughters and her faltering artistic career. Then Tai Rosen --- the father of her most difficult student --- ignites an unexpected passion and a familiar betrayal that could illuminate the past, even as it jeopardizes everything dear.

Outside the Ordinary World reveals what lies beneath the surface of infidelity. But at its heart, it is the story of the powerful, sometimes disturbing bond between mothers and daughters, and the shimmering line between self-revelation and self-destruction.

Discussion Guide

1. As a child, Sylvia describes her mother as ?perfect,? the kind of mother who took them to the fabric stores on Tuesdays, ?wallpapered the insides of her silverware drawers,? put her husband through school, and kept her family together. Yet she?s also harboring a destructive secret. Discuss whether Elaine is a ?good mother,? using evidence from the book. What is the possible relationship between Elaine?s ?goodness? and her secret life?

2. Sylvia?s father is an ambitious man who drinks too much and is prone to violence. Yet he can also be tender, fun and insightful. To what extent do you think Don?s behavior is an expression of his character, and to what extent exacerbated by his feeling rejected? Might this character have transformed, if Elaine had fully embraced him, or was the marriage

?doomed from the start??

3. The Seventh-day Adventist church, with its pervasive imagery of the second coming, plays a role in this story and in Sylvia?s consciousness as a child. In what ways do you think faith informs this story? How does Sylvia?s relationship to faith change throughout the course of the book?

4. When Sylvia meets Tai, she feels as if a door has opened and she ?has not walked, but fallen through.? Throughout her affair, she continues to experience this sensation of being drawn by a force larger than gravity?Do you think Sylvia ?needed? to repeat her mother?s experience? Why or why not? What unresolved issues from Sylvie?s marriage contributed to her having this affair, and which from her past?

5. California during the 1970s figures large in Sylvia?s childhood, captured in details like the Watergate hearings, California brush fires, Patty Hearst, Helen Reddy, Santa Ana winds, The Joy of Sex...How important do you think setting details are in the story? What might the author have been trying to convey by setting the story in this time and place?

6. Houses also play an integral role in the story. Elaine and Don?s marriage unravels in their new house. Sylvia and Nathan?s union is overwhelmed by the renovation of an antique farmhouse, which was the scene of another family?s dissolution, years before. And Orchard Hill, Sylvie?s grandparents? house, is a kind of outdated Eden, ?safe from the transience and bustle of ordinary time.? The final image in the book is of Sylvie and Nathan?s house, blazing with the light of their recent argument. Discuss the symbolism of houses in this story.

7. Mr. Robert is the archetypal visitor --- the intruder whose appearance disrupts the stream of ordinary life. He offers laughter and love, promises to fulfill everyone?s dreams. Yet his presence, unwitting or not, triggers catastrophe. Is Mr. Robert savior, or captor?

8. Tai is a landscape architect who builds labyrinths. Although Sylvia is powerfully drawn to the labyrinth in his backyard, she never actually walks it. Why do you think the author made this choice?

9. After Sylvie and Tai make love for the last time, she experiences a series of ?letting go? moments: in the therapist?s office with Hannah, at her grandmother?s funeral, when she visits her father?s grave, and finally, on the lakeshore looking for Emmy, when she believes she has lost everything. At what point do you as a reader really believe she has surrendered to the life she has? At what point do you experience any hope for Sylvia?s and Nathan?s marriage?

10. What does the title, Outside the Ordinary World, mean to you? How do you think it relates to each of the main characters?

11. Throughout the story, Sylvie struggles toward and against the intimate bond she shares with her mother. In what ways has this intimacy helped or harmed Sylvia? In what ways has it influenced her own mothering? How has this mother/daughter relationship transformed by the end of this story?

12. The legacy of abuse and betrayal is often passed down from one generation to the next. Knowing this, what chances do you think Hannah and Emmie have of breaking the cycle in their own adult relationships?

Author Bio

Dori Ostermiller left her native California at 24 to complete an MFA in writing at the University of Massachusetts. She is the recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist?s Grant, and the founder and director of Writers in Progress, a literary arts center in the Pioneer Valley of western MA. She currently lives with her husband and daughters in Northampton, where she is at work on her second novel. Visit her at www.DoriOstermiller.com

---

Outside the Ordinary World

by Dori Ostermiller

Publication Date: July 27, 2010
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 400 pages
Publisher: Mira
ISBN-10: 0778328899
ISBN-13: 9780778328896