

"A gothic unraveling of a novel, as moody and atmospheric as the isolated island on which it's set."

—JODI PICOULT, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Small Great Things* and *A Spark of Light*

the Second Mother

A
NOVEL

Jenny
Milchman

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Describe the community of Wedeskyull. Why can't Julie bear to live there anymore?
2. How would you characterize Julie and David's marriage? Do you think it was ever a healthy relationship?
3. Despite the job post sounding a little strange—no Wi-Fi in town, very poor phone service, and an incredibly tight-knit community—Julie wants the teaching job very badly. Would a position like this appeal to you? Why or why not?
4. How did you feel about Ellie when she first meets Julie? Did you trust her?

5. Put yourself in Julie's shoes. How would you feel moving to such a remote place? Would you find it intimidating, or would it feel like a fresh start?
6. Julie feels that there is something off about Martha's relationship with her son, Peter. Why do you think that is?
7. Compare David and Callum. In what ways are the two men different? Are they similar in any way?
8. Describe the Hempsteads' power over the island of Mercy. Are there any characters above the family's influence?
9. At the end of the story, we realize that Peter's odd behavior is a result of a troubled family life. How did Julie misperceive his actions? Do you think her negative impression of him was justified?
10. Think about Melinda, Peter's biological mother. Do you think it's possible for her to make up for the lost time with her son?
11. David visits Mercy and admits to feeling guilty for Hedley's death, and Julie forgives him. What do you think this says about her?
12. Discuss the ways that Julie changes throughout the book. How has she grown?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

This novel is deeply rooted in its setting, a remote island off the coast of Maine. Why did you choose Mercy as the main location for your story?

Mercy is a fictional place, but it feels very real to me. My family didn't have a lot of extra money when I was growing up, but one thing my parents saved for every year was a summer vacation in Maine. We stayed in rental cabins, and my mom cooked just like we were at home (except she added some of the regional foods as described in the book!), and these were some of the happiest times of my childhood. After I met my husband during our senior year of college and we were deciding What To Do Next, I had the fantasy of applying for a job in a one-room schoolhouse on Monhegan Island. I have no doubt if we had, it would've gone a lot more smoothly than the plot of *The Second Mother*! I'm drawn to the location because it feels like a part of me...and the dark side and secrets and terror crept in for reasons I can't quite explain, but which seem to happen whenever I write a book.

What does your writing process look like?

I write in the mornings in a tiny backyard studio that has electricity and heat, and that's about it. It doesn't need more than that—it has the stories. Writing a book is one of the purest joys I have, right after being with my family. Not to get all mystical, but it doesn't feel like I'm doing the writing. I don't know where these people and their stories come from really. The process is like being hurled into a whitewater river and tumbled and carried along on a wild, exhilarating, sometimes terrifying but always joyous ride. And if it sounds strange that I write psychological suspense novels—where some pretty scary stuff happens—yet still feel joyful, I think that's because the potential for triumph is so strong. When I'm writing, I am waiting to find out, along with the reader, if my heroine clambers out, dripping and stronger and victorious at the end.

***The Second Mother* delves into one of the greatest fears of motherhood—losing one's children. How did exploring this theme affect you?**

It was so hard to write about that even responding to this question is difficult. I give thanks for my children every single day. What Julie suffered was grief of an unimaginable sort—unless someone has been through it. And what I found, when she was the heroine I was living with during the nearly two years of writing and polishing this novel, was that her grief wasn't limited to what happened to her baby girl, but extended to all the parts of life the two of them never got to share. My hope is that as Julie climbs back out of an existence that had become intolerable to her, it might give readers who are experiencing or have experienced their own losses a little bit of light as well.

When you're not writing, what kinds of books do you like to read?

I am a huge reader of my own genre, psychological or literary suspense. I find that sometimes my tastes align with what other people love—I am a big fan of books by, say, Liane Moriarty and Ruth Ware,

Gregg Hurwitz and Lee Child—but some of the authors I find the most talented are less discovered than I think they deserve to be. Big shout-out to Koren Zailckas: no one does suspense and fractured family relationships like she does. I love wilderness thrillers; Tim Johnston's are gems. And also books about the great divide in this country, of which David Joy's work is a terrific example. I was weaned on the horror of the 1970s and still go back to Stephen King, Frank De Felitta, Ira Levin, and others when I need comfort (as crazy as that sounds).

Julie works hard to make connections with the children of Mercy's insular community. Can you talk a little bit about her role as a teacher?

First of all, may I say that teachers are the unsung heroes of this country, and if I could give every single one of them a raise—and an even longer vacation—I would. I mean, seriously, we put some of our most precious, beloved relationships in their hands, five days out of the week and ten months out of the year, and they in turn educate, nurture, and inspire our kids. No salary or benefit package can repay that. So when I was writing Julie's role as schoolteacher, it was really important to me to convey how challenging and all-encompassing the position can be. I think that what Julie does well, and what the best teachers all seem to do, judging by my own kids, is to be honest with the students. Teachers don't have to know everything, their roles as purveyors of knowledge notwithstanding. It's sometimes hardest to say what you don't know.

This book is full of flawed, dynamic characters. Which was the most challenging to write?

Callum. Hands-down. He is the opposite of me: a man's man, used to working with his hands not his thoughts, and emotionally, the way he reacts is by holding things in. I am much more the spill-it-out type. It took me at least four drafts before I got (I hope) his voice and how he would behave when intensely drawn to someone in a way that meant all

those blocked-off feelings would begin to rise to the surface. Watching him start to fall in love with Julie without once coming out and saying so was tricky to translate as an author. Callum is all subtext; he didn't let me put anything directly onto the page.

Are you working on anything new?

I just started my latest Wedeskyull novel! It's a big change for me because the antagonist is in some ways also the heroine of the story—at least she thinks she is—while the real heroine's entire life is held together with pins and air. (The latter may not be such a departure, come to think of it.) The story is about a woman whose son has been diagnosed with a spectrum disorder, so she seeks help from a controversial and dynamic practitioner, known for treatments that are way, way outside the box.

What do you think Julie's journey teaches us about grief?

My guess is that this answer will be different for everybody. For me, it was a privilege to get to write about the resiliency many people have at their core—a thrust toward life, no matter how beaten down their circumstances may have made them. In *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton, Ian Malcolm says, "Life will find a way." This can be a good thing—or a total horror show, at least where dinosaurs are concerned. But I believe that Julie exemplifies this truism in the most positive of ways.

Why did you choose to center this story so heavily on motherhood?

Motherhood is at the center of so much, isn't it? We all have mothers—even when two fathers raise a child, there was an egg involved, and that egg lived inside a woman. Even when a mother is not present, the shadow of her is. Motherhood is at the core of religions, myths, and philosophies. And as you say, it's the raw, beating heart of this novel, right down to its title. I wanted to write a book about the many facets of motherhood, how it can be the most precious of roles to one woman,

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and not even wanted by another. You can be the first mother, or the second, or never a mother at all, and each of these is an equally valid approach to life.

What do you ultimately want readers to take away from this story?

That hope, even when it has flagged to a tiny, dim spark, is worth holding on to. One day, it might burst again into flame.