

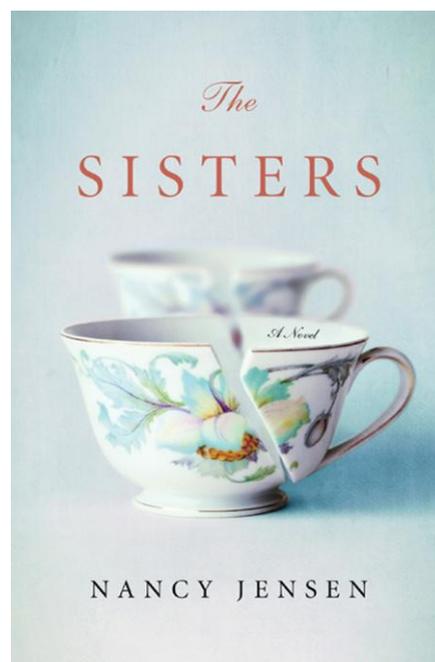


The Sisters

by Nancy Jensen

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Sisters* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Sisters*.

About the Book

Growing up in hardscrabble Kentucky in the 1920s, with their mother dead and their stepfather an ever-present threat, Bertie Fisher and her older sister Mabel have no one but each other—with perhaps a sweetheart for Bertie waiting in the wings. But on the day that Mabel receives her eighth-grade diploma, good intentions go terribly wrong, setting off a chain of misunderstandings that will send the sisters on separate paths and reverberate through their daughters' and granddaughters' lives.

What happens when nothing turns out as you planned? From the Depression through World War II and Vietnam, and smaller events both tragic and joyful. Bertie and Mabel forge unexpected identities and raise daughters—and sisters—of their own, learning that love and betrayal are even more complicated than they seem. Gorgeously written, with extraordinary insight and emotional truth, Nancy Jensen's debut novel illuminates the far-reaching power of family and family secrets.

Praise for *The Sisters*

"I've rarely seen a novel that moves through a number of characters in such a sure-footed and always rewarding way. I really could not put it down. Nancy Jensen has the natural story-teller's ability to

command attention, but with sophisticated psychological understanding and beautifully crafted writing. *The Sisters* is a needed novel that will become a very popular classic."

-- Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Adam & Eve: A Novel* and *Ahab's Wife*.

"The American Dream has most often been a myth, particularly for women, with reality usually being a hardscrabble life with survival being the main goal. In *The Sisters*, Mabel and Bertie and their succeeding generations span the 20th century and their struggles mirror those of the society surrounding them. While crucial decisions and misunderstandings often lead to tragedy for the women of the two families, the characters demonstrate a strength and resilience that enables each to eventually triumph and lead a life of substance on their own terms....Readers will be both provoked and moved by this story of two sisters whose lives are lived apart yet, in the end, always tied by the bonds of blood and love."

--Bill Cusumano, *Nicola's Books*, Ann Arbor, MI

About the Author

NANCY JENSEN is a graduate of the MFA in Writing Program at Vermont College. Her short stories and essays have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Northwest Review*, *Other Voices*, *Under the Sun*, and *The Louisville Review*. She lives in Kentucky, where she was awarded an Artist Enrichment Grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women and an Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council. This is her first novel.



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Discussion Questions

1. There are many secrets in *The Sisters*, beginning with Mabel's decision not to tell Bertie about Jim Butcher. In trying to understand her sister's behavior, fourteen-year-old Bertie wonders if "the things she didn't know were what kept her safe." What secrets do other characters keep, and how do you think the secrets ultimately help or hurt their loved ones?
2. How does the period in which each woman comes of age affect her experience and shape her outlook on what is possible?
3. How do the main characters perceive loyalty? Betrayal? What do you think of their perceptions?

4. How do Bertie's girlhood losses affect her daughters' and granddaughters' relationships with men?
5. Bertie, Alma, and Lynn are accused by other characters of being hard and cold. How do you see them? To what extent do you think they change in the course of the novel?
6. At the end of her life, Bertie struggles to cry out to Rainey and Lynn, "*Forgive. Forgive.*" Why do you believe some characters are able to forgive and others not? Do you believe everything can or should be forgiven?
7. What does the novel suggest about whether families are born or made?
8. When Daisy expresses her concern that Mabel is setting herself up for emotional pain by photographing young men bound for Vietnam, Mabel tells Daisy, "You can't protect yourself from loss." Do you think this is true? What happens to the characters in the novel, and to people in your experience, when they try?
9. In her interview with Ed Bradley, Mabel says, "I don't think any real war [is ever over]—large, small, between countries, between people. Even the wars inside ourselves. Something always remains." Do you agree—in the novel and/or in real life?
10. *The Sisters* is structured as a series of chronological, interlocking narratives, sometimes with strikingly different perspectives of the same events. In what ways does this structure reflect the experience of an individual within a family?
11. Bertie tells Grace, "Something can happen to change your life so sudden, you can't get over it fast enough...And that changes things for them too, all in a line." Do you think that happens in most people's lives at one time or another? If so, is the chain reaction inevitable, or can someone choose to break the chain?
12. How were you affected when Bertie wrote *Deceased* on the letter from Mabel, and Mabel later decided not to follow up on Nick's possible lead about Bertie's whereabouts? Can you imagine either of them acting differently? Did you find the conclusion satisfying?

Essay

When I was about ten or eleven years old, my sister pushed me into our room and whispered that our grandmother, who had been upset all day, had received a letter telling her that her sister was dead. I knew about my grandmother's brothers, but this was the first time I'd ever heard mention of a sister. I tried to ask questions, but my sister shushed me, telling me I must never ask anyone, and especially not Grandma, about this. Later, my mother repeated the same admonition, but I couldn't stop thinking about this estranged sister.

Over the years, fragments of the family lore surrounding the sister trickled down to me—though my grandmother still kept silent. I heard the sister was a tramp and a gold-digger. Sometimes it was implied that this was why she had been cast out of the family, but other times

it was suggested she had turned her back on them. I could understand how someone might reject a family member. I could understand how a person might speak badly of the one who had been rejected. But I could not understand, and I could not stop wanting to know, what kind of offense or betrayal could result in one sister's deciding to erase another, as if she had never existed. My grandmother died without sharing the intricacies of her story, so I knew if I was ever going to have an answer to my question, I'd have to write it myself.

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