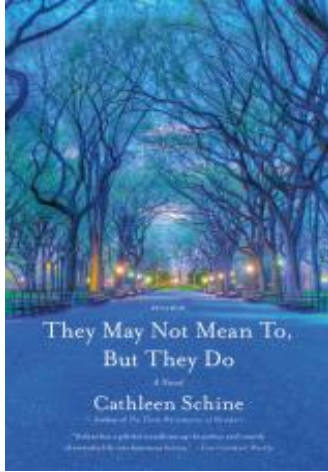


# They May Not Mean To, But They Do

by Cathleen Schine

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## About the Book

From one of America's greatest comic novelists, a hilarious new novel about aging, family, loneliness and love.

Joy Bergman is not slipping into old age with the quiet grace her children, Molly and Daniel, would prefer. She won't take their advice, and she won't take an antidepressant. Her marriage to their father, Aaron, has lasted through health and dementia, as well as some phenomenally lousy business decisions. The Bergman clan has always stuck together, growing as it incorporated in-laws, ex-in-laws and same-sex spouses. But families don't just grow, they grow old. Cathleen Schine's *THEY MAY NOT MEAN TO, BUT THEY DO* is a tender, sometimes hilarious intergenerational story about searching for where you belong as your family changes with age.

When Aaron dies, Molly and Daniel have no shortage of solutions for their mother's loneliness and despair, but there is one challenge they did not count on: the reappearance of an ardent suitor from Joy's college days. They didn't count on Joy suddenly becoming as willful and rebellious as their own kids.

With sympathy, humor and truth, Schine explores the intrusion of old age into a large and loving family. Schine's *THEY MAY NOT MEAN TO, BUT THEY DO* is a radiantly compassionate look at three generations, all coming of age together.

## Discussion Guide

### Introduction

Acclaimed for blending wry humor and crystal-clear truth, Cathleen Schine now explores the quandaries of eldercare through the eyes of a vibrant matriarch who has no interest in aging gracefully. Joy Bergman has stood by her husband for nearly a lifetime, but as he slips further into dementia and their finances dwindle, she faces exasperating choices.

When their well-intentioned children try to intervene, they aren't prepared for their mother's rebellious streak, especially when an old flame enters her life. A radiant, compassionate look at three generations --- including in-laws, ex-in-laws and same-sex spouses --- **THEY MAY NOT MEAN TO, BUT THEY DO** is a modern take on timeless questions of love and loyalty.

We hope that the following guide will enhance your experience of this exuberant, heartwarming novel.

### **Questions and Topics for Discussion**

- 1.** How do the aging parents described in the novel compare to your relatives? Who will your long-term caregivers be when you're not able to care for yourself?
- 2.** Aaron is "sentimental and unreliable and brimming with love and obvious charm," while Joy is "distracted, forgetful, thoughtful, brimming with love, too." How were Molly and Daniel affected by having lovebirds for parents? In their own marriages, and as parents themselves, are Molly and Daniel very different from their parents?
- 3.** As Aaron and Duncan lose their grip on reality, which one fares better?
- 4.** What is the ultimate role of Walter, Wanda and Elvira? How does Joy navigate the fact that they are paid workers, yet they are performing deeply personal work for a family that has become attached to them?
- 5.** Cathleen Schine is a master of tragicomedy. Which scenes made you laugh out loud, inappropriately?
- 6.** Where should Freddie and Coco fit into the decision-making for their in-laws? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being on the fringes of a family in crisis?
- 7.** Is "selling Upstate" the best solution to Joy's financial conundrum? Should children help pay for their parents' retirement?
- 8.** How does Joy's life as a museum conservator reflect her perception of the past?
- 9.** Chapter 41 is just two sentences long: "Daniel asked his mother if she was depressed. She said, "Naturally."" What do these seemingly simple sentences say about the nature of grief?
- 10.** How do you predict Ben, Cora and Ruby will treat their aging parents?
- 11.** Would you have said yes to Karl's proposition, even if it meant giving up a rent-controlled apartment?
- 12.** In the closing scene, as Joy helps Ben with a legal situation, why does she finally feel at home? What does she want her purpose in life to be?

13. In the last paragraph of chapter 20, Joy turns the Philip Larkin lines cited in the epigraph on their head; in her version, 'they' refers to the children, not the parents. What do her children mean to do, and why do they create such havoc for her?

14. In each of her novels, which portraits of companionship and solitude does Cathleen Schine create? How do her characters tolerate loneliness, and each other?

## Author Bio

Cathleen Schine is the author of *KÜNSTLERS IN PARADISE*, *THE GRAMMARIANS*, *THE THREE WEISSMANNS OF WESTPORT* and *THE LOVE LETTER*, among other novels. She has contributed to *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Times Book Review*. She lives in Los Angeles.

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