

MARRYING THE KETCHUPS

READERS' GUIDE

“*Marrying the Ketchups* mercilessly (and hilariously) skewers the indignities of modern romance, the absurdities of family life, the tribalism of the American Midwest. Jennifer Close’s fourth book is a rare feat—a genuinely funny comic novel that is cutting but never cruel, with the ambition to explore the impact of contemporary political tumult on everyday life.”

—Rumaan Alam, best-selling author of *Leave the World Behind*

The introduction, discussion questions, author biography, and suggestions for further reading that follow are meant to enliven your group’s discussion of *Marrying the Ketchups*, Jennifer Close’s wickedly funny and delicious comedy of manners and ideas. Set in Chicago in 2016, this is a story of America at a turning point: Hillary Clinton has just lost the presidential election, hundreds of thousands of people have joined the Women’s March, and, perhaps most shockingly for the characters in this richly populated midwestern novel, the Chicago Cubs have won the World Series. The comedy is set at this tumultuous moment in our history, where changes both global and local have sent characters reeling, unsure of how they might move forward in a strange and surprising world where anything seems possible.

Introduction

At the novel’s center are two young women and a young man, a pair of sisters and their cousin, who are each at a crossroads in their life. Gretchen is a talented musician, a singer who long felt destined for fame, who is now questioning the likelihood of that dream. Jane is her older sister, a mother of two and bookkeeper at the family restaurant, married to a man she no longer trusts. Their cousin Teddy is the general manager at the restaurant, hardworking, devoted to the Sullivan family, but always slightly relegated to the outside, unable to claim ownership of the place he loves so dearly. All of these three struggle with their own agency, each hoping for a life of romantic fulfillment, professional success, and familial harmony, yet each begins the novel trapped: by their talents, their romantic failures, and their fears.

It’s Gretchen’s arrival in Chicago that sets much of the novel’s events in motion. When she discovers that her boyfriend and fellow bandmate is cheating on her she quits, leaving New York and driving home, where she assumes there will be a place for her at Sullivan’s, her grandfather’s restaurant. Teddy is happy to welcome Gretchen home, but less enthusiastic about sharing his job. Teddy is nursing heartbreak of his own, still pining for his ex-boyfriend, sleeping with Walter even though he knows it’s a mistake. Jane discovers her husband is in love with another woman and they separate, leaving Jane to spend long and surprisingly happy evenings at the restaurant, flirting with the bartender, and crowding Gretchen’s small apartment. When Walter’s half sister, Riley, an occasional hostess at Sullivan’s, creates a social media maelstrom, her actions put an unexpected spotlight on each cousin, and their secrets and mistakes are laid bare. This is a comedy that illuminates the way change truly arrives in our lives: unexpectedly, clumsily, and, when we are lucky, with the grace and help of those who love us best. Thanks to

Jennifer Close's deft comic gifts, her flawless ear for dialogue, and her masterly skill for juxtaposing the personal and the political, her book is both social commentary and a truly immersive read.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. At the opening of the novel Gretchen is based in New York. Why might Close have chosen to begin outside Chicago? How does this help the reader understand what home means to her?
2. Teddy occasionally feels excluded from the Sullivan family, as though Jane and Gretchen somehow belong more than he does. How does the story of his half sister, Riley, illuminate what it means to be part of this close-knit group?
3. The recent political election has caused Jane to chafe against her suburban neighborhood of Lake Forest. She wonders if she would be happier in Oak Park, where her neighbors would be more likely to agree with her politics. How important is it to feel you belong in your neighborhood? Is it better to surround ourselves with those who share our opinions or to interact with those who are different?
4. Teddy, Gretchen, and Jane all visit their grandmother, Rose, at her assisted living facility. Rose is unhappy there, longing for home. What does it mean that Rose refuses to eat meals in the dining room? What is Close saying about the power of food and community? Are the Sullivans doing the right thing by Rose?
5. The novel is cut through with scenes from the World Series, showing where each character was when the Cubs won in 2016. Why did Close choose to structure the novel in this way? What insights do these scenes offer the reader?
6. Teddy often regards himself as the moral center of the family. He visits Rose, he takes care of his half sister, he tries to improve the restaurant. How does his affair with Walter undermine his view of himself? How does it change his relationship with Jane?
7. When Teddy asks Gretchen to watch Riley she lets her go see her friend Ashley. "[S]he hadn't seen her friends outside of school in weeks, and Gretchen could tell that she needed to . . . Gretchen felt like she'd done the right thing, like she'd done a good deed for Riley in the land of teenagers." What is Gretchen's mistake? Who has Gretchen really betrayed?

8. When Riley posts a viral video about her classmate, Bobby, his parents threaten to sue and Riley ends up in terrible trouble. How does this story intersect with the opening of the book at the Women's March? How does this event cause Gretchen to examine her own teenage years? Should Riley be punished, or was she sticking up for herself in the only way she knew how to?

9. Sullivan's is a traditional restaurant, with white tablecloths and a menu that rarely changes. This is contrasted with their neighbors at the brewery, who offer watermelon beer and have decorated their space with airplanes and cats. Why are Teddy's mother, aunt, and uncle so reluctant to update Sullivan's? How does this conflict speak to the larger themes of change and progress in the novel?

10. At the end of the novel are the characters better off than they were at the beginning? How does Gretchen's career choice feel? How has Jane made her own life easier and harder? What has Teddy learned about himself?

About This Author

JENNIFER CLOSE is the best-selling author of *Girls in White Dresses*, *The Smart One*, and *The Hopefuls*. Born and raised on the North Shore of Chicago, she is a graduate of Boston College and received her MFA in Fiction Writing from the New School. She now lives in Washington, DC, and teaches creative writing at Catapult.

Suggested Reading

Stephanie Danler, *Sweetbitter*; Katherine Heiny, *Early Morning Riser*; J. Courtney Sullivan, *Maine*; Grant Ginder, *The People We Hate at the Wedding*; Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity*; Nita Prose, *The Maid*; Jay McInerney, *Brightness Falls* and *The Good Life*; Curtis Sittenfeld, *Prep*; Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*; Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Rose's Bloody Mary Recipe

Ingredients

2½ oz. vodka
¾ cup tomato juice
2 Tbsp. lemon juice
2 Tbsp. pickle juice
1 Tbsp. bacon bits
2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
2 dashes hot sauce
¼ tsp. prepared horseradish
1 pinch celery salt
1 pinch black pepper
To garnish: leafy celery stalks, sliced lemon, and green olives

Directions

1. Combine the vodka, tomato juice, lemon juice, pickle juice, bacon bits, Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, horseradish, celery salt, and black pepper in a tall glass. Stir well to combine. Fill the remainder of the glass with ice and stir once again.
2. Garnish with a piece of celery, a slice of lemon, and a green olive.

Gretchen's Playlist

"Torn" by Natalie Imbruglia

"Dreams" and "Linger" by the Cranberries

"Ants Marching" by Dave Matthews Band

"Better Man" by Pearl Jam

"Untouchable Face" by Ani DiFranco

"Nothing Compares 2 U" by Sinéad O'Connor

"Glory Box" by Portishead

"Paper Bag" by Fiona Apple

"Nightswimming" by R.E.M.

"Cannonball" by the Breeders