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The Jane Austen Book Club

by Karen Joy Fowler

About the Book

"Real people are really complicated," says Jocelyn, the founder of the "Central Valley/River City all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time book club." And the members of her newly founded book club certainly prove this to be true. Each has a story to tell, and much like an Austen novel, the intricate plots that are their own lives are slowly revealed. There's Sylvia, Jocelyn's friend of forty years, who is in the midst of a painful divorce. Her daughter, Allegra, beautiful, vivacious, a "creature of extremes" who finds her thrills through skydiving and rock-climbing but can't seem to find love. There's Bernadette, the oldest member at sixty-seven, a woman who has married well, several times at that, and even had a brush with fame, but currently looks disheveled and distracted. Prudie is the only member who's currently married. She's a high school French teacher and a great believer in organization, and finds comfort in her lists when life feels overwhelming. Grigg is in his early forties, yet his older sisters still feel protective of him, hoping to rescue him from the legacy of their father. And last, there's Jocelyn. Never married, she has a keen interest in the happiness of others and is constantly playing matchmaker. In fact, this could be her underlying motivation for inviting Grigg, the only member of the group who's never before read Austen. Or perhaps she thinks the book club will serve as a distraction for Sylvia. After all, who better to heal one's pain than Jane Austen?

Discussion Guide

1. The author opens the novel with a quote from Jane Austen, part of which reads, "Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure." Do you agree with this sentiment? Why do you think the author chooses to open the novel with this quote? How might this statement apply to each of the characters in the book?

2. When the group is first being formed, Bernadette suggests that it should consist exclusively of women: "The dynamic changes with men. They pontificate rather than communicate. They talk more than their share." (page 3). What do you think of her statement? How does Grigg affect the group's dynamic? How would things have been different without him?

3. While the group is reading **Sense and Sensibility** and discussing Mrs. Dashwood, Sylvia mentions that "the problems of older women don't interest most writers" (page 46) and is thrilled that Austen seems to care. Do you agree with this, that most writers aren't interested in older women? What about society in general? How does Fowler approach older women? Later, Prudie says that "An older man can still fall in love. An older woman better not." (page 47) Do you agree? How does Fowler deal with this issue?

4. On page 228 Sylvia asks, "Why should unhappiness be so much more powerful than happiness?" How would you answer her? How does each character find her/his own happiness in the novel?

5. The book club meets from March through August. How does the group change over these six months? "I always like to know how a story ends," Bernadette says on page 199. How do you think this story ends (the "epilogue to the epilogue")? Does Bernadette have a happy marriage with Senor Obando? Do Allegra and Corinne stay together? How about Jocelyn and Grigg? Daniel and Sylvia?

6. At the end of the novel, Jocelyn reluctantly agrees to read some science fiction, including the work of Ursula Le Guin, and really likes it. What other authors do you think the group might like? Although they would have to change the name of their group, what author would you suggest for the Central Valley/River City all-Jane-Austen-all-the-time book club to read next? What do you suggest for your own group?

7. If you're new to Jane Austen, are you now interested in reading her work? Based on what you've learned from Karen Jay Fowler, which novel would you go to first? If you are already a "dedicated Janeite," how has reading **The Jane Austen Book Club** made you feel about your favorite author? How would you describe your own "private Austen"? What novel would you recommend to first-time readers of Austen?

Author Bio

Karen Joy Fowler, a PEN/Faulkner and California Book Award winner, is the author of six novels (two of them *New York Times* bestsellers) and four short story collections. She has been a Dublin IMPAC nominee, and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Critical Praise

"I love this book! I haven't read Austen for years, Fowler's story worked like a charm."

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Publication Date: April 26, 2004
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 304 pages
Publisher: A Marian Wood Book/Putnam
ISBN-10: 0399151613
ISBN-13: 9780399151613