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The Season of Second Chances

by Diane Meier



About the Book

Joy Harkness had built a career and a safe life in New York. When offered a position at Amherst College, she impulsively leaves the city. A tumbledown Victorian house proves an unlikely choice; nevertheless, it becomes the home that changes Joy forever. As the restoration begins to take shape, so does her outlook on life. Amid the half-wanted attention of the campus?s single, middle-aged men and the legitimate dramas of her community, Joy learns that second chances are waiting to be discovered within us all.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you find Joy to be a reliable narrator? Is she capable of providing insights about her own life? Does this change from the beginning of the novel to the end?

2. How did your opinion of Joy change throughout the novel? Did you find her endearing at first? In a way, do you think your perception of the narrator over the course of the novel mimics Joy?s own coming to terms with herself?

3. Joy heads off to Amherst thinking that it will be a fresh change from what she perceives as the politics and bureaucracy at Columbia. Is Amherst truly different from Columbia? Did Adele Grant?s wedding change your opinion of the life Joy left behind?

4. At first, Joy finds Fran and Josie?s attempts at friendship intrusive. What is it that finally gets her to accept them as her friends? Why do you think it takes Joy so long to open up to them?

5. When Teddy first starts working on Joy?s house, he takes her completely by surprise when he recites Yeats to her. What do you make of this incident? How does it foreshadow the events still to come?

6. Upon arriving at Josie?s house for the first time, Joy is stunned by how beautiful and tasteful her home is. Do you think the author intends to make a point about the importance of style here? Do you think that having style is inextricably linked to having a strong sense of one?s self?

7. Joy?s sharp wit pervades the novel. Do you think that in some ways she uses her wit to distract herself from the reality at hand? Is her wit a kind of guard for her?

8. Consider the effect that Joe?s death had on Teddy and the effects of Tim?s death on Joy. Were their reactions to losing an older brother at all similar? How did Joy and Teddy each respond to this loss? Joy mentions that once she moved to New York she no longer felt that Timmy was with her --- why do you think this changes when she arrives in Amherst?

9. At one point in the novel, Joy goes to Will?s apartment, where she is met by a half-naked Will, and, moments later, a neighbor knocking at the door in a negligee who claims to have come down because she thought she smelled gas. What do you make of this incident? How is it that Joy doesn?t grasp --- or even suspect --- what?s actually going on here? Why does she blame herself?

10. In what ways is the night Joy leaves Will a major turning point for her? Is there anything different about her afterward?

11. How does Joy deal with the attack on Donna? Does she surprise herself in some ways? Did she surprise you?

12. What does this novel have to say about feminism? Consider Bernadette Lowell?s opinions about women taking care of each other and also what Theo (the hairdresser) has to say about looking good to get ahead. What is Joy?s definition of feminism? Does it change over the course of the novel?

13. Joy, Josie, and Dan all want to get Teddy to go back to school, but he doesn?t seem particularly interested. Why do you think that is? What are Joy?s reasons for wanting Teddy to go back to school? Do her actions in this arena demonstrate a deeper understanding of Teddy or not? Do you think at times academic achievement can be overly important to her?

14. What do you think it means to share your life with someone? Who in the novel is successful at this, and why do you think they are? Who isn?t?

15. Parts of the novel?s plot turn on Teddy?s relationship with his mother, Maureen. Why do you think she treats him the way that she does? Why does he submit to it? Do you think that Teddy is genuinely his own person? Do you think he can be while he?s still under his mother?s wing?

16. When Bernadette and Joy go shopping, Bernadette asks Joy why style ?frightens her so in the flesh? when it doesn?t in literature. How does Joy react to this? Why do you think style ?frightens? Joy?

17. At first Joy talks about her decision to go to Amherst --- and many of her other decisions following that one --- as taking her completely by surprise. She says that she ?felt like Howdy Doody with Buffalo Bob pulling the strings.? What do you think truly inspired her to make these changes? Does the end of the novel leave you feeling hopeful for Joy?s future?

Author Bio

Diane Meier is the author of THE NEW AMERICAN WEDDING and president of Meier, a New York City-based marketing firm. Her career spans from writing and design to public speaking. This is her first novel. Meier lives in New York City and Litchfield, Connecticut. Learn more at http://us.macmillan.com/author/dianemeier.

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