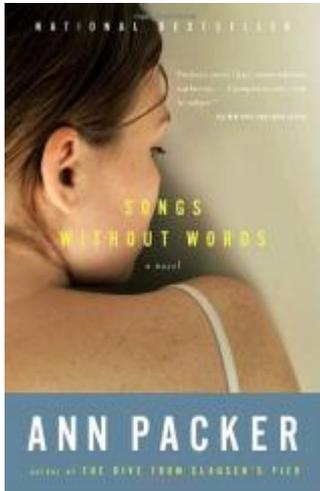


Songs Without Words

by Ann Packer



About the Book

Ann Packer's new novel centers around two childhood friends, Liz and Sarabeth, as they navigate the challenges of their lives as adults, confront loneliness and near tragedy, and test both the limits and the redemptive power of their friendship.

Songs Without Words is a novel about friendship and about family, but it is also very much about suicide. Sarabeth remarks that *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, which she is reading at a retirement home, are not so much about adultery as about suicide. Adultery is an issue, too, in **Songs Without Words**, as Sarabeth struggles to climb out of the wreckage of one adulterous affair and to avoid falling into another. But suicide is the mother lode in this novel, just as it is in Flaubert's and Tolstoy's. When Sarabeth's mother took her own life, which for Sarabeth was a "devastating relief," it deepened the bond between her and Liz. But decades later, when Liz's daughter tries to kill herself, it threatens to destroy their friendship. Sarabeth is overcome by her own pain, unable to rise above it enough to comfort Liz, and Liz is outraged by her friend's failure. A gulf opens between them that seems unbridgeable. And for Liz and her husband Brody, consumed by solitary guilt and anger at each other, their daughter's suicide attempt has deeply shaken the ground beneath their feet—why hadn't they seen it coming? why couldn't they stop it?—unsettling their marriage and dramatically altering their view of themselves and the solidity of life they'd created together.

Part of what makes **Songs Without Words** so deeply moving—and so terrifying—is its extraordinary level of realism, the way Packer captures both the most subtle and most dramatic emotional currents that spark human behavior. Reading **Songs Without Words**, one feels immersed not in fiction, but in the lives of real people. Liz and Brody and their children, Joe and Lauren, seem a typical American family, even in—or perhaps especially in—their difficulties with Joe's soccer games and Brody's long hours at work and Lauren's strange moods all representative of the kinds of problems familiar to many upper-middle class families. What Packer shows with such devastating effect is how fragile even the most seemingly normal families can be, how easily despair can well up to engulf someone like Lauren, who in a moment of self-hatred nearly severs herself from life. But, as much as the novel examines unflinchingly the nature of human suffering, it also affirms, in writing that is as vivid and emotionally compelling as any in contemporary American fiction, the healing power of friendship and of love.

Discussion Guide

1. Ann Packer has been praised for the lifelike quality of her fiction. Do you feel that the friendship depicted here seems especially true to life? Do you find yourself choosing sides with either Liz or Sarabeth?

2. Why does Lauren attempt to kill herself? What are the immediate and the more suppressed causes? How does Lauren herself explain it?
3. Liz tells Brody that she feels completely guilty for Lauren's suicide attempt. "I know, it sounds crazy," she says, "but the point is: if it was your fault, then you weren't powerless—you weren't at the mercy of stuff just happening." To which Brody replies: "You're always going to be at the mercy of stuff just happening, no matter what" [p. 293]. What different ways of looking at life do these two positions represent? To what extent are they "at the mercy of stuff just happening"?
4. Thinking back over her relationship with her daughter, Liz imagines herself "bowing to Lauren, acknowledging Lauren. Had she somehow failed to do that? She couldn't think of anything more important for a mother to do" [p. 127]. Why would nothing be more important than this kind of acknowledgment of one's child? Why does Liz choose the word "bowing"?
5. After Lauren has returned from the hospital, Liz admits to Lauren that she and Sarabeth are "having some problems." After that, Lauren occasionally asks her mother about her relationship with Sarabeth. Do you think Lauren is intentionally pressuring Liz to talk to her? Do you think it's Lauren's place to pressure her mother about Sarabeth?
6. Liz and Sarabeth have a long history together. Do you think that, without Lauren's attempted suicide, Liz and Sarabeth would have ended up in the same place anyway?
7. Why do you think Lauren is drawn to Sarabeth? Do you think it has more to do with Sarabeth's experience with depression and suicide, or with Sarabeth's knowledge of art and her less-conventional life? Or something else entirely?
8. Why doesn't Sarabeth call Liz immediately when she learns of Lauren's suicide attempt? Is her reaction selfish or merely self-protective?
9. Why does Liz tell Sarabeth, "I'm not your mother" [p. 226]? Is she justified in saying this? How does it affect Sarabeth, immediately and ultimately?
10. Brody describes Sarabeth as "five feet of chaos" [p. 278]. In what ways is this statement true of Sarabeth?
11. What is the effect of tragedy—the suicide of Sarabeth's mother and Lauren's attempted suicide—occurring in such seemingly ordinary, and in Lauren's case loving, families?
12. Near the end of the novel, after Joe has won at poker, he thinks: "The cards didn't really matter. What mattered was how you played. What mattered was your face" [p. 314]. In what ways might this apply to the lives of the characters in the novel?
13. How are Liz and Brody able to repair their marriage? Why does Lauren's attempted suicide create such anger and distance between them?
14. What do you think about the hostility between Sarabeth and Brody? Do you think they would have gotten along better if not for their relationships with Liz?
15. How are Liz and Sarabeth able to restore their friendship? Why is the gift of the bench so important?
16. What is the turning point in Lauren's recovery? What is it that really begins to restore her optimism and interest in life?
17. **Songs Without Words**, though much of it is concerned with suffering, depression and suicide, ends happily, with the restoration of Liz and Sarabeth's friendship and Lauren choosing to embrace rather than hide from life. Why does this ending feel right? How does Packer keep the novel from achieving too easy a closure?
18. What does **Songs Without Words** reveal about both the strength and fragility of human relationships?

Author Bio

Ann Packer was born in Stanford, California, in 1959, and grew up near Stanford University, where her parents were professors. She attended Yale University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has received fellowships from the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Michener-Copernicus Society, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

She is the acclaimed author of two collections of short fiction, SWIM BACK TO ME and MENDOCINO AND OTHER STORIES, and two bestselling novels, SONGS WITHOUT WORDS and THE DIVE FROM CLAUSEN'S PIER, which received the Kate Chopin Literary Award, among many other prizes and honors. Her short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and in the O. Henry Prize Stories anthologies, and her novels have been published around the world.

Ann returned to her native Bay Area in 1995. She lives in San Carlos with her family.

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Publication Date: July 29, 2008

Genres: Fiction

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Vintage

ISBN-10: 0375727175

ISBN-13: 9780375412813