The Year We Left Home

by Jean Thompson



About the Book

From National Book Award finalist Jean Thompson comes a mesmerizing, decades-spanning saga of one ordinary American family --- proud, flawed, hopeful --- whose story simultaneously captures the turbulent history of the country at large.

Over the course of a 30-year career, Jean Thompson has been celebrated by critics as"a writer of extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity" (*O, The Oprah Magazine*), "an American Alice Munro" (*The Wall Street Journal*), and "one of our most lucid and insightful writers" (*San Francisco Chronicle*). Her peers have been no less vocal, from Jennifer Egan ("bracing . . . boldly unconventional") to David Sedaris ("if there are 'Jean Thompson characters,' they're us, and never have we been as articulate and worthy of compassion").

Now, in **The Year We Left Home**, Thompson brings together all of her talents to deliver the career-defining novel her admirers have been waiting for: a sweeping and emotionally powerful story of a single American family during the tumultuous final decades of the twentieth century. It begins in 1973 when the Erickson family of Grenada, Iowa, gathers for the wedding of their eldest daughter, Anita. Even as they celebrate, the fault lines in the family emerge. The bride wants nothing more than to raise a family in her hometown, while her brother Ryan watches restlessly from the sidelines, planning his escape. He is joined by their cousin Chip, an unpredictable, war-damaged loner who will show Ryan both the appeal and the perils of freedom. Torrie, the Ericksons' youngest daughter, is another rebel intent on escape, but the choices she makes will bring about a tragedy that leaves the entire family changed forever.

Stretching from the early 1970s in the Iowa farmlands to suburban Chicago to the coast of contemporary Italy --- and moving through the Vietnam War's aftermath, the farm crisis, the numerous economic boomsand busts --- **The Year We Left Home** follows the Erickson siblings as they confront prosperity and heartbreak, setbacks and triumphs, and seek their place in a country whose only constant seems to be breathtaking change. Ambitious, richly told, and fiercely American, this is a vivid and moving meditation on our continual pursuit of happiness and an incisive exploration of the

national character.

Discussion Guide

1. Early on in the novel, Ryan muses"what really counted was the life you made for yourself, and the person you decided to be." (p. 11) Does this prove to be true? How does this play out in his life, and in the lives of his family members? How does this concept change for him?

2. "Something in him always stood apart, and he was not who people assumed was." (p. 27) How is this true for Ryan throughout the novel? How do the characters define themselves, and each other?

3. Which narrator did you like best: Anita, Ryan, Chip, Torrie, Audrey, Matthew, or Blake? Why do you think Thompson chose to have Ryan narrate the majority of the sections? Was there someone you wanted to hear more from?

4. Anita feels that she and her mother are always on the verge of a conversation:"Is this what it means to be a wife, a mother, a woman? Is it what you expected? Should I have gone about it differently?" (p. 105) Why don't they ever actually have that conversation? How might things be different for them, and other women in the novel, if they discussed such things with each other?

5. Why do you think Megan ruins Ryan's career with her essay? Is she crazy, or clever? Hurt, or just trying to stand out?

6. Why does Anita go to the Goodells' auction and give her relatives five thousand dollars? Does she feel responsible because her husband is a banker? Talk about Anita's concept of family and loyalty.

7. Martha's words at Anita's wedding startle Ryan:"You never can tell, looking at it from the outside. How miserable people can be in a marriage." (p. 14) How are her words prophetic? Do you think she was referring to her own marriage, which seemed so happy?

8. Discuss the many different ideas of marriage in the novel. Why does Anita marry Jeff (p. 183), and why does she stay with him? Why does Ryan get married (p. 221), and then have affairs that lead to divorce? What about Blake, whose wife everyone seems to look down on?

9. Ryan thinks to himself,"You decided that your life would go in a certain direction, and maybe it did. Or maybe you were kidding yourself, and the world was mostly a matter of being in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time." (p. 221) Do you agree? How much of Ryan's life is shaped by his choices, and how much does he simply allow to happen to him?

10. The author states:"Everybody in America is one of two things, either in or out." (p. 288) How does this theme of insider and outsider play throughout the novel?

11. Why does Anita bring in Rhonda to live with her family? How is it true that sometimes a family needs an orphan?

12. For a while, Anita seems to be drifting through the duties of a wife and mother. What spurs her to take classes to become a realtor and get involved with Alcohol Anonymous? Did Jeff's descent into alcoholism empower her to take

charge of her life, or do you think she would have done so regardless?

13. Throughout the novel, Chip is consistently an outsider who never seems to have much going for him. However, he often provides poignant insights to Ryan and others, and doesn't seem to experience the lack of fulfillment that plagues many other characters. Why do you think this is?

14. Why do you think Ryan and Chip remain close throughout the years? Is Ryan more like Chip than he might want to admit? How so?

15. Why does Ryan buy the Peerson house?

16. Referring to the Peersons, Blake remarks,"They didn't think in terms of happy." (p. 409) Do you agree that the older generations were more content with what they had, and less concerned with searching for happiness elsewhere? Discuss the characters' conceptions of happiness, and whether or not they are able to find it. What constitutes true happiness?

17. Discuss the title of the novel. Why do you think Thompson chose this title? How does it capture the spirit of the novel?

Author Bio

Jean Thompson is a novelist and short story writer, whose most recent novel is THE POET'S HOUSE. She has published nine previous novels, including THE YEAR WE LEFT HOME and WIDE BLUE YONDER, and six short story collections, including the National Book Award finalist WHO DO YOU LOVE.

Thompson?s short fiction has been published in many magazines and journals, including *The New Yorker*, and been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* and *Pushcart Prize*. Her work has been praised by *Elle Magazine* as ?bracing and wildly intelligent writing that explores the nature of love in all its hidden and manifest dimensions.?

Jean has been the recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, among other accolades, and taught creative writing at the University of Illinois?Champaign/ Urbana, Reed College, Northwestern University, and many other colleges and universities. She lives in Urbana, Illinois.

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