Oxford Messed Up

by Andrea Kayne Kaufman



About the Book

Rhodes Scholar Gloria Zimmerman has come to Oxford University to study feminist poetry. Yet the rigors of academia pale in comparison to her untreated Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, fueled by her overachieving parents and manifested in a deathly aversion to germs and human contact. Her next-door neighbor (who is also, to her mortification, her roommate) is Henry Young, the appealing but underachieving English music student. Still mourning the death of his supportive mother while enduring the mockery of his disapproving and merciless father, Henry is haunted by the unexpectedly serious ramifications of a reckless and tragic youth. Gloria and Henry's relationship evolves from a shared obsession with Van Morrison's music into a desire to fill the gaps in each other?s lives. Yet the constraints of a debilitating illness and the looming revelation of a catastrophic secret conspire to throw their worlds into upheaval and threaten the possibilities of their unlikely yet redemptive love.

Discussion Guide

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

1. Why do you think the author titled the book OXFORD MESSED UP? What are the different ways the phrase "messed up" is used in the book? What are the implications of its various uses? Can being "messed up" be a good thing?

2. Do you see this as a traditional love story? How is the book similar to and different from other novels with romantic plotlines you have read in the past, and how do these differences or similarities affect the general themes of romantic love in this work?

3. How do Van Morrison and his music affect and inform Gloria and Henry and the other characters in the novel? Why does the author use Van Morrison music as the link between these two isolated souls?

4. How do Gloria's dead women poets and the other poets referenced affect and inform the characters in the novel? How is poetry a language for both isolation and connection?

5. Why does the author set so many of the novel's high and low points in the claw-foot tub? What is its symbolism for Gloria, Henry, and their relationship?

6. OCD's internal struggle is not usually portrayed in mainstream media. How did this book inform your knowledge of OCD? Did you have any misconceptions about OCD before reading it? How do you feel now? What has changed and why?

7. Gloria describes Oliver as both a protector and jailer. What did you think of him? Did your feelings for him evolve as you read? Has there been something in your life that gave you security but was not good for you? Were you able to let it go?

8. Would this story have been different if told in the first person? How would it change if told from Gloria's point of view or Henry's? As it exists now, what devices does the author implement to place the reader inside the minds of Gloria and Henry?

9. When Gloria asks Henry whether he believes in happy endings, he replies, "In theory." But by the end of the novel, he seems to be converted. When does this transformation occur? Does Gloria undergo a similar metamorphosis? Do you think OXFORD MESSED UP has a happy ending? Do you believe in happy endings?

Author Bio

As both an educator and attorney, Andrea Kayne Kaufman has worked closely on issues relating to Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Kaufman is currently the chair of the Department of Leadership, Language and Curriculum at the DePaul University College of Education in Chicago. She earned a bachelor's degree from Vassar College, a master's degree in Education from Harvard University, and a Juris Doctor from the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

She lives with her husband and two children in Chicago.

Critical Praise

"In her first novel, Andrea Kayne Kaufman asks whether each of us, messed up in our own way, can choose to embrace happiness."

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