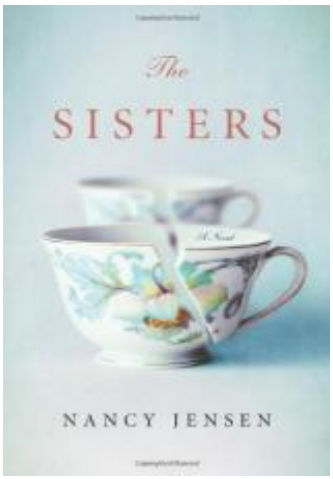
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Sisters

by Nancy Jensen



About the Book

Growing up in hardscrabble Kentucky in the 1920s, with their mother dead and their stepfather an ever-present threat, Bertie Fischer and her older sister Mabel have no one but each other --- with perhaps a sweetheart for Bertie waiting in the wings. But on the day that Bertie receives her eighth-grade diploma, good intentions go terribly wrong. A choice made in desperate haste sets off a chain of misunderstandings that will divide the sisters and reverberate through three generations of women.

What happens when nothing turns out as you planned? From the Depression through World War II and Vietnam, and smaller events both tragic and joyful, Bertie and Mabel forge unexpected identities that are shaped by unspeakable secrets. As the sisters have daughters and granddaughters of their own, they discover that both love and betrayal are even more complicated than they seem.

Gorgeously written, with extraordinary insight and emotional truth, Nancy Jensen?s powerful debut novel illuminates the far-reaching power of family and family secrets.

Discussion Guide

1.) There are many secrets in THE STISTERS, beginning with Mabel?s decision not to tell Bertie about Jim Butcher. In trying to understand her sister?s behavior, fourteen-year-old Bertie wonders if ?the things she didn?t know where what kept her safe.? What secrets to other characters keep, and how do you think the secrets ultimately help or hurt their loved ones?

2.) How does the era in which each woman comes of age affect her experience and shape her outlook on what is possible?

3.) How do the main characters perceive loyalty? Betrayal? What do you think of their perceptions?

4.) How do Bertie?s girlhood losses affect her daughters? and granddaughters? relationships with men?

5.) Bertie, Alma, and Lynn are accused by other characters of being hard and cold. How do you see them? To what extent do you think they change in the course of the novel?

6.) At the end of her life, Bertie struggles to cry out to Rainey and Lynn, *Forgive. Forgive*. Why do you believe some characters are able to forgive and others not? Do you believe everything can or should be forgiven?

7.) What does the novel suggest about whether families are born or made?

8.) When Daisy expresses her concern that Mabel is setting herself up for emotional pain by photographing young men bound for Vietnam, Mabel tells Daisy, ?You can?t protect yourself from loss.? Do you think this is true? What happens to the characters in the novel, and to people in your experience, when they try?

9.) In her interview with Ed Bradley, Mabel says, ?I don?t think any real war [is ever over]---large, small, between countries, between people. Even the wars inside ourselves. Something always remains.? Do you agree --- in the novel and/or in real life?

10.) THE SISTERS is structured as a series of chronological, interlocking narratives, sometimes with strikingly different perspectives of the same events. In what ways does this structure reflect the experience of an individual within a family?

11.) Bertie tells Grace, ?Something can happen to change your life so sudden, you can?t get over it fast enough?and that changes things for them too, all in a line.? Do you think that happens in most people?s lives at one time or another? If so, is the chain reaction inevitable, or can someone choose to break the chain?

12.) How were you affected when Bertie wrote *Deceased* on the letter from Mabel, and Mabel later decided not to follow up on Nick?s possible lead about Bertie?s whereabouts? Can you imagine either of them acting differently? Did you find the conclusion satisfying?

Author Bio

Nancy Jensen, who received an MFA in Writing from Vermont College, has published stories and essays in numerous literary journals, including *The Louisville Review, Other Voices* and *Northwest Review.* She was awarded an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women and an Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council, and teaches English at Eastern Kentucky University. THE SISTERS is her first novel.

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