

PICADOR

Reading Group Gold

Outline: A Novel

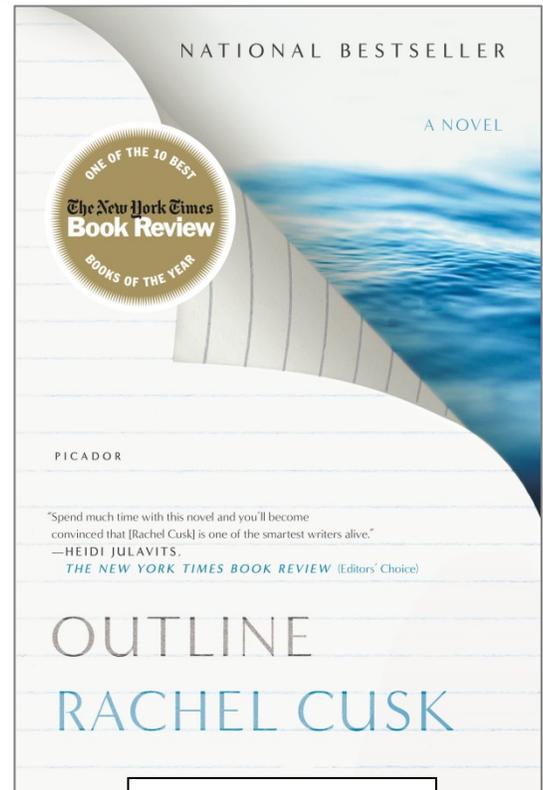
by Rachel Cusk

ABOUT THE BOOK

Outline is a novel in ten conversations. Spare and lucid, it follows a novelist teaching a course in creative writing over an oppressively hot summer in Athens. She leads her students in storytelling exercises. She meets other visiting writers for dinner. She goes swimming in the Ionian Sea with her neighbor from the plane. The people she encounters speak volubly about themselves: their fantasies, anxieties, pet theories, regrets, and longings. And through these disclosures, a portrait of the narrator is drawn by contrast, a portrait of a woman learning to face a great loss.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Outline* unfolds through a series of conversations between the narrator, an unnamed woman, and the friends and people she meets during her time teaching a writing course in Athens, Greece. While she speaks little about herself throughout the novel, in what ways is this structure effective in its ability to reveal information about her? What do you know about her by the novel's end?
2. During the narrator's discussion with her neighbor on her flight to Athens, she briefly discusses her former marriage and offers some observations on the nature of marriage. She describes it as "a system of belief, a story, and though it manifests itself in many things that are real enough, the impulse that drives it is ultimately mysterious." What do you think she is suggesting with this statement? Do you agree with her observation?
3. The narrator tells her neighbor on the plane about her small son's habit of leaving a meeting place immediately if the person meant to meet him is not there when he arrives. The narrator disagrees with his behavior and believes that "the only hope of finding anything is to stay exactly where you are, at the agreed place. It's just a question of how long you can hold out." This statement seems to have a double meaning. What else do you think the narrator is alluding to here?
4. As the narrator talks to her neighbor, she recalls a memory of her two sons. When both of them were very young they would repeatedly drop things from their high chair. Inevitably, her sons would cry for the fallen object, and at that point, she would place it back on the highchair only to see them immediately drop the object again. She muses that "The memory of the suffering had no effect whatever on what they elected to do: on the contrary, it compelled them to repeat it, for the suffering was the magic that caused the object to come back and allowed the delight in dropping it to become possible again." Why do you think her sons took such delight in this activity? What do you think, as the narrator wonders, would the boys have learned if she had refused to return the object the first time they dropped it?



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5. During the narrator's conversation with Ryan, he tells her about his time in America as a young adult. He found this time to be a time of self-transformation, which he describes as "an article of faith" for Americans. What is it about America that might allow one to feel as if he or she has the ability to self-transform, even if they come from a culture, like Ryan, which might not encourage this type of behavior?
6. While Ryan felt free to transform himself during his time in America, he also says he felt "more Irish in America than he'd ever been at home." Why would living abroad have this effect on him?
7. As the narrator looks around the small flat she stays in, several boat models that are mounted to the wall intrigue her. From afar, the sails on these boats seem to be filled with the wind, but when she looks at them closely she notices that there are dozens of tiny cords fixing them in their shapes, and that they are not made of cloth but of paper. After she finishes investigating the apartment, unable to unearth "a layer of mystery or chaos or shame," she returns to the boats with their "brittle sails." What is it about these boats that intrigues the narrator? What do the sails say about the relationship between illusion and reality?
8. The narrator's physical descriptions of her companions are often unflattering. She describes the back of her neighbor from the plane as "very broad and fleshy, leathery with sun and age, and marked with numerous moles and scars and outcrops of coarse grey hair." The fellow writer, who arrives to stay in the flat on the day of her departure, is described as "an attenuated, whey-faced, corkscrew-haired person somewhere in her forties, with an unusually long neck and a rather small head, like that of a goose." What do these painfully honest portraits add to the novel?
9. The narrator sees her neighbor on the plane two additional times throughout the novel. We gather through her descriptions of him that she is not attracted to him. Why then, do you think she chose to take two boat trips with him? Do you believe, as she tells her friend Elena, that it is simply because "it was hot"?
10. Throughout the novel the narrator and her companions speak of the idea of two people—either a romantic couple or siblings—creating a shared, imaginary world whose order is comprehensible to only the two of them. The narrator describes this as one definition of love, "the belief in something that only the two of you can see." What do you make of this idea, and why does the narrator reflect on this idea throughout the novel? Have you ever experienced this phenomenon?
11. For her first class, the narrator asks her students to tell her about something they noticed on their way to class. While most of the class responds positively to this exercise, one student does not. This student, who waits until the end of class to share her thoughts, is angry and feels that the class has been a waste of her time and money. She goes so far as to call the narrator a "lousy teacher." Do you agree? Why would an exercise like this be helpful for writers?
12. Angeliki has very particular views regarding the traditional roles of women. She describes the women she met in Berlin as women who had it all—successful careers, seemingly happy families, important roles in the community, and elegance. Upon her return, she experiences a period of exhaustion that she postulates could be the "collective exhaustion of these women." These women, she explains, always wore practical, flat shoes, "the shoes of a woman without vanity," and she sees these shoes as the key to their success. After she returned, she took to wearing delicate shoes, like the silver high-heeled sandals she wears to dinner. Why do you think she made this choice? Do you find her choice to be in conflict with the other feminist ideas she champions?

13. Paniotis brings the narrator a photo of her with her family that he took before her divorce. The narrator expresses much reluctance to look at the photo and by the end of the novel, the envelope he has given her, we presume, remains unopened. Why do you think she chooses not to look at the photo?
14. Silence is a major theme throughout the novel. Ryan tells the narrator that the word *ellipsis* can literally be translated to mean, “to hide behind silence,” and near the end of the novel, the writer who comes to stay in the flat after the narrator departs reflects on the power of silence and its ability to put people out of one another’s reach. Is the narrator hiding behind silence? In what ways do she and Cusk use silence as a tool throughout the novel?
15. The novel ends with a conversation between the narrator and her neighbor from the plane. She tells him she cannot meet him today as she has plans to go sightseeing. He tells her, “I will spend the day in solicitude,” and she corrects him by saying “You mean solitude,” and he agrees with her correction. While these two words are very close in spelling, they have different meanings. Why do you think Cusk chose to end the novel in this way? And what do you make of the difference between spending the day in solicitude or solitude?

Guide written by Kianoosh Hashemzadeh



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