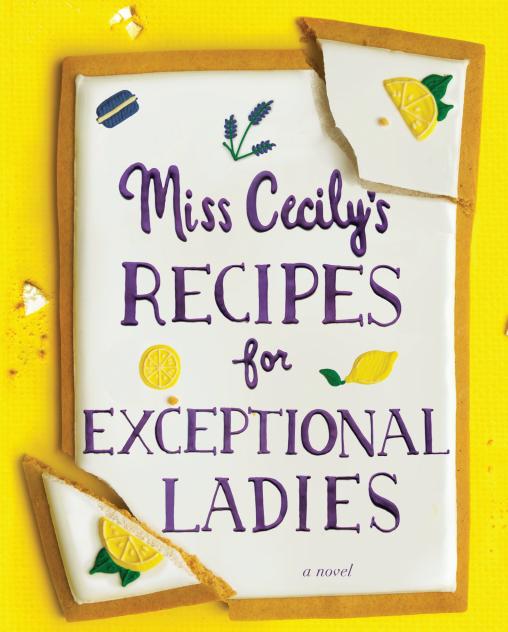
"A beautiful, thoughtful read about love, friendship, and food... Read it and then give a copy to all of your friends."

-TASMINA PERRY



Vicky Zimmerman

READING GROUP GUIDE

- 1. Characterize Kate and Cecily's friendship. Have you ever had a friend like Cecily?
- 2. This book is full of delicious food. Discuss the meals that sound most appealing to you. Do you think you'll try cooking any of them?
- 3. After everything he puts her through, do you think Nick truly loves Kate? Why or why not?
- 4. When she goes through difficult times, Kate often relies on food for comfort. To what extent do you think this is a good thing? Can it be detrimental?
- 5. Discuss the ways that Cecily and Kate help each other. What do they each get out of their friendship?
- 6. Think of an occasion that's important to you and design a meal around it. What would you make and why?

- 7. While Kate, Bailey, and Cara are all friends, they each approach romance differently. Discuss what each woman looks for in a relationship and how they act once they're in one. How are they different? Are they similar in any way?
- 8. Describe Nick and Kate's relationship. What were its flaws? Was there anything good about it?
- 9. Kate's favorite hobby is cooking—her passion for food brings her joy and fulfillment. Do you have any hobbies like this?
- 10. Do you think Martin's explanation for standing Kate up is an honest one? Why do you think she didn't want to go out with him again?
- 11. Cecily led an adventurous life, full of love, sorrow, and growth. Why do you think she chooses to spend her last years confined in a bedroom?
- 12. Did you view Cecily in a different light after learning her life story? In what way?
- 13. Multiple people tell Kate that Nick isn't good enough for her, but she can't see it. Why do you think it took her so long to realize she deserves better? Put yourself in Kate's shoes. Would you have stayed as long?
- 14. At the end of the story, Kate has started dating Ben. Do you think they'll live happily ever after?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Cecily's character is loosely based on your own grandmother, though Cecily is a bit meaner. Why did you choose to deviate from your grandmother's personality when you created Cecily?

In real life, my grandmother was good-natured and gentle, and as a grandmother, she was wonderful, but for the purposes of drama and narrative, I thought a spikier, more irritable character would work better. I wanted Kate to be challenged by Cecily, and in order to do so, I had to make Cecily grumpier and generally in the mood for conflict. And, of course, as the story progresses, the reader sees that there is a reason behind Cecily's unhappiness—a plot point that deviates from my grandmother's real life too.

(In my first novel, *Pear Shaped*, I did include a minor character more like my actual grandmother. She was gentle, kind, and much-loved by readers... Perhaps I should exclusively write books about Cecily!)

Of all the meals featured in this book, did you have a favorite?

Probably the double pasta meal Kate serves at her pasta supper club. I adore pasta—and any meal in which I get to eat two different pastas in one sitting would be my idea of food heaven.

If you had to design your own event and meal, what would it be and why?

I think it's really important to celebrate the small victories in life, so I'd probably create a Friday night celebration of having made it through a working week. It would probably be something simple involving carbs, chili, and melted cheese, so I think a spicy tomato pasta (possibly with bacon or chorizo) topped with lots of Parmesan, followed by a dessert that was indulgent but quick to make, such as a Jamie Oliver chocolate mousse.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

I love Elizabeth Strout, Ann Patchett, Anne Tyler, Hilary Mantel, Elizabeth Gilbert, Cheryl Strayed, Sara Benincasa, Nora Ephron.

It feels like *Miss Cecily* is about the relationships between people, romantic and otherwise. Which relationship dynamic was your favorite to write?

Definitely the Kate/Cecily relationship. It was so much fun writing Cecily. I was allowed to be scathing, and rude verging on outrageous, without having to worry about putting any sort of filter on. And by the end of the book, while still retaining a few spikes, I think it's fair to say Cecily has softened somewhat.

I also really enjoyed exploring how Kate and Cecily's relationship changed and developed over time. It's my natural tendency to shy away from difficult or rude people, so if I met a real-life Cecily, I'd probably avoid her. However, Kate persists in their relationship and reaps huge rewards as a result. She uncovers the reason why Cecily is so difficult. In my experience, *hurt people hurt*, i.e. when a person lashes out and is unkind, it's generally because they're unhappy within themselves, and that's clearly true for Cecily. And Kate is just about patient enough to get to the other side of that. By the end of the novel, Kate and Cecily have developed a huge amount of affection for each other, and I think you could call this a platonic love story on that basis.

Some of the recipes featured here are a little niche. Did you have to do any research when you were writing the book?

A lot of the recipes in my book were taken directly from my grandmother's cookbook from the 1950s, and some of them are a little dated, as we've had more than sixty years of culinary evolution since then. Other recipes were inspired by dishes I enjoy cooking or have eaten in restaurants.

One of my favorite dishes is the cheeseburger at the start of the book, which was a burger an American ex-boyfriend of mine used to cook for me. I really miss that cheeseburger.

Kate and Cecily derive comfort and joy from a good, well-prepared meal. Why do you think we have so much emotional attachment to food?

Food is about so much more than mere nutrition. Well, it is for me, at least. It's about love, nurture, celebration, comfort, consolation, family, memory, history. I'm lucky enough to come from a line of great female cooks—my mother is a wonderful cook, and both my grandmothers were—and all of them expressed their love for their families through the food that came out of their kitchens.

A dear friend of mine once said that food was "the only reliable pleasure" in life—and I think he's right. I can rely on a tuna melt to

deliver a specific and consistent emotional uplift. If only the same could be said of all things in life.

Nick is not the typical "bad boyfriend"—he doesn't cheat, he's not abusive, he seems to care about Kate—but he's still not a good partner. Why did you choose to write a relationship like Kate and Nick's? What can we learn from it?

I've seen a lot of fictional relationships where the man is a rather obvious "bad" guy, and while those guys clearly exist in real life, and we all like to see them get their comeuppance, I wanted to write something a little more subtle. Nick is a gray area, I think—he has many good qualities, but he's fundamentally not capable, as you say, of being a good partner. He's fundamentally selfish and self-absorbed, and it's doubtful at his age whether he'll change.

Having said that, I think we live in strange times. We can have unrealistic expectations of what a relationship should be and expect a partner to be our best friend, a perfect match in the bedroom, an amazing listener, empathetic, an intellectual and spiritual equal, a soul mate, and to rarely have an off day. If we compound that with the often highly edited images of perfect coupledom we see on Instagram, we can end up feeling massively inadequate about the state of affairs.

Personally, I think it's about being realistic about what the other person can bring to the table and, at the same time, it's about boundaries. Kate's problem is that she doesn't have a solid enough grasp at the start of what her needs are in the relationship, and then when Nick fails to meet them, she cannot put boundaries in, because she's too invested in the relationship and is scared to leave. I think one of the key strands in the novel is Kate learning to draw the line. Arguably, she draws it later than she should, but throughout the

course of the book, she evolves to a place where she has enough self-love to step back and look at her relationship with more perspective and say "This isn't enough for me anymore."

What does your writing process look like?

Chaotic, inconsistent, full of Post-it Notes...

On a good day, I'm at my dining room table with coffee and my laptop by 8:30 a.m., and I'll work until I'm too hungry to carry on. After lunch, I tend to be less productive—I know I probably should avoid carbs at lunch, as I suspect they tire me, but I've never been one for self-discipline when it comes to carbs. I then might do a few hours of writing and will usually run out of steam by about 5:00 p.m. However, if I'm in the editing stage rather than in a first draft, I'll work much longer days. I prefer editing. I like it when there's something already there that I can try to make better. Five books in, and I still find the blank page quite terrifying at times.

Writing runs in the family—your grandmother published a cookbook that inspired the one in this narrative. Would you ever want to continue the legacy and write your own cookbook?

Absolutely, 100 percent yes please! I adore food—cooking it, shopping for it, and most of all eating it. A lot of my professional life before I was a full-time writer was connected to food—I used to make TV ads for Pizza Hut, I worked for five years in marketing on a food magazine, and then I had the best day job ever, which was as a professional food taster for a major supermarket, a job where I was paid to go to Italy to eat pasta! So I have quite a lot of experience and a lot of enthusiasm for food and would love to share that with a wider audience.

Kate writes a contemporary version of Cecily's cookbook, adding her own personal flair to the project. If you could add anything to your grandmother's cookbook, what would it be?

I actually wouldn't change a word. I'd republish it tomorrow.

Thought for Food is, in some ways, very much a product of 1957—the recipes, the tableware, some of the more outdated male/female workplace assumptions (Dinner for Boss's Wife). But at the same time, on that basis, it is quite a fascinating snapshot of what home cooking was like in the late 1950s.

At the same time, I think the book has many modern and contemporary elements that are relevant today. There are menus for the man you hope to seduce (involving strong spirits and very good wine), for the man you're gently trying to let down (that could be updated to Dinner for a Tinder Date That You've Realized Has No Future), and for a meal when you roll in late from a night out dancing and are in serious need of a hefty plate of grilled cheese and bacon.

What are you hoping readers will take away from this story?

There are several points I personally sometimes need to remind myself of, which are part of the message of this story: you are responsible for your own happiness in this life. It's okay to be single. It's vital to be true to yourself, and while that sometimes involves difficult, painful decisions and having to let go of things, it will serve you better in the long run. And finally—and perhaps most importantly—that friendship is one of the greatest gifts we have to give each other, and we should value it accordingly.