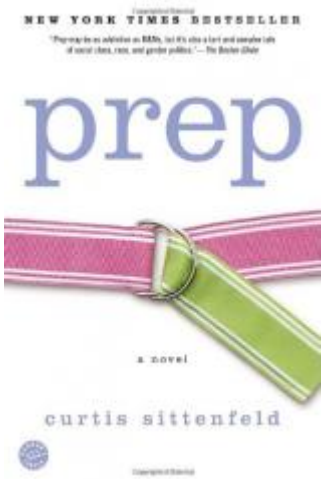
Prep

by Curtis Sittenfeld



About the Book

Curtis Sittenfeld's debut novel, **Prep**, is an insightful, achingly funny coming-of-age story as well as a brilliant dissection of class, race, and gender in a hothouse of adolescent angst and ambition.

Lee Fiora is an intelligent, observant fourteen-year-old when her father drops her off in front of her dorm at the prestigious Ault School in Massachusetts. She leaves her animated, affectionate family in South Bend, Indiana, at least in part because of the boarding school's glossy brochure, in which boys in sweaters chat in front of old brick buildings, girls in kilts hold lacrosse sticks on pristinely mown athletic fields, and everyone sings hymns in chapel.

As Lee soon learns, Ault is a cloistered world of jaded, attractive teenagers who spend summers on Nantucket and speak in their own clever shorthand. Both intimidated and fascinated by her classmates, Lee becomes a shrewd observer of --- and, ultimately, a participant in --- their rituals and mores. As a scholarship student, she constantly feels like an outsider and is both drawn to and repelled by other loners. By the time she's a senior, Lee has created a hard-won place for herself at Ault. But when her behavior takes a self-destructive and highly public turn, her carefully crafted identity within the community is shattered.

Ultimately, Lee's experiences --- complicated relationships with teachers; intense friendships with other girls; an all-consuming preoccupation with a classmate who is less than a boyfriend and more than a crush; conflicts with her parents, from whom Lee feels increasingly distant, coalesce into a singular portrait of the painful and thrilling adolescence universal to us all.

Discussion Guide

1. How does **Prep** differ from other books about teenagers you've read? Reviews have cited the book as an unsentimental view of high school and adolescence --- do you agree? How does Lee Fiora's point of view relate to your own high school experience?

2. Throughout the novel, Lee describes herself as an outsider, partly because of her scholarship-student status. How does Sittenfeld develop this theme of fitting in racially and financially? What kind of difficulties, both overt and subtle, do Little, Sin-Jun, Darden, and other minority students encounter at Ault, and how does their outsider status differ from Lee's?

3. How does the school-wide game of Assassin temporarily transform Lee? How do her interactions with her classmates during this game empower her? Explore her guilt in "killing" McGrath.

4. Many readers and reviewers of **Prep** have described Lee as a passive character. When is Lee submissive,

and when does she act on her desires, even if subconsciously? Does her level of assertion change by the end of the novel?

5. Lee experiences friction with her parents when they visit Ault for Parents' Weekend. How has her relationship with them changed since she left for boarding school? Her father states, "When you started at Ault . . . I said to myself, I'll bet there are a lot of kids who'd think real highly of themselves going to a place like that. And I thought, but I'm glad Lee has a good head on her shoulders. Well, I was wrong. I'll say that now. We made a mistake to let you go" (202). Do you think Lee has changed in the way her father claims she has?

6. Many reviewers have mentioned that **Prep** feels autobiographical and reads like a memoir, but Sittenfeld denies that her novel closely follows her life. Why, then, do you think **Prep** comes across as so authentic and personal?

7. Is Angela Varizi, *The New York Times* reporter who interviews Lee, manipulative in her interview? Do you think Lee intended, even if subconsciously, to give a negative picture of Ault?

8. During Lee's final conversation with Cross Sugarman, he tells her, "You'll be happier in college. . . . I think it's good you're going to a big school, somewhere less conformist than Ault" (380). Why does Cross think this, and do you agree with him? How do you envision Lee changing after high school?

9. Reviewers have compared Sittenfeld to other authors in the boardingschool- novel genre, including J. D. Salinger, John Knowles, and Tobias Wolff. How does **Prep** differ from those other novels? How does a female perspective affect **Prep**?

10. How does Lee's adolescence compare to your own? Which of her high school experiences resonate with you most?

Author Bio

Curtis Sittenfeld is the bestselling author of the novels PREP, THE MAN OF MY DREAMS, AMERICAN WIFE and SISTERLAND, which have been translated into 25 languages. Her nonfiction has been published widely, including in *The New York Times, The Atlantic, Time* and *Glamour,* and broadcast on public radio's "This American Life." A native of Cincinnati, she currently lives with her family in St. Louis.

Critical Praise

"Curtis Sittenfeld is a young writer with a crazy amount of talent. Her sharp and economical prose reminds us of Joan Didion and Tobias Wolff. Like them, she has a sly and potent wit, which cuts unexpectedly --- but often --- through the placid surface of her prose. Her voice is strong and clear, her moral compass steady; I'd believe anything she told me."

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