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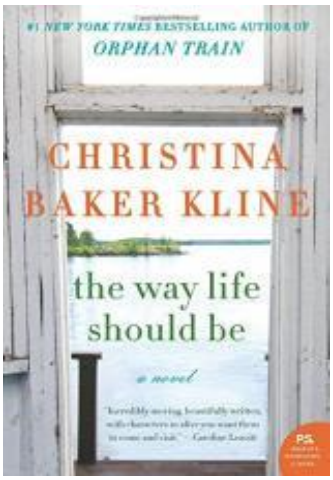
The Way Life Should Be

by Christina Baker Kline



About the Book

Angela can feel the clock ticking. She is single in New York City, stuck in a job she doesn?t want and a life that seems to have, somehow, just happened. She inherited a flair for Italian cooking from her grandmother, but she never seems to have the time for it --- these days, her oven holds only sweaters. Tacked to her office bulletin board is a photo from a magazine of a tidy cottage on the coast of Maine --- a charming reminder of a life that could be hers, if she could only muster the courage to go after it.

On a hope and a chance, Angela decides to pack it all up and move to Maine, finding the nudge she needs in the dating profile of a handsome sailor who loves dogs and Italian food. But her new home isn?t quite matching up with the fantasy. Far from everything familiar, Angela begins to rebuild her life from the ground up. Working at a local coffeehouse, she begins to discover the pleasures and secrets of her new small-town community and, in the process, realizes there?s really no such thing as the way life *should* be.

Discussion Guide

1. What is the ?way life should be?? How does Kline develop and expand upon this question as the story progresses? Nonna tells Angela that her father ?can?t see any other way. To him, this is how life is. And the way it should be? (p. 59). Later, spotting the Maine state slogan on a billboard, Angela wonders if it?s simply ?a marketer?s vision of a land of lobsters and blueberries that never has, and never will, exist? (p. 259). How does Angela?s own vision of what her life should be change over time?

2. How does Angela?s identification with her grandmother, and apparent resistance to her mother?s influence, shape the choices she makes? How does her thinking about these two women change as the story progresses?

3. What does Maine represent to Angela before and after her arrival there?

4. One of the major threads running through this book is the journey of generations of immigrants in America. Nonna clings to old customs; her son mainly wants to assimilate; her granddaughter wants to learn about her cultural traditions. How ?Italian? is Angela? How has she been shaped by both the Italian and Irish sides of her heritage?

5. Nonna describes ? il regalo? as the gift of instinctively knowing how to cook. How can this phrase be seen as a larger metaphor for Angela?s experience in the novel?

6. The idea of ?home? is very important in this book. What is Nonna?s idea of home? What is Angela?s? How does this novel explore the roots we retain as we move away from our families of origin?

7. What does ? la famiglia? mean to Angela at the beginning of the book? At the end?

8. Angela goes to Maine in search of love, but things don?t turn out as she?d planned. Do you see it as a desperate move or a brave leap of faith? Does her decision to stick it out make sense to you?

9. What role does food play in Angela?s life and in the book?

10. By the end of the book, do you believe that Nonna feels she has led a fulfilling life, or is she, as she laments, filled with regret about the choices she made?

11. Each person in the cooking class reveals a secret?some mundane, some serious. Nonna reveals a secret, too. How do these revelations add resonance to Angela?s own story?

12. Which character do you find most sympathetic? Most interesting? Most exasperating?

13. For much of the book, Angela?s relationship with her brother is fractious and distant. How would you characterize their relationship at the end?

14. How does the character of Lindsay function in the story?

15. What is the metaphorical significance of the rabbit-fur coat that Nonna gives to Angela when she returns to Maine (p. 258)?

16. As the novel ends, Angela is crossing back into Maine in the middle of winter. What do you think will happen to her? Will she ever open her own restaurant?

Author Bio

A #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of 10 novels, including ORPHAN TRAIN, THE EXILES, PLEASE DON'T LIE (co-authored with Anne Burt) and THE FOURSOME, Christina Baker Kline is published in more than 40 countries. Her novels have received the New England Prize for Fiction, the Maine Literary Award, and a Barnes & Noble Discover Award, among other prizes, and have been chosen by hundreds of communities, universities and schools as ?One Book, One Read? selections. Her essays, articles and reviews have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Book Review*

, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*.

Critical Praise

?With prose that flows so naturally it needs no fancy dressing, third-time novelist Kline develops an inventive stock of characters in Angela?s new orbit and endows them with dialogue so natural that readers will at times feel like cutting in?Kline weaves an unassumingly beautiful story of human relationships and self-discovery. Her knack for storytelling makes this the ideal page-turning light read, with a tremendous payoff.?

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