The Paper Palace

by Miranda Cowley Heller



About the Book

A story of summer, secrets, love and lies: in the course of a singular day on Cape Cod, one woman must make a life-changing decision that has been brewing for decades.

It is a perfect July morning, and Elle, a 50-year-old happily married mother of three, awakens at ?The Paper Palace? --- the family summer place that she has visited every summer of her life. But this morning is different: Last night, Elle and her oldest friend, Jonas, crept out the back door into the darkness and had sex with each other for the first time, all while their spouses chatted away inside. Now, over the next 24 hours, Elle will have to decide between the life she has made with her genuinely beloved husband, Peter, and the life she always imagined she would have had with her childhood love, Jonas, if a tragic event hadn?t forever changed the course of their lives. As Heller colors in the experiences that have led Elle to this day, we arrive at her ultimate decision with all its complexity.

Tender yet devastating, THE PAPER PALACE considers the tensions between desire and dignity, the legacies of abuse and the crimes and misdemeanors of families.

Discussion Guide

1. In THE PAPER PALACE, desire and duty are put to the test when Elle Bishop has to choose between the life she always believed she was *meant* to have with her oldest friend Jonas, and the life she has with her loving husband Peter. Compare and contrast Elle?s relationship with both. What does she get from each?

2. The novel is set in Cape Cod, a setting the author describes with vivid intimacy. In what ways has this place grounded and shaped the lives of the Bishops?

3. THE PAPER PALACE unfolds over 24 hours, and 50 years: one day in Elle?s life, and the moments that lead to this

day. What do we gain through multiple timelines that we otherwise would not?

4. In the multigenerational story, we see the reverberations of the choices made by grandparents and parents, and the scars they have left on Elle herself. In what way do those scars reveal themselves, and is it possible to break the cycle?

5. The individuals who find themselves at The Paper Palace are as susceptible to the elements as the house is. Consider adult Elle and Jonas? intimate beach scene, their dangerous sailing trip, etc. What role do nature and the weather play in the story? How is the outside, natural world used to echo Elle?s interior journey?

6. Secrets are at the heart of the novel: the acts that create them, the decisions to keep them hidden. What is the outcome of keeping secrets, and how do we see that play out within the novel? Why do you think Elle keeps the secrets that she does from her family? From Peter? Think of a time when you kept a secret. Was it harmful or helpful?

7. The novel is called THE PAPER PALACE. Why? What parallels exist between the camp and the people who inhabit it?

8. How did you interpret the ending? For you, was the major plot of the novel about Elle choosing between two men, or choosing different versions of herself? Explain.

Author Bio

Miranda Cowley Heller has worked as senior vice president and head of drama series at HBO, developing and overseeing such shows as "The Sopranos," "Six Feet Under," "The Wire," "Deadwood" and "Big Love," among others. THE PAPER PALACE is her first novel. She grew up spending summers on Cape Cod, and now lives in California.

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