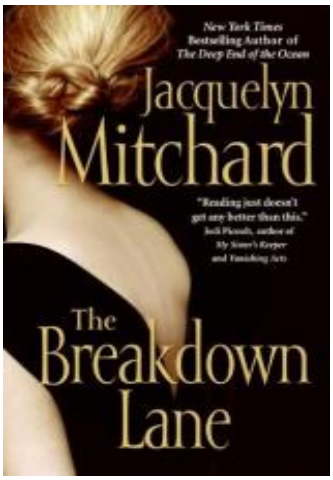
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Breakdown Lane

by Jacquelyn Mitchard



About the Book

Where can a woman turn when her own life threatens to overwhelm her ability to keep her children safe? *New York Times* bestselling author Jacquelyn Mitchard takes the readers of her newest novel on a wry and moving journey of loss and healing.

Giving advice is what Julieanne does for a living -- every Sunday she doles it out to clueless people she doesn't know, in a column in her local Wisconsin paper. But when it comes to her personal life, Julie herself seems to have missed some clues. Having worked creatively to keep her twenty-year marriage to Leo fresh and exciting, she is completely caught off guard when he tells her he needs to go on a "sabbatical" from their life together, leaving Julie and their three children -- Gabe, Caroline, and Aury -- behind. But it soon becomes clear that his leave of absence is meant to be permanent. The succeeding months are filled with a confusion and sadness that shake the core of the entire family. Things take a turn for the worse when Julie is diagnosed with a serious illness and the children undertake a dangerous journey to find Leo -- before it's too late. As the known world sinks precariously from view, the clan must navigate its way through the shoals of love, guilt, and betrayal. Together, with the help of Leo's parents and Julie's best friend, Cathy, they work their way back to solid ground and a new definition of family.

No one illuminates modern love, marriage, and parenting better than Jacquelyn Mitchard. Written with her trademark poignancy, humor, and insight, **The Breakdown Lane** is her most moving, eloquent, and life-affirming work yet.

Discussion Guide

Giving advice is what Julianne Ambrose Gillis does for a living: Every Sunday she doles it out to "clueless" people she doesn't know, in a column in her local Wisconsin paper. But when it comes to her personal life, Julie seems to have missed some clues. She has worked hard to keep her marriage fresh and to be a good mother, so it's a mystery when Leo, her husband of twenty years, decides to defect from their life together and their three children, Gabe, Caroline, and Aury.

In his absence, Julie is diagnosed with a serious illness, which drives her children to undertake a dangerous journey to find Leo -- before it's too late. As the known world sinks precariously from view and leaves them all adrift, the members of the Gillis clan must navigate their way through the trenches of love, guilt, and betrayal back to solid ground and a new definition of family.

1. What kinds of columns does Julianne Gillis write for the Sheboygan News-Clarion? How does she get her job in the first place, and what does it eventually lead to? Why does the tone of her columns change over the course of **The Breakdown Lane**?

2. Describe Julie and Leo's marriage: what connects them as a couple, and what distances them from each other? What do you think explains Leo's disappearance?

3. What aspects of the family life described in **The Breakdown Lane** resonated with your own experiences? Did Jacquelyn Mitchard capture marriage, parenting, separation, pregnancy, divorce, remarriage, or adoption in a way that reminded you of some of these phases in your life?

4. What unconventional help do Julie's family and friends offer her and her family during Leo's absence? What drastic and difficult economic measures must Julie make to keep her family afloat? What did you think of these compromises?

5. What are some of the physical symptoms Julianne experiences prior to being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? What are some of the emotional changes she undergoes as she begins the medical course of treatment for her disease?

6. How do Gabe, Caroline, and Aurora interact with each other as siblings? What do you think explains their different reactions to their mother's illness and their parents' separation?

7. How does Gabe's learning disability color his perspective on life? Why does he decide to drop out of high school? How does his friendship with Tian change him?

8. Describe the "hippie lifestyle" that Leo seeks. When Gabe and Caroline go looking for Leo, what do they encounter? How does what they find affect them and their relationships with their father?

9. Who is Matthew MacDougall and how does Julie reconnect with him? What kind of life does her promise her and her children, and how does he fulfill that promise?

10. What did you think of the end of **The Breakdown Lane**? How did you feel on learning that Julianne Gillis was a pseudonym?

Author Bio

Jacquelyn Mitchard is the award-winning, *New York Times* bestselling author of 12 novels for adults, seven novels for teenagers, and five children?s books. These include THE DEEP END OF THE OCEAN, the inaugural selection of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. She is also a professor of creative writing whose short stories, articles, essays and book reviews have been widely published. A native of Chicago, she now lives on Cape Cod with her family.

Critical Praise

"From our petulant, prideful heroine to her sullen-yet-saintly son, each character?s complexities shine..."

Washington Post

"That [Mitchard] takes emotional family events and makes something fresh yet familiar about them is what keeps her readers returning and her bestseller status shiny. THE BREAKDOWN LANE...should do nothing to dull that sheen."

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

"Mitchard?s work...is filled with vivid characters who live out loud, and in vibrant color."

Capital Times

"Rousing melodrama; fluid, often funny, dialogue; and the convincing portrayal of children involved in the collapse of a marriage add up to another page-turner from Mitchard."

Publishers Weekly

"THE BREAKDOWN LANE takes the reader on a journey of love and loss, self-discovery and synergy, a satisfying story about determining which of the signposts of our lives we should follow."

Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel

"Mitchard dissects feelings of loyalty, betrayal and guilt with such aplomb, the book moves along like a thriller."

Life magazine

"Mitchard is a snappy writer with a deft eye for comedy and family foibles...Her tale of an imploding American family will rule the beaches this summer and provide fodder for a first-class weeper down the road."

Associated Press

"...An intriguing study of a quintessential American family...[a] thought-provoking, introspective novel."

The Breakdown Lane

by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Publication Date: April 1, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Mass Market Paperback: 464 pages
Publisher: HarperTorch
ISBN-10: 0060587253
ISBN-13: 9780060587253