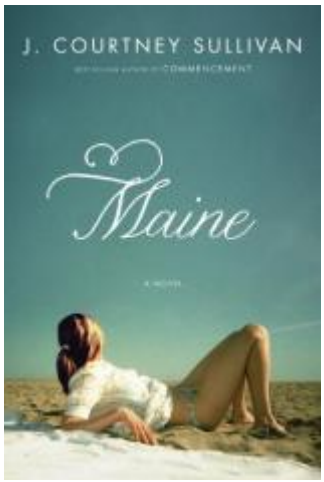
Maine

by J. Courtney Sullivan



About the Book

A *Time* Book of the Year

A *Washington Post Book World* Notable Book

For the Kellehers, Maine is a place where children run in packs, showers are taken outdoors, and old Irish songs are sung around a piano. As three generations of women arrive at the family's beach house, each brings her own hopes and fears. Maggie is thirty- two and pregnant, waiting for the perfect moment to tell her imperfect boyfriend the news; Ann Marie, a Kelleher by marriage, is channeling her domestic frustration into a dollhouse obsession and an ill-advised crush; Kathleen, the black sheep, never wanted to set foot in the cottage again; and Alice, the matriarch at the center of it all, would trade every floorboard for a chance to undo the events of one night, long ago.

Discussion Guide

1. The epigraph pairs two quotes; the first is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem Aurora Leigh: "Alas, a mother never is afraid, / Of speaking angrily to any child, / Since love, she knows, is justified of love." The second is from a letter written by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "Just do everything we didn't do and you will be perfectly safe." Why did the author put these quotes together? Which characters do you think they refer to?

2. If you had to choose one word to describe the overriding theme of Maine, what would it be?

3. Which of the women in the novel would you say is a good mother, and why? Who resents motherhood the most?

4. Discuss how each of the four main characters --- Alice, Kathleen, Maggie, and Ann Marie --- approaches religion. Who seems to have the most comfortable relationship with God?

5. What was Alice's motivation for changing her will? Why did she wait so long to tell her family?

6. Speaking of secrets, many of the characters in the novel keep substantial secrets for one reason or another. Whose is the most damaging?

7. What role does alcohol --- and alcoholism --- play in the novel? How do the characters use alcohol (or abstain from it)?

8. "Even after thirty-three years of marriage, Ann Marie sat at every family dinner and listened to them tell the

same stories, over and over. She has never met a family so tied up in their own mythology." (page 140) What is the mythology of the Kelleher family? Who is helped the most by it? And harmed the most?

9. What does Ann Marie's obsession with dollhouses tell us about her character?

10. After Daniel's funeral, Alice says to Kathleen, "You killed him, and now you want me dead too, is that it?" (page 189) Why does she lash out like this?

11. Why did Daniel's death have such an impact on the family?

12. What did you think of the revelation about Mary's death? Was Alice right to blame herself?

13. On page 301, Maggie says to Kathleen, "I actually want this baby. I don't feel it's a mistake the way you did with us." Why does Maggie feel this way about her mother? Do you agree with her assessment?

14. And on page 310, Kathleen says to Alice, "News flash, Mom, you really weren't that talented. None of us stopped you from becoming anything. That was a stupid childish dream like everyone else has." How does this relate to Maggie's earlier outburst? How does the notion of sacrifice play into each woman's story about herself?

15. How did Ann Marie misread Steve so completely? And why does Kathleen's witnessing the event change her attitude towards Ann Marie? Why do you think Kathleen reacted the way she did?

16. What kind of mother do you think Maggie will be? Who will she take after most: Alice, Kathleen, or Ann Marie?

17. Discuss the last lines of the book: "She prayed until she heard footsteps behind her, coming slowly down the aisle, a familiar voice softly calling out her name: 'Alice? Alice. It's time.'" Is this Father Donnelly, Daniel, or someone else?

18. Which of these women would you like to spend more time with? Are there any you'd never want to see again?

Author Bio

J. Courtney Sullivan is the author of the New York Times bestselling novels COMMENCEMENT and MAINE. MAINE was named a Best Book of the Year by *Time* magazine, and a *Washington Post* Notable Book for 2011. Courtney's writing has also appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *New York* magazine, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *Men's Vogue* and the *New York Observer*, among others. She is a contributor to the essay anthology THE SECRET CURRENCY OF LOVE and co-editor of CLICK: When We Knew We Were Feminists. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Critical Praise

"At the heart of this compelling novel of three generations of women emotionally stunted by fate and willful stubbornness is the family vacation property in Cape Neddick, ME, where the Kellehers have convened for six decades... In her second novel (after **Commencement**), Sullivan brilliantly lays out the case for the nearly futile task of these three generations of badly damaged Irish Catholic women seeking acceptance from one another."

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