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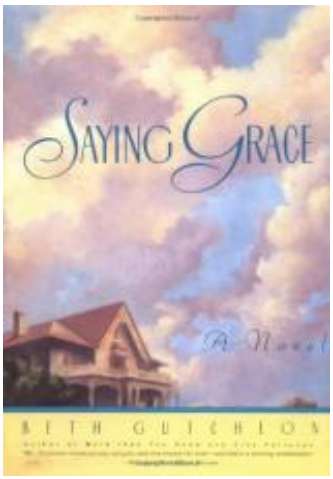
Saying Grace

by Beth Gutcheon



About the Book

Saying Grace is set in the close-knit community of a country day school on California's gold coast. It has been shaped and nourished for almost two decades by the headmistress, Rue Shaw, a woman of extraordinary character, quiet dignity, and steely resolve. A passionate educator, a devoted wife, and a loving mother of a daughter on the brink of adulthood, Rue seems to be reaping the benefits of a life lived properly and wisely. Then unexpected changes creep into Rue's carefully composed professional and personal shelters. At school, a question of whether a fifth-grader is being abused at home sets off a clash of values and cultures that profoundly shakes the entire community. At home, a chilling tragedy and an unsettling secret threaten to derail Rue's pattern of perseverance.

Saying Grace is about the fragility of happiness and the strength of convictions, about keeping faith and adhering to principles whether it keeps one safe or not. It is about the comfort of the familiar, and the charm of a special community guided by integrity and common sense and shaken by inevitable human failing.

Discussion Guide

1. When Bonnie describes to Rue the Zoroastrian system for recognizing personality types, she defines a "helper" as a person so focused on being Good that she doesn't see the big picture. Is this true of Rue? If so, how?

2. One of the most prominent conflicts in this novel involves the clash of values represented by Rue Shaw and Chandler Kip. What are those values and do you believe that they are irreconcilable? Do you think that Rue was politically savvy in dealing with Chandler?

3.In Saying Grace, the purpose of education is a subject of continuous debate. For Chandler, the mission of education is to equip a person to compete and win. How would you define Rue's beliefs? Whose arguments do you feel are more compelling? How does the world of this school resemble current political thinking in the world at large?

4. Catherine Trainer is a perpetually vulnerable character and important catalyst to the major events in this story. Is she a comic figure or a tragic one? If she had behaved differently, would the story have had a different ending?

5. Hints about Henry's relationship with Emily percolate in the course of this story. Do you think Rue's reaction to it shows strength or weakness? Do you feel Henry deserves blame or sympathy?

6.At Chandler Kip's Christmas party Rue talks about the "spiritual gestation" each person undergoes. Why did Chandler's mother find Rue's statement so offensive?

7. Henry and Rue have different views about the meaning and purpose of work in their individual lives. While Henry had chosen a traditional high-stress high-income career path, Rue chose to be an educator, an altruistic occupation compared to one of the more highly paid professions that the Chandler Kips of the world find impressive. Do you feel that Henry is disillusioned, at mid-life, about the beliefs and expectations he had when he was younger? What about Rue? How does it make you feel about the career choices you've made and where they have brought you?

Author Bio

Beth Gutcheon is the critically acclaimed author of the novels THE NEW GIRLS, STILL MISSING, DOMESTIC PLEASURES, SAYING GRACE, FIVE FORTUNES, MORE THAN YOU KNOW, LEEWAY COTTAGE, GOOD-BYE AND AMEN, GOSSIP, DEATH AT BREAKFAST and THE AFFLICTION. She is the writer of several film scripts, including the Academy-Award nominee *The Children of Theatre Street*. She lives in New York City.

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