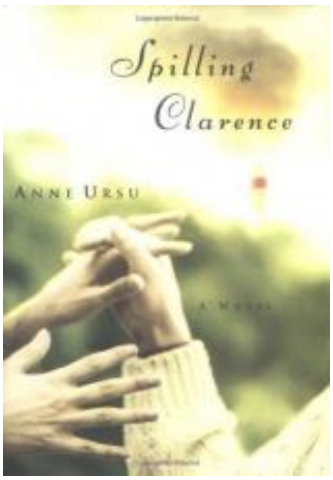
Spilling Clarence: A Novel

by Anne Ursu



About the Book

What if you could suddenly remember everything that ever happened in your life? Would it be a blessing -- or a curse?

The answer is found in **Spilling Clarence** , a satisfying, witty, romantic, and tender novel. In the fictional town of Clarence, Minnesota, a breakroom microwave sparks a smoky fire at the pharmaceutical factory and triggers a massive chemical spill. Panic-stricken and paralyzed, the townspeople wait until the all-clear signal to assure them everything?s back to normal. Except that it isn?t. Over the coming days, the citizens of Clarence fall under the spell of a strange and powerful drug that unlocks their memories. They become trapped by their own reminiscences: of love and death, of war and childhood, of family they?ve lost and sins they?ve committed.

Beautifully rendered with a light comic touch, this bittersweet first novel is about more than the sum of its beguiling parts. It?s about the need to remember, and about the bliss of forgetting. A universe peopled by exquisitely drawn characters, **Spilling Clarence** is a funny, moving story with a truly original premise that introduces the impressive talents of an exciting new writer.

Discussion Guide

1. The people in the novel are affected by the deletrium in different ways. Age is a big factor in their reactions; how do children, adults, and the elderly react differently and why?

2. What do you think the point of the Davis and Dean Bookstore is? How does it function in the story? Is there any thematic relationship between the presence of a chain bookstore and a story about memory?

3. What is the role of humor in the novel?

4. There are lot of minor characters whose stories are touched on in the novel (the manager, Lorna Hansen, Lilith, Ms. Plum). What do they add to the novel?

5. What do you think the function is of the scenes with the school-age children?

6. There are a number of points in the novel where the narrator breaks into the story and makes comments and addresses the reader. Why do you think the author chose that device?

7. Many novels consider the relationship between past and present. How is this novel different?

8. Before the chemical spill, how did the characters deal and not deal with their pasts? How did their pasts affect their choices?

9. In his lecture on memory, Bennie says that forgetting may be biologically positive. Do you think that?s true? Does the novel prove his point or not?

10. When Bennie sees Phil crying in his office, he thinks, "Our friendship does not encompass moments like these." What is the nature of their friendship? Phil is Bennie?s only real friend in Clarence -- why do you think that is? Why does Bennie let himself have a friend at all?

11. What is the effect of the glimpses of Susannah?s favorite television show, *Innocence Falls*?

12. What attracts Susannah and Madeline to each other initially? What draws them so close after the spill?

13. Why does Susannah move to Sunny Shadows? What is she running away from and what is she running toward?

14. What assumptions about memory does Todd make with his memory game? What leads him ultimately to destroy it?

15. Near the end of the novel, Sophie tells her father, "I?m just a kid." Why does she feel compelled to say this?

16. Some readers have said they want to see Susannah and Bennie fall in love at the end of the book. What would that do to the story? Would you find that satisfying? Why do you think they do not?

17. What do you think Calvin toasts to in the very last paragraph of the book?

18. What does the book have to say about regret? How does regret influence the lives of each character?

19. What do you think the author is saying about the nature and function of memory?

20. What do you think would have happened to these characters without the deletrium spill? Are the residents of Clarence better off after the spill? How do you think having these memories helped or hurt each character?

21. What do you think of the choices Susannah and Bennie make at the end of the book? Given their pasts, how does each character seek fulfillment, and what are the sacrifices they make?

Author Bio

Anne Ursu was voted "Best Customer Service" by her bookstore peers in 1996. She took a break from retail the following year to write on theater for the *City Pages* in Minneapolis and the *Portland Phoenix* in Maine. Her fictionalized account of The Clarence Spill has just been published by Hyperion Books -- names have been changed to protect the innocent. When she's not working on her next novel, she reviews local theater for the *Clarence Chronicle* and uses her customer service skills to great effect at the Davis & Dean Information Desk. Sometimes she shelves calendars, too.

Critical Praise

"...Ursu is a writer who cares deeply about her characters, and her descriptions of professor Bennie Singer's haunting flashbacks of his wife's fatal car accident and his tender interactions with his daughter, Sophie, are very moving."

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