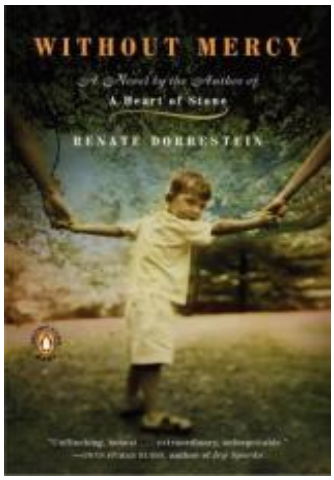
Without Mercy

by Renate Dorrestein



About the Book

Reminiscent of Andre Dubus's critically acclaimed **In the Bedroom** and Joyce Carol Oates's **We Were the Mulvaneys**, Renate Dorrestein's new novel explores the undercurrents of married life and the world of today's teenagers.

"Perfect" was the word both for Phinus and Franka Vermeer's marriage and their teenage son, Jem, but in the wake of his senseless murder, grief drives a wedge between them. Determined to resurrect the joy they once knew, the couple embarks on a weekend in the country to mend their fraying relationship. Their marital troubles, however, run deeper than they realize. Suspenseful, tragic, and strangely touching, **Without Mercy** portrays the preciousness of everyday happiness.

Discussion Guide

1. How do Franka's and Phinus's styles of grieving differ? How much of these differing styles are due to gender? Do Franka and Phinus follow predictable male/female emotional patterns here?

2. What did you notice about the story that struck you as particularly Dutch? Do Dutch marriages seem similar to American marriages? What about Dutch teenage life or the way parents treat their children? What elements struck you as universal?

3. What is the significance of Phinus's career as a board game developer? Is Dorrestein making a comment on Phinus's character? What does Franka's preference for jigsaw puzzles reveal about her?

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5. How is Phinus affected by being an orphan? How does his history drive his behavior throughout the story? Does it make him more likely to want to have a child of his own, even under the most inappropriate circumstances?

6. Are all families, in the end, somewhat dysfunctional? Can you think of any family you have ever known that has not had a secret, a tragedy or some significant challenge it has had to face? Given our vulnerability, can we ever relax into happiness or must all our happiness be tinged with the knowing of how fragile our happiness is?

7. One of Franka and Phinus's biggest fights occurs around Franka's seeming compassion for the perpetrator's fate and family, which Phinus interprets as a betrayal. Is Franka's compassion here real or is she refusing to go deeper and experience her own anger?

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9. Phinus and Franka suffer terribly from survivors' guilt. What is survivors' guilt? Is there anything useful that could come from survivors' guilt? Might Phinus and Franka one day decide to live their lives more fully or make their marriage the best it could be, in honor of their son's memory?

10. If you were to write an epilogue to this story, what would you write? Do Franka and Phinus stay together? If so, how is their relationship changed? Does Sanne have the baby?

Author Bio

Renate Dorrestein, the award-winning author of **A Heart of Stone**, is one of the Netherlands' best loved and bestselling novelists. **Without Mercy** is the second of her novels to be translated into English.

Critical Praise

"A novel that gradually unfolds through measured prose, revealing characters drawn with knife-sharp clarity... One of those books one can't forget. "--- *The Baltimore Sun*"Brilliantly crafted... An extraordinary, unforgettable writer."--- Gwyn Hyman Rubio, author of **Icy Sparks**

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