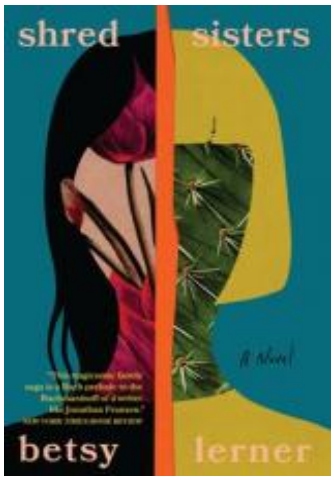
Shred Sisters

by Betsy Lerner



About the Book

From Betsy Lerner, the celebrated author of THE BRIDGE LADIES, comes a wry and riveting debut novel about family, mental illness and a hard-won path between two sisters.

It is said that when one person in a family is unstable, the whole family is destabilized. Meet the Shreds. Olivia is the sister in the spotlight until her stunning confidence becomes erratic and unpredictable, a hurricane leaving people wrecked in her wake. Younger sister Amy, cautious and studious to the core, believes in facts, proof and the empirical world. None of that explains what?s happening to Ollie, whose physical beauty and charisma mask the mental illness that will shatter Amy?s carefully constructed life.

As Amy comes of age and seeks to find her place --- first in academics, then New York publishing, and through a series of troubled relationships --- every step brings collisions with Ollie, who slips in and out of the Shred family without warning. Yet for all that threatens their sibling bond, Amy and Ollie cannot escape or deny the inextricable sister knot that binds them.

Spanning two decades, SHRED SISTERS is an intimate and bittersweet story exploring the fierce complexities of sisterhood, mental health, loss and love. If anything is true, it?s what Amy learns on her road to self-acceptance: *No one will love you more or hurt you more than a sister.*

Discussion Guide

1. SHRED SISTERS opens with three options for how Amy might begin her narrative: ?Here are the ways I could start this story: Olivia was breathtaking. For a long time, I was convinced that she was responsible for everything that went wrong. No one will love you more or hurt you more than a sister.? How do you see those three different versions playing out in the novel? Did one interest you more than the others? Why?

2. Ollie struggles to feel remorse for her actions, whereas Amy feels a tremendous amount of responsibility for both her own and Ollie?s. Is Amy?s sense of responsibility for the world around her disproportionate? How do you see that responsibility changing over time, especially as her relationship with Ollie evolves?

3. As the novel progresses, Amy recognizes herself in her mother?s solitude and sense of abandonment. She sees a parallel connection between Ollie and her father; at one point, she describes them as ?both playing a part: a father-daughter duo on the lam, conning judges, law enforcement, psychiatrists, themselves? (93-94). Do you agree with this pairing between Amy and her mother and Ollie and her father? Why or why not?

4. When Ollie is at The Place, Amy writes her a note, ?*Come home*,? that she crosses out and revises: ?*This sucks*? (56). Ollie calls Amy crying and says that she?s the only one being honest about the situation. What is everyone else?s narrative of Ollie?s time in The Place? What is the role of denial in the Shred Family and society at large when it comes to mental health?

5. Part II --- in which Amy meets Josh, marries Marc, gets a successful career in publishing, and befriends Courtney --- is called ?The Almost Time,? referring to Amy?s mother?s favorite time of day (79). Revisit the passage in which Amy describes the almost time. Does the idea of the almost time resonate with you? Why or why not?

6. In what ways does Josh resemble Ollie? What do you think draws Amy to him? What does he give her, and why does she keep showing up for him?

7. Ollie?s main criticism of Amy is her predictability, but as the book progresses, Amy does increasingly unpredictable things, especially in her relationship with men (the kiss with Josh on the eve of her wedding, her affair with TJ). Did you agree with Ollie?s diagnosis of Amy as predictable? How did you interpret Amy?s moments of unpredictability? What do you think drives them?

8. Some of the starkest moments of Ollie?s mistreatment of Amy are only referenced briefly and very late in the novel. For instance, when Ollie lashes out after Amy suggests medication, the language shifts to memories: ?*Ollie straddling me, threatening to punch me in the face, pouring broth in my bed*? (193). Why do you think Amy withholds these violent details in an otherwise meticulous account of Ollie?s life? How did these revelations change your feelings towards both Ollie and Amy?

9. TJ, the psychologist who Amy catapults into literary fame, studies the empathy response. Consider empathy as a larger theme in the novel. Where do you see it showing up? What do you think Betsy Lerner is trying to say about empathy?

10. When Courtney and Amy?s friendship falls apart, Amy writes, ?On some level, I had always been poised for this moment; Ollie was my first and best teacher in the art of betrayal? (196). How does this anticipation of betrayal affect Amy?s relationships throughout the novel?

11. Before turning to publishing, Amy studied the ?fight, flight, or freeze? phenomenon in mice. Where do you see Amy ?freezing? in response to trauma or threats, either emotional or physical?

12. Amy repeatedly tries to force her parents to hold Ollie accountable for her actions, but she also begs Hunt to forgive Ollie for similar transgressions. As you read, did you struggle with how to feel about Ollie? Did you ever want Amy to be more forgiving of her --- or less?

13. During her senior year of high school, Ollie has ?Live free or die? tattooed on her arm (28). This idea resurfaces while Ollie is giving birth (243). What is Ollie?s idea of freedom, and how does Amy view that outlook?

14. When Amy marries Marc, she says, ?I wanted to believe that I had been rewarded for being good. That my stupid solitary life had been a mistake, that my real life was starting now? (172). In the novel, do you think people are rewarded for being good? Why do you think Amy wants that to be the case? By the end of the book, does she still believe that?

15. At the end of the novel, on Kira?s wedding day, she tells Amy that her therapist?s advice was to forgive herself (263). What does Amy need to forgive herself for? What is preventing her from doing so?

16. Amy and Ollie?s last name, Shred, feels increasingly symbolic as the novel develops. How do you feel the last name speaks to the themes of the book? At the end of the novel, how would you describe the state of Ollie and Amy?s relationship? What do you think will happen between them next?

17. Consider the depiction of mental illness in the book and the big questions raised over the course of the novel. How do you care for a family member who does not want treatment or denies any illness? Are we our sister?s keeper? How would you say SHRED SISTERS answers these questions?

Written by Gwyneth Henke

Author Bio

Betsy Lerner is the author of the popular advice book to writers, THE FOREST FOR THE TREES, and the memoirs FOOD AND LOATHING and THE BRIDGE LADIES. She received an MFA from Columbia University in Poetry. A publishing professional for over 30 years, Lerner is a literary agent in New York. SHRED SISTERS is her first novel.

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