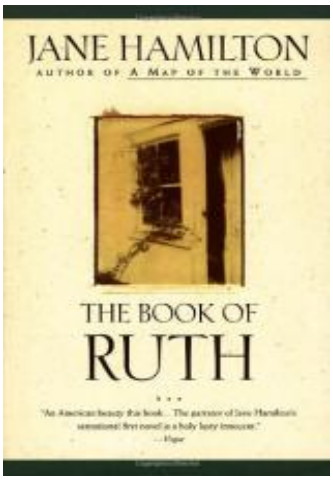
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The Book of Ruth

by Jane Hamilton



About the Book

"I learned, slowly, that if you don't look at the world with perfect vision, you're bound to get yourself cooked." Having come within an inch of her life, Ruth Dahl is determined to take a good look at it--and to figure out whether, in fact, she's to blame for the mess. Pegged the loser in a small-town family that doesn't have much going for it in the first place, Ruth grows up in the shadow of her brilliant brother, trying to survive in a world of poverty and hardship. Matt's brain is his ticket out of Honey Creek. Ruth, without options, cleaves instead to her tough, half-crazy mother, May, and eventually to Ruby, the sweet but slightly deranged young man she loves, marries, and supports. Ruth spots stains at Trim 'N Tidy dry cleaners, bowls at the Town Lanes, and tries in vain to keep the peace at home between May, whose lashing criticisms blow through the cramped house with gale force, and Ruby, who spends his days getting stoned and watching reruns of Bewitched on television. When the precarious household erupts in violence, Ruth is the only one who can piece their story together--and she gets to the truth in a manner at once ferocious, hilarious, and heartbreaking.

In this powerful, incandescent novel, Jane Hamilton has worked a small miracle: she has given voice to a young woman who is indistinguishable except for her passion in her commitment to life. **The Book of Ruth** is a stunning testament to the human capacity for mercy, compassion, and love.

Discussion Guide

1. Ruth's story is particularly poignant because of the way she conveys so much that is beyond her understanding. What are the differences between what Ruth tells us and what we infer about her life and the people in it? How does Hamilton achieve this?

2. How do you respond to Ruth's na?veté? Is her lack of understanding about the people in her life frustrating? Or does her innocence make her a more sympathetic character?

3. May is in many ways a monstrous character in Ruth's life. What about her is human and invokes our sympathy? Are there any similarities between May and Ruth?

4. How does Ruth get caught between May and Ruby? Does Justy's birth improve the situation for her at all?

5. Daisy seems comfortable in the world of the novel, even while she remains distinct and apart from everyone in that world. How is her friendship important to Ruth? Is she as well-drawn as the other characters in the book?

6. The Book of Ruth's climax is hinted at throughout the novel. What effect does this type of foreshadowing have on your reading? Does it add to or diminish the impact of the events when they finally occur?

7. Is Ruth's attitude toward Ruby justified at the end of the book?

8. Compare the characters of Aunt Sid in The Book of Ruth and Aunt Kate in A Map of the World. Do they serve the same function for Ruth and Alice?

Author Bio

Jane Hamilton?s novels have won literary prizes, been made into films, have been international bestsellers, and two of them --- THE BOOK OF RUTH and A MAP OF THE WORLD --- were selections of Oprah?s Book Club. Her essays have appeared in the *New York Times* and various magazines and anthologies. Through the years, she?s taught at Carleton College and in the Warren Wilson MFA program, and given numerous workshops. She lives in Wisconsin on an apple orchard with her family.

Critical Praise

" A sly and wistful, if harrowing, human comedy. Hamilton is a new and original voice in fiction and one well worth listening to. "--***Boston Sunday Globe***"Ms. Hamilton gives Ruth a humble dignity and allows her hope--but it's not a heavenly hope. It's a common one, caked with mud and held with gritted teeth. And it's probably the only kind that's worth reading about. "--***New York Times Book Review***" An extraordinary story of a family's disintegration... Will be compared to Jane Smiley's **A Thousand Acres**. Astonishingly vivid and moving. "--***People***"An enthralling tale of guilt, betrayal, and the terrifying ways our lives "--***Entertainment Weekly***"Unforgettably, beat by beat, Hamilton maps the best and worst of the human heart and all the mysterious, uncharted country in between. "--***Kirkus Reviews***"Hamilton's story builds to a shocking crescendo. Her small-town characters are a appealingly offbeat and brushed with grace as any found in Alice Hoffman's or Anne Tyler's novels. "--***Glamour***"An American beauty this book... The narrator of Jane Hamilton's sensational first novel is a holy lusty innocent. "--***Vogue***

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