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The
LAST LIST
of MISS
JUDITH
KRATT

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. How would you describe Judith? What are her virtues? What are her flaws?
2. Why does Rosemarie's return compel Judith to begin writing her inventory? In what other ways does Rosemarie disrupt Judith's life?
3. How would you characterize Judith and Olva's relationship? Is it one of equals? How does their relationship change throughout the novel?
4. In the first chapter, Judith compares the concept of memory to a letter opener made of cut glass: "held to the window, it produced a different color for each of us." How do Judith's memories shape the way she tells her family's story?
5. Olva has her own take on memory. She says to Judith, "Memory and history are bound up with one another. Where does one end and the other begin?" What do you think Olva means by this? How might the relationship between memory and history be an especially charged one in the South?

6. Quincy describes siblinghood to Judith in this way: “You and Rosemarie are the mold, and I’m the gelatin that never set.” Judith weighs in, too: “This was the way of siblings, how my existence, my very selfhood, grew partly from what Quincy was not. And from what Rosemarie was not.” How has birth order influenced the experiences of the Kratt children and the choices they’ve made? Do you think your life has been affected by the decisions and actions of your siblings? If you are an only child, do you think you would be a different person if you had had siblings?
7. This novel teems with objects. Judith records items in her inventory, but other inventories materialize, too, such as the merchandise in Daddy Kratt’s department store, the gifts left for Rosemarie, and the collection of unfamiliar belongings in Olva’s bedroom. What additional inventories can you find in the book? Why does Judith organize life into lists?
8. Which object in the book do you believe is most significant and why? In your own life, do you have an object that you value above others?
9. What do you think Judith covets most in her life? Is it a thing?
10. Daddy Kratt and his associates pursue Charlie in the book’s 1929 timeline. The Bramlett family searches for Marcus in the 1989 timeline. How are these two pursuits related? How do the two men’s circumstances impact their relationships with their families?

11. This novel explores the power of ownership. Olva says to Judith and Rosemarie, “Do you own your own life? If you have never had to ask that question, you are fortunate indeed.” What do you think she means by this? How might questions about ownership be especially critical to ask in the context of the South’s history and legacy of slavery and racial injustice?
12. When Judith begins her inventory, what is her purpose? How has that purpose changed by the end of the novel?
13. Is Daddy Kratt a villain? What about Jolly Bramlett and her son, Rick? What do these characters struggle with?
14. What do you make of Olva’s decision to sell the Kratt house and most of the heirlooms within it? Why does the possibility of a Kratt heir—Quincy and Dovey’s potential child—not faze her?
15. Has the relationship between Judith and Amaryllis shifted by the end of the book? If so, how, and which objects play a role in this shift?
16. Why does Rosemarie leave Bound for a second time in her life?
17. Why does this novel end with a letter from Olva to Amaryllis?

FURTHER PROJECTS

1. Judith provides a list of novels containing spinsters like herself. She includes Jane Austen's *Emma*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Henry James's *The Bostonians*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, and Edith Wharton's *Bunner Sisters*. Read one or more of these novels. Is Judith similar to those spinsters? Is her commentary accurate: "It is true some of these fictional heroines have challenging personalities, but defects of character are often an outcome of circumstances, are they not?"
2. The author reveals in her Q&A that this novel began as a retelling of a story from her family's history. Is there a story from your family's history that is intriguing? An heirloom that has a tale to tell? Start with writing a paragraph. Then write another paragraph. Then another. That's how a book begins!

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Where did the idea for *The Last List of Miss Judith Kratt* come from?

The book was inspired by a real murder that occurred in my family two generations before me. (You'd think this news would produce a fresh shock for me each time I mention it, but in my family, we discuss the details of the incident so frequently and at such length that they have been rendered ordinary.) Early drafts of the manuscript were my attempt to tell the actual story of my great-uncle fatally shooting his own brother, but eventually, I freed myself from retelling that specific event. Characters shifted; plotlines changed. Yet the heart of the story—a Southern family haunted by a brother's murder and the chilling allegation that a sibling may be to blame—remained the same.

The story of the Kratt family is told from the perspective of a first-person narrator, the Southern spinster Judith Kratt. How did you make that decision?

The voice of Judith is based on my unmarried great-aunt. She was the sister of the two brothers mentioned above—one shot the other—and I chose to adopt her point of view because I was interested in following the path of a character's mind as she absorbs and recounts a family tragedy. That, and I've always

been drawn to compellingly flawed narrators, especially in the first person. Judith is our guide through the novel, but we see her limitations, and that gap between her telling of events and what we otherwise sense to be true, mainly through other characters' reactions, provides a rich interpretive space, not only for witnessing Judith's growth, but also for examining how memory and perception color a person's outlook.

Why did you choose for Judith to narrate the story through an inventory of objects?

I grew up in a Southern house crowded with family heirlooms. I'm fairly certain the stories about those heirlooms took up twice the space of the actual items. I wanted to tell a story through objects in part because I'm fascinated by how possessions can evoke starkly different memories—and thus meanings—for different people. For families, inheritance can be a thorny subject, to say the least. For Southerners, our willingness to engage with the fraught history of objects in our region—for example, the problem of Confederate monuments—is critical.

Do you have a favorite character? If so, who and why?

It's true that I'm obsessed with Judith's voice. I'm interested in the moments in which she surprises herself and, even more, in her mistakes and misjudgments. But my heart is with Olva. She checks Judith's vision of the world when it narrows, and over the years, she has had to provide a tremendous amount of emotional labor for Judith. I often wonder about Olva's life after the final pages of the novel. As the book ends, she finds herself closer in birthright to the Kratts, but also, to some extent, free of

them. What will she do with that new awareness? I'm enthralled by that question.

Who are your favorite authors and why?

The novels of George Eliot—*Middlemarch*, in particular—taught me the value of applying a sympathetic imagination to my characters. Anything written by Virginia Woolf is a master class in the magic of language. As for contemporary writers, Marilynne Robinson and Elizabeth Strout are literary giants to me. Both authors can coax staggering truths about the human condition from a scrupulously observed insight about a character or the delicate arrangement of images within a sentence. Honestly, the syntax alone of some of their sentences can have me in fits for weeks. I pore over the works of Kazuo Ishiguro, especially how he develops the voices of his first-person narrators. And the poets! William Butler Yeats, Walt Whitman, Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland, Rita Dove, Mary Oliver, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Kimberly O'Connor. My ritual is that I read a poem before I begin writing each day.

What is your most treasured family heirloom?

I have a poem clipped from a newspaper that was found in my grandfather's wallet when he died. Even more remarkable, the poem's subject is death.