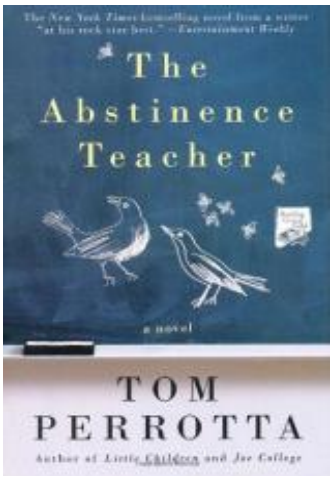
# The Abstinence Teacher

by Tom Perrotta




## About the Book

Stonewood Heights is the perfect place to raise kids. It?s got the proverbial good schools, solid values and a healthy real estate market. It?s the kind of place where parents are involved in their children?s lives, where no opportunity for enrichment goes unexplored.

Ruth Ramsey is the human sexuality teacher at the local high school. She believes that ?pleasure is good, shame is bad, and knowledge is power.? Ruth?s younger daughter?s soccer coach is Tim Mason, a former stoner and rocker whose response to hitting rock bottom was to reach out and be saved. Tim belongs to The Tabernacle, an evangelical Christian church that doesn?t approve of Ruth?s style of teaching. And Ruth in turn doesn?t applaud The Tabernacle?s mission to take its message outside its doors. Adversaries in a small-town culture war, Ruth and Tim instinctively mistrust each other. But when a controversy on the soccer field pushes the two of them to actually talk to each other, they are forced to take each other at something other than face value.

**The Abstinence Teacher** exposes the powerful emotions that run beneath the surface of modern American family life and explores the complex spiritual and sexual lives of ordinary people. Elegantly written, it is characterized by the distinctive mix of satire and compassion that have animated Perrotta?s previous novels.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** There are numerous references to Ruth and Tim?s past sexual experiences scattered throughout the novel. How do these anecdotes color the debate about sex education at the center of the narrative?

**2.** Is Ruth the victim of a witch hunt, or a teacher who went too far and deserved to be reined in by her community?

**3.** Is Tim Mason?s faith genuine? Or is it, as his mother suggests, a crutch, something temporary that he needed to fight

his addictions? What remains of his faith at the end of the novel?

**4.** Is Ruth right to be upset when Tim asks the girls to pray after the soccer game? How is this different from Ruth teaching sexuality in a way that some Christian parents might find offensive?

**5.** In order to keep her job, Ruth is forced to teach a curriculum she does not believe in. Discuss a time when you felt you had to sacrifice your beliefs or principles.

**6.** Ruth doesn?t challenge her daughter Eliza or hold back her permission when she wants to go to church with her friend from school. Can you think of other examples in THE ABSTINENCE TEACHER when a character restrains him or herself from something they are very tempted to do?

**7.** Can you think of something Ruth?s daughters might want to do that would horrify Ruth even more than organized church-going?

**8.** What do you make of the Abstinence Refresher course taught by JoAnn? Do stories of sexual regret reinforce the idea that young people should refrain from sex until marriage? Or do they simply remind us that making mistakes?both sexual and otherwise?is an essential part of growing up?

**9.** Both Ruth and Tim struggle with inner conflicts that make it difficult for them to fulfill their public roles. How does this influence their encounters? Do you think there?s any future for them as a couple?

**10.** If Ruth, Tim and their families lived in a 1950?s version of Stonewood Heights, how would their stories play out differently? What about a 1970?s version?

**11.** How do you think private beliefs can best be balanced with public interests like education? Who should have a say in how a community?s children are taught? What happens when the community is bitterly divided?

**12.** Did you feel differently about Evangelical Christianity after reading THE ABSTINENCE TEACHER? Why?

**13.** Despite some studies questioning their effectiveness, abstinence programs continue to be implemented. Why do you think that is?

**14.** Ruth Ramsay is both a parent and a teacher in the public school system of Stonewood Heights. Do you think her own experience as a parent makes her a better human sexuality teacher?

## Author Bio

Tom Perrotta is the author of 11 works of fiction, including ELECTION and LITTLE CHILDREN, both of which were made into Oscar-nominated films, and THE LEFTOVERS and MRS. FLETCHER, which were adapted into acclaimed HBO series. His new novel is GHOST TOWN.

## Critical Praise

"He's the Steinbeck of suburbia."

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