

READING GROUP GUIDE

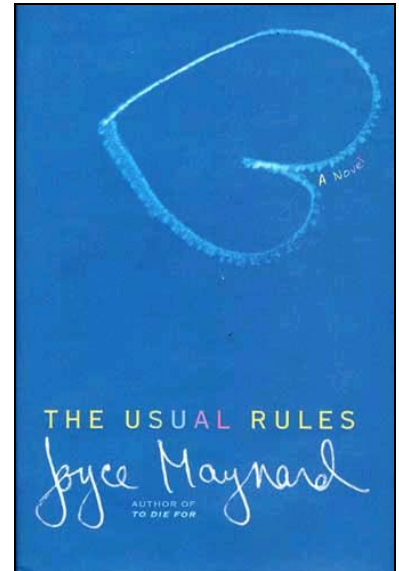
The Usual Rules

by Joyce Maynard

St. Martin's Press

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Introduction to *The Usual Rules*

It's a Tuesday morning in Brooklyn—a perfect September day. Wendy is heading to school, eager to make plans with her best friend, worried about how she looks, mad at her mother for not letting her visit her father in California, impatient with her little brother and with the almost too-loving concern of her jazz musician stepfather. She's out the door to catch the bus. An hour later comes the news: A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center. Her mother's building

Through the eyes of thirteen-year-old Wendy, we gain entrance to the world rarely shown by those who documented the events of that one terrible day: a family's slow and terrible realization that Wendy's mother has died, and their struggle to go on with their lives in the face of crushing loss.

Absent for years, Wendy's real father shows up without warning. He takes her back with him to California, where she re-invents a life that comes to include a teenage mother, living on her own in a one-room apartment with a TV set and not much else; her father's cactus-grower girlfriend, newly reconnected with the son she gave up for adoption twenty years before; a sad and tender bookstore owner who introduces her to the voice of Anne Frank and to his autistic son; and a homeless skateboarder, on a mission to find his long-lost brother.

Over the winter and spring that follow, Wendy moves between the alternately painful and reassuring memories of her mother and the revelations that come with growing to know her real father for the first time. Pulled between her old life in Brooklyn and a new one three thousands miles away, Wendy is faced with a world where the usual rules no longer apply but eventually discovers a strength and capacity for compassion and survival that she never knew she possessed.

At the core of the story is Wendy's deep connection with her little brother, back in New York, who is

grieving the loss of their mother without her. This is a story about the ties of siblings, about children who lose their parents, parents who lose their children, and the unexpected ways they sometimes find one another again. Set against the backdrop of global and personal tragedy, and written in a style alternately wry and heartbreaking, *The Usual Rules* is an unexpectedly hopeful story of healing and forgiveness that will offer readers, young and old alike, a picture of how, out of the rubble, a family rebuilds its life.

Praise for *The Usual Rules*

"Wordsworth's prescription for successful poetic writing called for emotion recollected in tranquillity, but in the post-millennial world his advice is decidedly outdated. As if to prove it, a mere 18 months after the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the intrepid Joyce Maynard has delivered one of the first novels incorporating that day's horrific events...[The author's] gift for creating realistic and heartfelt domestic moments succeeds in convincing us that Wendy has found a reason to go on in the midst of her tremendous sorrow, and that she, like her heroine Anne Frank, still believes 'in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.'"

—**The New York Times Book Review**

"Haunting ... Maynard's fictional survivor provides deeper solace than the spiritual cheerleading that often applies to coping with loss in our culture... Maynard's feel for the workings of a 13-year-old's internal voice distinguishes *The Usual Rules* in the same way writer Judy Blume did a generation earlier in *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* ... [Maynard] speaks to a generation of young girls who are trying to navigate through a culture of loss, of wanting to belong to a family and at the same time free themselves from the usual rules ... [She] explores the idea of family as much as she examines the culture of loss."

—**Kathy Balog, USA Today**

"Joyce Maynard takes us into the heart and mind of a thirteen-year-old girl struggling to come to terms with her mother's death. What so many of us wondered about—and what most of us feared—is captured perfectly in these pages; the horror, the disbelief, the unspeakable grief, and the painfully slow recovery that come hand-in-hand with such a sudden and senseless loss."

—**Hope Edelman, author *Motherless Daughters***

"Joyce Maynard has taken a timely subject and found in it those timeless aspects of human experience that sometimes make fiction more truthful than fact. Any reader who has suffered great loss—loss of love, of certainty, of trust in the usual rules—will empathize with, and be comforted by, Maynard's wonderfully authentic characters. The story of their journey from devastation to hope is honest, heartrending, compassionate, and, in the end, profoundly healing. A jewel."

—**Martha Beck, author of *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth and Everyday Magic***

"Every now and then I'll finish a stellar book and think, 'I wish I'd written that.' *The Usual Rules* is one of these—a heartbreaking, haunting, perfectly pitched novel about a young girl who loses everything one sunny September morning, and manages to find herself in the midst of it all. If we are still learning lessons post 9/11, then Maynard's book should be required reading: to help us remember how we used to be, and to celebrate the stronger, spirited people we are capable of becoming."

—**Jodi Picoult, author of *Perfect Match* and *Second Place***

"Out of violence, sorrow, and loss, Maynard has crafted a miracle: a heartbreaking and ultimately hopeful novel that has much to say about families and the ways in which they support and fail each other. At the heart of *The Usual Rules* is this: love and understanding are the means by which we save ourselves."—**Anne LeClaire, author of *Leaving Eden* and *Entering Normal***

"Joyce Maynard has written the story we all imagined but dared not tackle—what happens to a postmillennial Wendy thrust into a Neverland she could never have imagined."

—**Jacqueline Mitchard, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean***

"She seems to deeply understand a teenager's grief. Readers...will find it impossible not to root for Wendy as she figures out how to get on with her life."—***People***

"Joyce Maynard . . . conveys with poignancy and realism Wendy's struggle to cope with her mother's disappearance. As she finds her own way through the rubble and discovers pockets of hope and optimism in her future, Wendy serves as an inspiration for anyone touched by tragedy, at any age."

—***Bookpage***

"Maynard offers a sensitive account of how 13-year-old Wendy copes with the death of her mother."—***Library Journal***

"In the aftermath of September 11, the usual rules don't apply, as this sometimes wrenching, ultimately cathartic novel shows . . . This is a well-wrought and heartfelt portrayal of the people [such tragedies can leave] behind."—**Michele Leber, *Booklist***

"While the first fifty-odd pages of Maynard's new novel are emotionally harrowing, perseverance is rewarded. Set both in Brooklyn and the small town of Davis, California, following the events of September 11, the book tells the coming-of-age story of a girl whose mother goes to work one morning and doesn't come back . . . The intense subject matter and well-crafted flashbacks make for a worthy read . . . Readers will find the novel an honest and touching story of personal loss, explored with sensitivity and tact. Maynard brings national tragedy to a personal level, and while the loss and heartache of her characters are certainly fictional, the emotions her story provokes are very real."

—***Publishers Weekly***

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Following the death of her mother, would you expect a young girl in Wendy's situation to be more emotional and less in control than she appeared? Is it believable that she behaved as she did?
2. If you have lost a parent—at whatever age the loss occurred—talk about how the experience changed you.
3. What was your initial impression of Garrett? How did your feelings about the man change over the course of the novel?
4. What did you feel about Wendy's decision to go to California? Should Josh have prohibited her leaving?
5. Did you anticipate the source of Louie's dismay on his birthday? Do you think the author wanted you to do so?

6. How do you feel about Josh becoming involved with Kate?
7. What do you consider to be the function of Violet? Of Tim? Of Carolyn's son? Of Todd? Do they serve a function in the story or distract you from the main action surrounding Wendy and her family?
8. What do you think about Garrett's decision to let Wendy skip school after finding out that she was not attending ninth grade in Davis?
9. What is the significance of the title, *The Usual Rules*?
10. What do you envision will be the issues that arise in Wendy's future? Are you hopeful that she can go on to live a happy and healthy life after this kind of trauma and loss?

About the Author

Joyce Maynard has been a journalist and fiction writer for many years. Her books include the novel *To Die For* and the memoir *At Home in the World*. She currently divides her time between Northern California and Guatemala.