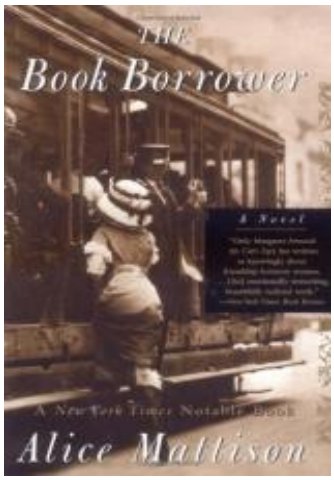
The Book Borrower

by Alice Mattison



About the Book

On the first page of The Book Borrower, Toby Ruben and Deborah Laidlaw meet in 1975 in a New York City playground, where the two women are looking after their babies. Deborah lends Toby a book, Trolley Girl,--a memoir about a long ago trolley strike and three Jewish sisters, one a fiery revolutionary--that will disappear and reappear throughout the twenty-two years these women are friends.

Through two decades Deborah and Toby raise their children, embark on teaching careers, and argue about politics, education, and their own lives. One day during a hike, they have an argument that cannot be resolved--and the two women take different, permanent paths--but it is ultimately the borrowed book that will bring them back together. With sensitivity and grace, Alice Mattison shows how books can rescue us from our deepest sorrows; how the events of the outside world play into our private lives; and how the bonds between women are enduring, mysterious, and laced with surprise.

Discussion Guide

1. When the two women meet, Deborah Laidlaw is depicted as a mainstream mother and wife with many friends and ties within the community. Yet she becomes best friends with Toby Ruben, a prickly and strange newcomer. Why do you think she chooses Toby? What qualities about Toby attracted Deborah?

2. The author always refers to the main character as "Ruben," the character's last name. But when others address her, they call her "Toby," her first name. Why do you think the author chose to refer to her this way? Did it affect your feelings toward Toby Ruben (i.e. make you feel more or less intimate with her?)

3. The saying goes: "With friends like these, who needs enemies?" Twice, Toby Ruben sabotages her best friend's employment by telling her bosses that she doesn't think Deborah is a good teacher. Why does Toby do this? Is it a breach

of friendship? How do you think they continue to be friends after these episodes? Could you?

4. Toby Ruben is accused by her best friend Deborah of having a "kindness deficit." But ultimately she ends up taking care of a cantankerous old woman. Is Toby truly unkind?

5. Toby Ruben does not have a strong sense of sympathy for others. Why do you think the story of *The Trolley Girl* was painful for her to read?

6. The anarchist, rabble-rousing sculptor Berry Cooper/Gussie Lipnick jumps from the pages of the long-borrowed book *The Trolley Girl* into real life just at the time when Toby needs her most. Why do you think the troublesome Berry Cooper is an antidote to Deborah's death? Have you ever experienced a coincidence that changed your life?

7. After Deborah's death, the rumor surfaces that she had a lover who she was on her way to meet when her car crashed. Deborah had never told Toby about this. Do you think it was true? Why or why not?

8. Husbands and children are secondary characters in The Book Borrower-in fact, Deborah speaks of wanting to keep husbands out of their friendship. Why did Deborah loan Toby her husband's favorite book? What was the nature of Toby and Jeremiah's relationship?

Author Bio

Alice Mattison grew up in Brooklyn and studied at Queens College and Harvard. Her collection of intersecting stories, *Men Giving Money, Women Yelling*, was a New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year. She is also the author of *Hilda and Pearl* and *Field of Stars*, two collections of stories, *Great Wits*< and *The Flight of Andy Burns*, and a collection of poems,*Animals*. She has been published in *The New Yorker, Glimmer Train, Southern Humanities Review, North American Review, Boulevard,* and the*Threepenny Review*. She resides in New Haven, Connecticut and teaches fiction in the Bennington Writing Seminars, a low-residency Master's program at Bennington College in Vermont. She is currently at work on her next novel as well as a new collection of short stories.

Critical Praise

" In deceptively quiet, guileless prose, she has described the mind numbing routine of child-care and the fraught, complex relations of men and women. Only Margaret Atwood (in Cat's Eye) has written as knowingly about the frienship between women. Emotionally wrenching, beautifully realized work. "-***The New York Times***"An ambitious and original novel...The author's determination not to tie things up is refreshing. "-***Wall Street Journal***"A rich, textured exploration of misfortune and its consequences: a book that will reward any reader willing to go slow and absorb its course. "-***Kirkus***

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