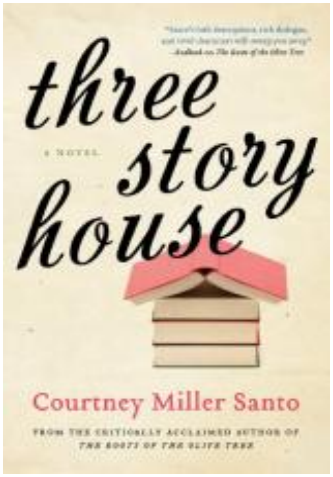
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Three Story House

by Courtney Miller Santo



About the Book

Renovating an historic Memphis house together, three cousins discover that their spectacular failures in love, career, and family provide the foundation for their future happiness in this warm and poignant novel from the author of THE ROOTS OF THE OLIVE TREE that is reminiscent of THE POSTMISTRESS, THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES and Kristin Hannah's novels.

Nearing thirty and trying to avoid the inescapable fact that they have failed to live up to everyone's expectations and their own aspirations, cousins and childhood best friends Lizzie, Elyse, and Isobel seek respite in an oddly-shaped, three-story house that sits on a bluff sixty feet above the Mississippi.

As they work to restore the almost condemned house, each woman faces uncomfortable truths about their own failings. Lizzie seeks answers to a long-held family secret about her father in her grandmother's jumble of mementos and the home's hidden spaces. Elyse's obsession with an old flame leads her to a harrowing mistake that threatens to destroy her sister's wedding, and Isobel's quest for celebrity tempts her to betray confidences in ways that would irreparably damage her two cousins.

Told in three parts from the perspective of each of the women, this sharply observed account of the restoration of a house built out of spite, but filled with memories of love is also an account of friendship and how relying on each other's insights and strengths provides the women a way to get what they need instead of what they want.

Discussion Guide

1. Until their great-great-grandmother points it out to them, none of the cousins realizes that all of their names are variants of the same name. What similarities are there between the women? Why do you think they share the same name? How do our cousins often represent lives that we could have had?

2. The book is divided into three stories and Spite House has three stories. How does each of the women?s stories connect to the house they live in while they are trying to get their lives back on track?

3. Despite being close to one another, each of the women keeps information from the others. What are their motivations in doing so? What do you keep secret from those close to you?

4. Memphis is an important setting in the book. How does the city specifically and the South generally affect each of the women and the choices they make? Lizzie believes that living in Memphis on a fault line with the ever-present threat of earthquakes has affected the way she looks at life. Can living in a place where natural disasters could hit at any moment influence the choices a person makes?

5. Throughout the novel, the cousins find refuge in the water. Discuss the symbolism of the bodies of water --- primarily the Mississippi River and the Massachusetts Bay in this novel.

6. Why do you think Lizzie keeps thinking she has a chance at returning to her soccer team, even after she receives bad news about her knee? When should people give up on their dreams? When are the obstacles too great?

7. Elyse doesn?t know how to fall out of love with Landon. How do you think her fascination with other people?s problems contributes to her unhealthy fixation on Landon? Do you know people like her? Have you ever had an irrational, one-sided relationship?

8. Like Lizzie, Isobel experienced success early. How does having your dreams come true early affect the rest of your life? What can a person hope to achieve if she peaks early?

9. Toward the beginning of the novel, the cousins decide to think of their year in the house as ?their very last year.? In what ways do they make decisions based on this idea? How would you make decisions if you knew the world as you know it was going to end? What risks would you take?

10. Do you think Lizzie?s parents kept secret the information about who her father was to protect Lizzie or to protect themselves? When are children old enough to be told about the complicated histories of their parents?

Author Bio

Courtney Miller Santo teaches creative writing to college students and lives in Memphis with her husband, two children and retired racing greyhound.

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