



Reading Group Gold

Sweet and Low A Family Story

by Rich Cohen

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Sweet and Low* 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 *Sweet and Low*.



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About the Book

Sweet and Low is the bittersweet, hilarious story of Ben Eisenstadt, who invented sugar packets and Sweet 'N Low, and amassed the great fortune that would later destroy his family. It is a story of immigrants, Jewish gangsters, and Brooklyn; of sugar, saccharine, obesity, and diet crazes; of jealousy, betrayal, and ambition. Disinherited along with his mother and siblings, Rich Cohen has written a rancorous, colorful history of his extraordinary family and their pursuit of the American dream.

“How decadent to indulge in Rich Cohen’s rollicking account of his family and the business it built. . . . Cohen has a terrific eye for detail, the little things that affix people and places in our memories, the gestures and miscues that shape family history. . . . It’s a guilty pleasure—sort of like sugar without calories.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A wildly addictive, high-octane narrative. Cohen sashays with boisterous panache from the history of the sugar trade to grandmother Betty’s brooch. . . . He moves from journalistic objectivity to the intensely personal with ease, enjoying the kind of access that historians almost never get.” —*The Washington Post*

“It is Cohen’s good fortune to be on the side of the family that was disinherited. Sweet revenge is the energy behind this glorious book.” —*Time*

“Cohen tells a fascinating story about family bonds in his quest to discover why his mother was cast out. His skewering of his relatives is merciless. . . . Plenty of writers have dissected their less-than-perfect families. Dealing with the issue with this much heart, though—that’s extraordinary.” —*People*

“This book is an absolute pleasure: expansive, fascinating, funny and full of historical tidbits to read aloud



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to anyone around.” —*Salon.com*

“Never less than fascinating . . . *Sweet and Low* might as well be a Balzacian nineteenth-century novel complete with a crisis, a contested will and a tragic resolution.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“Unfailingly entertaining . . . Echoes the cadences of such literary antecedents as Saul Bellow.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

About the Author

Rich Cohen is the author of *Tough Jews*, *The Avengers*, and *The Record Men: The Chess Brothers and the Birth of Rock & Roll*, and the memoir *Lake Effect*. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, among many other publications, and he is a contributing editor to *Rolling Stone*. He lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of *Sweet and Low*, Rich Cohen says, “To be disinherited is to be set free.” What sort of freedom does he have in mind? Is there such a thing as negative freedom? How does this relate to the line in the Janis Joplin song, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” And: Do you believe him?
2. Why does the author call this a Brooklyn story? How do the lives of these people connect to or amplify the history of the borough?
3. He describes his family as expatriates—what does he mean by this? Is *Sweet and Low* an outsider’s story? How did growing up in the Midwest, away from the main players, determine the story he tells?
4. Is this a story of the American dream? If so, what does it tell you about the health of those old dreams?
5. Who is the most powerful member of the Eisenstadt family? Who drives the action? Is it Ben, Betty, Marvin, Gladys, Ellen?
6. Why did Aunt Gladys take to her bed? Why did she stay? Why do you think she finally left the house?
7. Why was Ellen disinherited? (If you know the answer, please contact the author through his publicist, c/o Picador, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010). Could she have done anything differently? Who, if anyone, is to blame, and why?
8. What do you think the author means when he says Grandma Betty had a parenting style that can be described as, “Love is finite.” How did Betty’s childhood determine the way she raised her own children.



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9. How might things have been different if Uncle Abraham had lived?
10. How do some of the key parts of the story serve as symbols in the life of the family? Saccharine, the sugar packet, the fish tank in the factory where the tropical fish died?
11. What do you think happened at Cumberland Packing at the time of the scandal? Did Uncle Marvelous know about the criminal infestation? Did Grandpa Ben? If so, why did he do nothing to avert disaster?
12. Based on this story, can you come up with some reasons why a family business tends to last no more than three generations? What roles do the different generations play? Fathers, sons, and grandsons? How might a person upset this pattern and save the company?
13. At the end of the book, the author and his family get in a plane and fly away. What does this mean? What do you think the author is trying to say?