

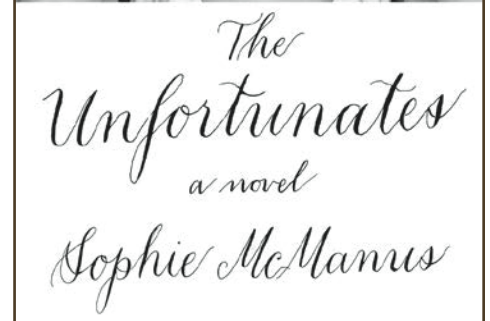
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

The Unfortunates

A Novel

by **Sophie McManus**



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If you are in the New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, or Pennsylvania area with a public transportation link to New York City, the author would be delighted to join your book club discussion of The Unfortunates. If you are farther away, she's happy to join you via Skype.

To check availability, send your request to info@sophiemcmanus.com.

By turns heartbreaking and hilarious, *The Unfortunates* is the story of an aging heiress who, afflicted with a rare disease, must confront the dual disappointment of her ne'er-do-well son and her estranged daughter. Touched by mortality for the first time, Cecilia Somner struggles to reconcile her gilded, bygone values with the encroaching modern world—even when that world offers her a clinical drug trial that could make her well again, at great profit to Wall Street investors, of course. As her son's obsessions grow ever more delusional, his wife (an outsider to their blue-blooded realm) weaves a tangled web of secrets and lies in a naive attempt to save them from ruin. A tragicomic meditation on the corrupting power of wealth and the healing power of imperfect love, *The Unfortunates* is a storytelling triumph.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's experience of this extraordinary debut novel.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did your perceptions of CeCe, George, and Iris shift as you learned more about them? Whose predicament resonated with you the most?
2. How does CeCe's mind-set change as she copes with MSA (multiple system atrophy) and finds hope in a pharmacological solution? What does *The Unfortunates* tell us about the things money can't buy, and about the ways we measure success in life?
3. Discuss the role of real estate as a catalyst in the novel. How does Booth Hill compare to George and Iris's house, and to the Kingsgate Estates development?
4. As their situations change, CeCe and Iris see their possessions in a new light. As you read the descriptions of their possessions, what came to mind? What items would appear on your list of cherished personal possessions, and what not-so-cherished ones wouldn't?
5. Discuss the relationships of the less prominent characters (Victor and Bill, Pat and Lotta, Otto and Dotty, Bob and Martha). What do they illustrate about the nature of long-term love?
6. If you were Iris, would you have trusted Bob? Is Tryphon Capital nobler than Somner Industries?
7. Chapter 36 begins with the observation that CeCe's actions are both a strange kind of justice and a strange kind of injustice. In your opinion, what would just deserts look like for George and Iris?
8. Does George's opera reflect his view of the world, or was he misunderstood? If you were CeCe, how would you have responded to your son after listening to his dreadful "masterpiece"? Would George's life have been different if his father hadn't rejected him?
9. How do the shadows of CeCe's father and grandfather influence her relationships? What are the traits of her ideal man? What gives her the confidence to believe that she is an ideal woman who does things correctly while others fail? Did CeCe have different expectations for her children based on their gender? How does the dynamic between George and Pat compare to that between you and your sibling(s)?
10. Would you enjoy Esme's job?
11. Explore the novel's title. What determines the characters' fates? Why doesn't the Somner family fortune—and wealth in general—always ensure happiness? How are the characters' personalities reflected in the way they handle money?
12. What does 3D mean to the various people who take care of him?

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13. How does the author balance poignant scenes with irreverent humor? What are the novel's most comic images? Which aspects of the story line were the most moving?
14. In the closing scene, Pat says she doesn't understand why Iris wrote the letter and mailed it to Stockport. What does this say about the differences between Pat and Iris? How would you answer Pat? What do you predict for Cecilia's future, and Douglas's?

PRAISE FOR *THE UNFORTUNATES*

"Sophie McManus . . . is an incisive, surprising prose stylist, and her debut novel heralds an exciting new talent with an old soul." —Christine Schutt, author of *Prosperous Friends*

"Sophie McManus's stunning debut novel revisits American money and brilliantly reconfigures the tradition of fiction about the very rich. What is truly rich about this first novel is the language—lucid, quick, accessible, and yet almost cubist in its syntactical swerves and surprising word choices—with which McManus invests the inner lives of the Somners, mother, son, and daughter-in-law, three unforgettable and finally poignant protagonists." —Jaimy Gordon, author of *Lord of Misrule*

"McManus writes with brio and with humor and with immense sympathy. The virtuosity in these pages is astonishing, but just as astonishing is this novel's abiding heart." —Joshua Henkin, author of *The World Without You* and *Matrimony*

"A big, chewy novel written with comic panache and an infectious tenderness toward the blunders of its heroes. *The Unfortunates* is both a mirror on the income inequality of the current moment and a social novel in the old, grand plotty mode: voracious for detail and punctuated by gasp-inducing turns of fate. Its subjects are money and the people unfortunate enough to have it. Who knew the rich deserved so much to be pitied?" —Salvatore Scibona, author of *The End*

"In finely etched detail as sharp as shards of glass, Sophie McManus reveals in *The Unfortunates* the corrupting power of wealth and the myriad ways it infects individual lives and families. As relevant as it is compulsively readable, this wonderfully composed triptych of Somners—Cecilia, the aging matriarch; her troubled son, George; and his outsider wife, Iris—functions as the heart of this novel about the potential monstrousness of privilege, and the responsibility of facing one's legacy." —Amanda Coplin, author of *The Orchardist*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie McManus was born in New York City and received her MFA in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts, and the Jentel Foundation. Her work has appeared in *American Short Fiction* and *Tin House*, among other publications. *The Unfortunates* is her first book. For more information, visit www.sophiemcmanus.com.

Guide written by Amy Clements