The Blessings

by Elise Juska



About the Book

When John Blessing dies, leaving behind two small children, the loss reverberates across his extended family for years to come. His young widow, Lauren, finds solace in her large clan of in-laws, while his brother?s wife Kate pursues motherhood even at the expense of her marriage. John?s teenage nephew Stephen finds himself involved in an act of petty theft that takes a surprising turn, and nephew Alex, a gifted student, travels to Spain and considers the world beyond his family?s Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood. Through departures and arrivals, weddings and reunions, THE BLESSINGS reveals the struggles beneath the surface of a close-knit Irish-Catholic family and the rituals that unite them.

For any reader who has embraced Elizabeth Strout?s Burgess family or J. Courtney Sullivan?s Kellehers of Maine, this is a moving and beautiful novel about how our families define us and how we shape them in return.

Discussion Guide

1. There are many departures and arrivals at different points in THE BLESSINGS, both literal (like Abby leaving to go back to college) and metaphorical (the deaths of two family members). The Blessing family creates rituals around all of them --- does your family do the same? Why or why not? Do you think it?s more important to recognize happy occasions and events or sad ones?

2. Do you come from a big family or a small one? Which characters in the book do you identify with the most?

3. Food is not just a means of sustenance in the novel; it can also be a gift, an obligation, and a means of coming together. In Meghan?s case, it is part of her illness. What do you think that the author is trying to express about families and food?

4. In ?Her Last Great Act,? Helen feels awkward about becoming part of Meghan?s social studies project. Do we risk marginalizing the older generations as we try to honor them?

5. The chapter ?Happy Face, Sad Face? deals with a couple who come from two very different kinds of families. Do you think that Alex and Rebecca?s relationship was doomed to fail? What common threads might have made the difference?

6. In ?Two Houses,? Patrick experiences a moment on the beach that brings back his childhood in ways that are both comforting and difficult. Have you ever had a similar experience? Does the ocean evoke nostalgia in you?

7. When Elena?s art show reunites the Blessings, many of their lives have taken surprising trajectories. What surprised you the most about where the characters are at the end of the novel? What do you think is next for them?

Author Bio

Elise Juska?s fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Hudson Review* and many other publications. She is the recipient of the Alice Hoffman Prize for Fiction from *Ploughshares* and her work has been cited in *The Best American Short Stories*. She lives in Philadelphia, where she is the director of the undergraduate creative writing program at the University of the Arts.

Photo Credit: Dan Bernstein

Critical Praise

?A family so real in all their sorrow, joy, and complexity that they could be yours or mine?bursting with wise observations about the nature of love and belonging.?

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