

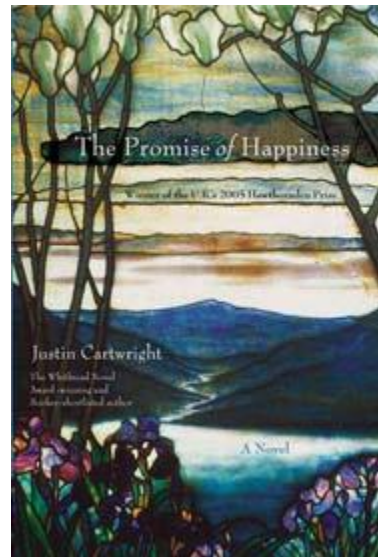
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Promise of Happiness

By Justin Cartwright

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Promise of Happiness* 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 Promise of Happiness*.

About the Book

A powerful elegy to the intimacies and idiocies of family, *The Promise of Happiness* tells the story of an apparently ordinary family on the cusp of an extraordinary moment: the return of the family's prodigal daughter, Juliet. Her release from an upstate New York prison throws the Judds, formerly of London but now scattered, back together.

For her father, Juliet's conviction for a theft she may not have committed had proven the disintegration of a dying society. For her mother, it is a source not only of resentment, but bafflement. And for all of the Judds, it is a moment of both intense joy and confusion.

As Justin Cartwright's novel opens, Juliet's parents await her release and return to England. Charlie, their capable and successful son, has been charged with collecting her and softening her reentry into the world, his own life unsettled meanwhile by his glamorous girlfriend's pregnancy and his ambivalence towards it. Sophie, the youngest and most rebellious sibling, is in the midst of getting her chaotic life (mostly) under control. And Juliet herself is wounded, the perfect daughter made scapegoat for a victimless crime.



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With searching perception and gentle humor, Justin Cartwright gradually reveals the inner struggles of the five disparate Judds as they grapple with their conflicting feelings for each other and the moral dilemmas that beset them, bringing them finally together in what is ultimately a celebration of the layers and universal oddness of the love of a family.

About the Author

Justin Cartwright has won the Whitbread Prize, for which he has been shortlisted five times; he has also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the South African M-Net Prize, and the CNA Prize. This is his eighth novel and the third he has published in the U.S. He lives in London.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How effective did you find the prologue as an introduction to the novel?
- 2) Charlie tells Sophie: 'Dad doesn't want to be happy, Soph. There are some people who don't believe in the promise of happiness' (page 22). When Charlie asks Ju-Ju why she is carrying small dumbbells she replies playfully 'I'm making good on the promise of happiness' (page 36). Why do you think Justin Cartwright chose 'The Promise of Happiness' as the book's title? What do you think he means by it? How appropriate did you find it?
- 3) How would you describe Charles and Daphne's marriage? How has their relationship been affected by Ju-Ju's imprisonment? How different are their reactions to her incarceration, and how do those reactions compare to those of Charlie and Sophie?
- 4) 'The empty, windswept landscape of her life is peopled again' (page 100). What prompts Daphne to think this? Why does she describe her world as empty?
- 5) Charlie carefully plans a gentle re-entry into the world for Ju-Ju. How would you describe the relationship between the two siblings? How does it compare with Charlie's relationship with his girlfriend, Ana, and with Charles' feelings for Ju-Ju?
- 6) 'We must get over believing that she is not guilty,' says Sophie. 'But exactly how guilty is she?' (page 134). How would Ju-Ju answer this? Why has she decided to take the rap? How has her view changed by the end of the book?
- 7) 'Professor Williams says that the idea of a good father is problematic. We know what a father is, he says, but the rest of the proposition is entirely subjective' (page 282). Do you think Charles has been a good father? How good a mother is Daphne?



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8) 'The Judd family is disintegrating. Or perhaps it is just going through a cycle of change...' (page 219). What do you think? How typical would you say the Judd family is?

9) Resurrection is a recurring motif in the book. It is the subject of the Tiffany window which was the cause of Ju-Ju's problems, and of the window that Davis Lyendecker finds himself under at Charlie and Ana's wedding. What do you think Cartwright means by it?

10) 'In my next life I will be bold and free.' (page 92). The narrative is written in the third person, switching from character to character, but very occasionally Cartwright intersperses it with first person comments. What effect does this have? Why do you think he chose this style? How well does he capture the voices of the novel's radically different characters?

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