The Smart One and the Pretty One

by Claire LaZebnik



About the Book

When Ava Nickerson was a child, her mother jokingly betrothed her to a friend's son, and the contract the parents made has stayed safely buried for years. Now that still-single Ava is closing in on thirty, no one even remembers she was once "engaged" to the Markowitz boy. But when their mother is diagnosed with cancer, Ava's prodigal little sister Lauren comes home to Los Angeles where she stumbles across the decades-old document.

Frustrated and embarrassed by Ava's constant lectures about financial responsibility (all because she's in a little debt. Okay, a lot of debt), Lauren decides to do some sisterly interfering of her own and tracks down her sister's childhood fiancé. When she finds him, the highly inappropriate, twice-divorced, but incredibly charming Russell Markowitz is all too happy to re-enter the Nickerson sisters' lives, and always-accountable Ava is forced to consider just how binding a contract really is...

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think that siblings tend to define themselves in opposition to each other? Is this more true for girls or boys? Do you feel that this happened in your own family? Were you the smart one or the pretty one?

2. Lauren?s problems with money set off the whole plot. Have *you* ever bought things you couldn?t afford? Do you think Lauren will learn to control her spending in the future? Or are some people doomed to be lifelong spendthrifts?

3. This book has several very different depictions of mothers and their relationship with their sons and daughters. Which mother would you say yours is most like? Do you think Russell would have been as devastated if his mother was dying as Daniel is?

4. Both women make good arguments about their beauty choices, Lauren that it?s fun and worth it to make yourself look

good and Ava that it?s a waste of time and only encourages people to focus on your exterior and not see through to who you really are. Which one do you agree with more? Why? How much time do you spend making yourself look nice on an average morning?

5. Do you think Lauren is just a one-night stand to Daniel? Is she right that he won?t remember her name? Lauren expresses a fairly casual attitude to sex early in the book (?You can sleep with a guy you don?t know that well?it?s one of the best ways of getting to know him.?), but then she seems pretty upset when she finds out Daniel has a girlfriend. Why do you think that is?

6. Russell and Lauren would seem on the surface to be a much better match than Russell and Ava. But he and Lauren are never actually interested in each other. Why do you think that is? On her part? On his? Do you think there?s truth to opposites attracting more than similar types?

7. Have you ever felt like the ?extra bag of bagels??

8. Contracts play a large role in this book. Ava believes that writing a contract is meaningful, even if it?s not a legal one?or at least she does until her sister confronts her with the betrothal document. Have you ever written a contract to change your behavior, like to diet or save money or work harder? Did it work?

9. Late in the book, Ava eavesdrops on her parents talking alone and realizes that they have an entire relationship that?s separate from anything the girls share with them. Do you think that?s true of parents in general? A well-known writer was recently criticized for saying publicly that she loved her husband more than her kids. What do you think most women would say about that?

10. Ava worries that Russell is trying to make her over, that he wants to change her and that must mean he doesn't love her the way she is. Have you ever been in a relationship where you felt your significant other was trying to change you in some way? Have you ever tried to change the person you were with? How do you feel if someone gives you a gift that is more for the way he/she thinks you SHOULD be than the way you ARE?

11. After the book ends, do you think Ava will care more than she did before about clothes and make-up? How do you see the gifting and dressing up aspect of her relationship with Russell progressing? Do you think their relationship will last?

12. Do you think brownies with ice cream and nuts provide all the essential nutrients and make a healthful dinner?

Author Bio

I grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, the youngest of five kids, and went to college about twenty minutes away from home. One of my sisters and my brother were both already enrolled at the same school, so it wasn't exactly a leap into the unknown --- neither was my subsequent move to New York, since two of my sisters and my brother lived there by then. But when I moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, I was finally mapping out some new territory (although my sister Nell joined me seconds later). I thought eventually I'd move back to the east coast. Turns out I was wrong.

Now I live in the Pacific Palisades (a city in Los Angeles, not far from the ocean) and my four kids are growing up true Californians: they wear tank tops and flip-flops and don't even know what a "snow day" is. My husband writes for TV which doesn't impress people all that much until I mention that he worked on "The Simpsons" for a year-and-a-half and then people get really impressed. Especially teenaged type people. Visit my website, http://clairelazebnik.com/.

Critical Praise

"This sparkling novel about two sisters is both witty and stylish. Even if you don't have a sister of your own, you won't be able to resist LaZebnik's charming take on modern relationships. Read it!"

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