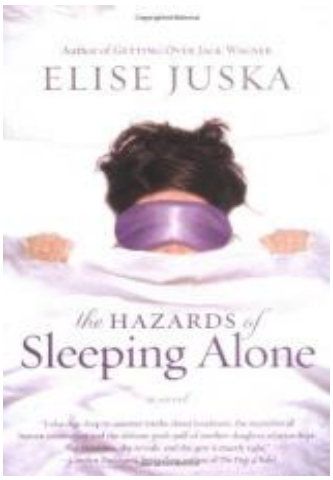
The Hazards of Sleeping Alone

by Elise Juska



About the Book

With her free-spirited daughter away at college and her "hip" ex-husband living across the country, Charlotte has grown used to being alone. For the most part, she prefers it. She relies on familiar routines: manicures, grocery shopping, game shows. But at night, no matter how hard she tries (and in spite of the Dream Machine her daughter Emily sent her) she can't stop her logical mind from running wild-imagining burglars, strange noises, and all manner of trouble that might befall her fearless daughter.

Having just graduated from Wesleyan with a pierced tongue and an arsenal of opinions, Emily has always been passionate about her beliefs-from mindfulness to vegetarianism to her new live-in boyfriend. Though Charlotte rarely understands her, she's learned to keep her doubts to herself. But when Emily and the new boyfriend arrive for a weekend visit, secrets are revealed that compel Charlotte to take a stand. Forced to examine her own life choices, she's about to learn she can't control everything. What she can do is open her heart to new possibilities, and to the fact that headstrong Emily might have a thing or two to teach them all.

Discussion Guide

1. When we meet Charlotte, she is awake and afraid. Fear dominates her life, especially at nighttime. What is she afraid of? What might her paranoia about "break-ins" represent?

2. Charlotte admits that she "often feels, when talking to Emily, as if she's dodging tiny, invisible barbs." Does Emily show love to her mother? If so, how? What are your initial reactions to her? Do they change as the book goes on? How might readers perceive this story differently were it told from Emily's point of view?

3. To some extent, Charlotte's decision to "keep her opinions to herself" regarding Emily has nurtured the very behaviors of which Charlotte is most critical. How would you characterize Charlotte and Emily's attempts at communication?

Where do they attempt to understand each other? Where does communication break down? How do old patterns interfere with their attempts at understanding?

4. Discuss Charlotte's initial reactions to Walter. How and why do her feelings toward him change? Contrast the way Charlotte views Walter with the way Emily views him. At one point, Charlotte describes him as an "ally." What does he represent for her? What does he provide?

5. Charlotte has very definite ideas about how to raise a child-and how not to. What about Joe's parenting style did she disagree with? In Chapter Four, she is devastated when "for the first time since Emily's birth, she considers the possibility that Joe might be the better parent." What makes her think this? What is your reaction to Charlotte as a parent, as a mother? How does she show love for her daughter? What does being a "good mother" mean?

6. Charlotte's history of "I think"s predisposes her to doubt and uncertainty. What need have the "I think"s served in her past? In her present, how is that need changing?

7. Joe is sometimes funny, sometimes caring, sometimes harsh. Do your impressions of him change as you read? Does he evolve as an ultimately sympathetic or unsympathetic character?

8. Bea and Charlotte seem like unlikely friends. Why do they form a connection? What effect does Bea's friendship have on Charlotte?

9. Charlotte is startled when she stumbles across the Love Butter in New Hampshire. Through the years, her life with her daughter has been littered with "Emily objects." What do these objects reveal about their relationship? What are Charlotte's objects, and what do they reveal?

10. Charlotte and Emily's conversation on the porch in New Hampshire is a turning point in their relationship. What changes during that conversation? What does Charlotte come to realize? How does Emily's pregnancy dovetail with the rebirth of Charlotte?

11. Compare Joe and Howie. What attracted Charlotte to Joe, and Joe to Charlotte? Over the course of their marriage, what changed? What attracts Charlotte to Howie? Do you think their relationship will last?

12. In the mall, talking about her daughter's anorexia, Linda Hill tells Charlotte: "It was the most scared I've ever been." Does fear play a role in parenting? If so, how? In what ways did it influence Charlotte's decisions raising Emily?

13. How does the nature of Charlotte's fear change throughout the book? How does her decreasing fear parallel her increasing courage? What helped her gain that courage?

14. Charlotte has a strong attachment to homes and houses, from her new condo to the house on Dunleavy Street to the "alternative living arrangement" in New Hampshire. What do her relationships to houses reveal? What do her actions in the final scenes symbolize? What, for Charlotte, is the difference between a "house" and a "home"?

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

"Juska's portrait of [Charlotte] is an exacting one and hews, however uncomfortably, close to the truth. There are neighborhoods full of Charlottes, and Juska's skill in portraying one is strong enough that her latest is a powerful success."

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