

The Art of Mending

by Elizabeth Berg



About the Book

It begins with the sudden revelation of astonishing secrets—secrets that have shaped the personalities and fates of three siblings, and now threaten to tear them apart. In renowned author Elizabeth Berg's moving new novel, unearthed truths force one seemingly ordinary family to reexamine their disparate lives and to ask themselves: Is it too late to mend the hurts of the past?

Laura Bartone anticipates her annual family reunion in Minnesota with a mixture of excitement and wariness. Yet this year's gathering will prove to be much more trying than either she or her siblings imagined. As soon as she arrives, Laura realizes that something is not right with her sister. Forever wrapped up in events of long ago, Caroline is the family's restless black sheep. When Caroline confronts Laura and their brother, Steve, with devastating allegations about their mother, the three have a difficult time reconciling their varying experiences in the same house. But a sudden misfortune will lead them all to face the past, their own culpability, and their common need for love and forgiveness.

Readers have come to love Elizabeth Berg for the "lucent beauty of [her] prose, the verity of her insights, and the tenderness of her regard for her fellow human" (*Booklist*). In **The Art of Mending**, her most profound and emotionally satisfying novel to date, she confronts some of the deepest mysteries of life, as she explores how even the largest sins can be forgiven by the smallest gestures, and how grace can come to many through the trials of one.

Discussion Guide

1. The mother in **The Art of Mending** treated her children very differently from one another. Do you think this was caused by events in the mother's own life? Her personality? The personalities of individual children? Does any mother love all of her children equally?
2. Laura was not aware that her mother had treated her sister differently from the way she treated Laura, during their childhood. Why do you think Laura missed this?
3. Though Laura didn't know what occurred between her mother and her sister, she does seem to have been aware that something was amiss in her family. How did she handle this, both as a child and as an adult? How does this relate to Laura's creating her own miniature home in the basement of their house? Do you think it is related to Laura's eventual choice of a career?
4. Once a parent reaches a certain age, is it still "fair" to confront them, or should a wronged child seek resolution and peace another way?

5. Laura and her brother Steve have trouble believing their sister Caroline's revelations about her childhood, partly because Caroline has always seemed difficult to deal with. In what ways is she difficult? Does this contribute to her unhappiness?
6. Is it ever possible to believe both people in a dispute when they are saying opposite things? How and why does this occur in the novel?
7. Laura learns of very significant events in her family long after they have occurred, and is forced to deal with them, long afterwards. What does she do? How do you feel about her solutions?
8. When Laura acknowledges her own culpability, she says, of her family, "We are all guilty." Do you agree?
9. Do any of these characters have false expectations of what forgiveness is and/or what it should do for them? What is your own definition of forgiveness — of oneself and of others?
10. When Caroline forgives her mother, it is, in Laura's eyes, with astounding ease. But is it really with ease? What contributed to Caroline's being able to forgive and start now to move on? What was she really after from her family? Did she get what she wanted?
11. Humor seems to play a significant role in the marriage of Laura and Pete. So do pleasant, playful daily rituals. Explore their relationship and what they each provide for one another.
12. Laura's father knows what happened between his wife and Caroline but he did not do anything about it. Why not? How did his feelings for his wife affect his choices as a father?
13. Laura's mother is described as being a beautiful woman. Do you think her narcissism is related to a dependence on seeing herself as beautiful? Is the narcissism in part responsible for her inability to see what she is doing to Caroline?
14. Laura reacts strongly to her mother's treatment of Laura's daughter, Hannah, after the babysitting incident. What do you think about Laura's reaction? Do you think Laura's mother's reaction to the babysitting incident — to react as if it were Hannah's fault, and to see Hannah as guilty -- helped Laura gain clarity about what happened to Caroline?
15. Laura's reaction to move against the repression of her daughter following the babysitting incident affects the resolution of the novel. In what way does Laura's reaction change her mother?
16. Can the painful events of the past be mended, and if so, how? Caroline's "art of mending" is to forgive her mother, and to move towards creating a loving outing together. Do you agree with this way of "mending" the past? How important was it, that Caroline could air her feelings with Laura and Steve, to enable this move toward a peaceful solution?
17. The epigraph comments on finding love by way of the truth, and the truth by way of love. How do these notions play out in **The Art of Mending**?
18. How much of the way Laura interacts with her husband and children is a direct reaction to or against the family in which she grew up? Can we ever truly escape our upbringing?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Berg is the author of many bestselling novels as well as two works of nonfiction. *OPEN HOUSE* was an Oprah's Book Club selection, *DURABLE GOODS* and *JOY SCHOOL* were selected as ALA Best Books of the Year, and *TALK BEFORE SLEEP* was short-listed for an Abby Award. Her bestsellers also include *THE YEAR OF PLEASURES*, *THE DAY I ATE WHATEVER I WANTED*, and *DREAM WHEN YOU'RE FEELING BLUE*. Berg has been honored by both the Boston Public Library and the Chicago Public Library and is a popular speaker at various venues around the country. She lives near Chicago.

Critical Praise

"Berg knows her characters intimately....She gets under their skin and leaves the reader with an indelible impression of lives challenged and changed."

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