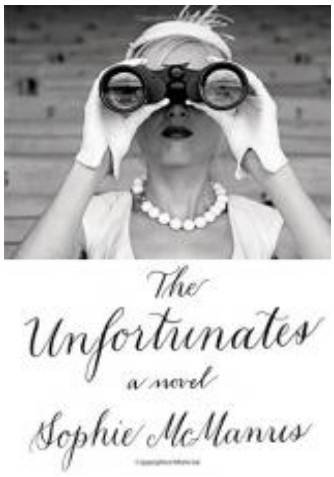
The Unfortunates

by Sophie McManus



About the Book

The riveting, hilarious and epic story of a prominent American family on the cusp of ruin

This extraordinary debut novel by Sophie McManus is a contemporary American tragedy of breathtaking scope: a dramatic story of pharmaceutical drug trials and Wall Street corruption; of pride and prejudice; of paranoia and office politics; of inheritance, influence, class and power.

Cecilia Somner's fate hangs in the balance. A larger-than-life heiress to a robber baron's fortune, once known for her cruel wit as much as for her tremendous generosity, CeCe is now in opulent decline. Afflicted with a rare disease and touched by mortality for the first time, her gilded, bygone values collide with an unforgiving present. Along with her troubled son, George, and his outsider wife, Iris, CeCe must face the Somners' dark legacy and the corrupting nature of wealth. As the Somner family struggles to find a solution to its troubles, the secrets and lies between CeCe, George and Iris grow entangled. CeCe's world topples, culminating in a crime as unforgettable as it is unexpected.

While no riches can put things right for the unfortunate Somners, when all is lost, they learn what life beyond the long, shimmering shadow cast by the Somner dynasty may become. THE UNFORTUNATES, hilarious and heartbreaking by turns, is most of all a meditation on love: as delusional obsession, as transformation and, ultimately, as a coming to grace.

Discussion Guide

1. How did your perceptions of CeCe, George and Iris shift as you learned more about them? Whose predicament resonated with you the most?

2. How does CeCe?s mindset change as she copes with MSA (multiple system atrophy) and finds hope in a pharmacological solution? What does THE UNFORTUNATES tell us about the things money can?t buy, and about the

ways we measure success in life?

3. Discuss the role of real estate as a catalyst in the novel. How does Booth Hill compare to George and Iris?s house, and to the Kingsgate Estates development?

4. As their situations change, CeCe and Iris see their possessions in a new light. As you read the descriptions of their possessions, what came to mind? What items would appear on your list of cherished personal possessions, and what not-so-cherished ones wouldn?t?

5. Discuss the relationships of the less prominent characters (Victor and Bill, Pat and Lotta, Otto and Dotty, Bob and Martha). What do they illustrate about the nature of long-term love?

6. If you were Iris, would you have trusted Bob? Is Tryphon Capital nobler than Somner Industries?

7. Chapter 36 begins with the observation that CeCe?s actions are both a strange kind of justice and a strange kind of injustice. In your opinion, what would just deserts look like for George and Iris?

8. Does George?s opera reflect his view of the world, or was he misunderstood? If you were CeCe, how would you have responded to your son after listening to his dreadful ?masterpiece?? Would George?s life have been different if his father hadn?t rejected him?

9. How do the shadows of CeCe?s father and grandfather influence her relationships? What are the traits of her ideal man? What gives her the confidence to believe that she is an ideal woman who does things correctly while others fail? Did CeCe have different expectations for her children based on their gender? How does the dynamic between George and Pat compare to that between you and your sibling(s)?

10. Would you enjoy Esme?s job?

11. Explore the novel?s title. What determines the characters? fates? Why doesn?t the Somner family fortune --- and wealth in general --- always ensure happiness? How are the characters? personalities reflected in the way they handle money?

12. What does 3D mean to the various people who take care of him?

13. How does the author balance poignant scenes with irreverent humor? What are the novel?s most comic images? Which aspects of the story line were the most moving?

14. In the closing scene, Pat says she doesn?t understand why Iris wrote the letter and mailed it to Stockport. What does this say about the differences between Pat and Iris? How would you answer Pat? What do you predict for Cecilia?s future, and Douglas?s?

If you are in the New York, Connecticut, New Jersey or Pennsylvania area with a public transportation link to New York City, the author would be delighted to join your book club discussion of The Unfortunates. *If you are farther away, she?s happy to join you via Skype.*

To check availability, send your request to info@sophiemcmanus.com.

Author Bio

Sophie McManus was born in New York City and received her MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Province-town, the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts and the Jentel Foundation. Her work has appeared in *American Short Fiction* and *Tin House*, among other publications. THE UNFORTUNATES is her first book. For more information, visit www.sophiemcmanus.com.

Critical Praise

?Sophie McManus?is an incisive, surprising prose stylist, and her debut novel heralds an exciting new talent with an old soul.?

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