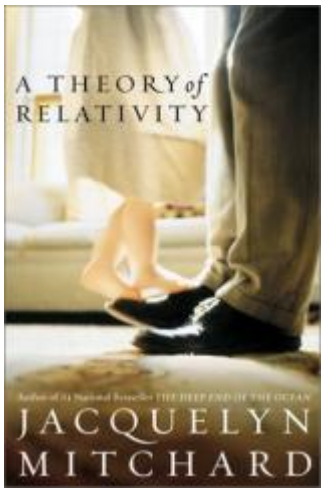
A Theory of Relativity

by Jacquelyn Mitchard



About the Book

Few writers have captured contemporary relationships as succinctly and honestly as Jacquelyn Mitchard. Over and over again she shows us that the experience of love is messy, trying, complicated, heartbreaking, terrifying-and utterly worth it.

At the heart of this story is the love between Georgia and Ray, two characters whom we never meet, but who provide the impetus for the novel's chain of events. Their death brings together two vastly different families, each battling overwhelming grief; each fiercely determined to shape the destiny of the couple's child. Mitchard deftly brings a variety of family issues into play here: adoption and single parenting, marriage and divorce, physical and emotional maturation. With a sharp eye for detail, Mitchard points out the challenges of daily life with children--the endless unmatched socks and baby spoons, the tantrums and stranger anxiety, the colds and sleepless nights-while also showing us the unmitigated joy of being part of a child's world. And, as we experience along with the McKenna and Nye families the wrenching twists and turns of a convoluted legal system, she shows us how loss, anger, fear, and mistrust pull us apart-and how courage, love, and honesty bring us together.

The term "relativity" has many meanings, all of which come into play in this novel. But whether one refers to Einstein's theory concerning nature 's most fundamental laws, or the seemingly arbitrary rules that bind one family to another, Mitchard's most powerful message is revealed in the person of Keefer Kathryn Nye McKenna: in her intelligence and honesty, in her humor and optimism. "Related" to her parents or not, she is happy, and she is loved. That's not relative, that's real.

Discussion Guide

1. In whose home do you think Keefer would be happiest-Gordon's or the Nye's? On what would you base your decision? What makes a good parent? What makes a happy home?

2. Do you think Mitchard's portrayal of Diane as a mother and as a born-again Christian is a balanced one? How does she make Diane a sympathetic character?

3. There are many kinds of single parents in the novel: Gordon, Delia, Craig (after Delia's death), the birth mothers of both Gordon and Georgia. How would you use this book to argue for or against single parenting?

4. Gordon is first introduced as a highly analytic person, one who thinks that "life could be lived like an experiment conducted in keeping with scientific method, that a certain set of results could be obtained and, once obtained, repeated." Eventually he comes to realize "the pressure of the human hand behind the instruments."(p. 11) How do Gordon's relationships with Keefer, Lindsay, his Aunt Nora, and his mother bring

about his own emotional development?

5. Discuss Gordon's decision to drop his petition to adopt Keefer. Was it the right one, given the circumstances? How much of it was based on his relationship with Georgia? How much do you think was based on the difficulties he would encounter as a single father?

6. Discuss how the phrase, "a theory of relativity" touches on the novel's themes: family, heredity, adoption, and parental love, to name a few. Can you think of any other issues this title suggests?

7. Do you agree with Judge Sayward's decision to deny Gordon's petition for adoption based on his own status as an adopted child? As a judge was she compelled to give a literal interpretation of the law, or do you think she should have assumed that Gordon's status was the same as any other blood relative of Georgia's?

8. Discuss the possibility that Ray and Georgia's accident was a suicide. How does it make you feel about Ray?

9. Where do you stand on the nature versus nurture debate? Do you think your personality has been determined genetically or by the situation in which you grew up? How do the characters of Georgia, Gordon, Alex, and Keefer support or contradict your beliefs?

10. In the last chapter, Mitchard offers us a glimpse of Keefer as a ten-year-old. Did she "turn out" the way you expected? How do you think Keefer would have been different if Delia had lived and become her mother?

Author Bio

New York Times bestselling author Jacquelyn Mitchard has written many novels for adults, including TWO IF BY SEA. She has also written young adult novels; children’s books; a memoir, MOTHER LESS CHILD; and a collection of essays, THE REST OF US: Dispatches from the Mother Ship. Her first novel, THE DEEP END OF THE OCEAN, was the inaugural selection of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, later adapted for a feature film starring and produced by Michelle Pfeiffer. Mitchard is the editor in chief and co-creator of Merit Press and a professor of fiction and creative nonfiction at Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier. She lives on Cape Cod with her husband and their nine children.

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