

# *The Saving Graces*

## Readers/Discussion Guide

Four women, Emma, Lee, Rudy, and Isabel, formed a women's group ten years ago and named it the Saving Graces. Since then they've seen each other through a veritable soap opera of life experiences—marriages, divorce, infidelity, infertility, heartbreak, career confusion, illness, and let us not forget the occasional nervous breakdown. And more is to come. The worst thing that can happen is about to happen, and *The Saving Graces* is the story of how they cope.

I used to write romance novels, you know, but nowadays—maybe it's old age, maybe it's menopause—nowadays I'm thinking the most important thing in the world to us women isn't romantic love, it's connection with others. Love, period. Community, trust, support. In *The Saving Graces*, the women have lovers, husbands, boyfriends, children—and their friendships are right up there with them, just as vital to their lives as the husbands and children. That seems like real life to me. My friends mean the world to me. I would be so diminished without them, I can't imagine myself.

We're all works in progress, and I think the reason we join so many groups, we women—reading groups, support groups, garden clubs, coffee klatches, bridge clubs—is that we're using each other, in the best way, as models and gauges for our own personal growth. We have friends in order to hold up mirrors to ourselves, and what we learn from each other is nothing less than how to live our lives.

1. Which Grace do you relate to most, and why? What do you define as "grace"? Where do you find it in your life?
2. Why do you think the author starts and ends the story from Emma's point of view? Would you consider Emma the main character?
3. When Lee is describing Isabel for the first time, she says, "Some people are born knowing things the rest of us spend our lives trying to learn." What kinds of things do you think she's talking about? Do you agree with Lee? What do you think Isabel had, or knew, that the other Graces didn't?
4. The night Emma finds out that Mick Draco is married, she describes men as "speed bumps ... aggravating distractions scattered along life's otherwise pretty nice highway," and also says that good women are easier to find. Do you think she really believes this? Have you ever felt the way Emma says she does? Do you think men feel that way about women -- that, on the whole, men are the better sex -- or is this a uniquely feminine perspective?
5. At one point, Rudy says about Curtis, "I tried not loving him -- just for a second; an experiment. To my horror, it worked." What does she mean by this? That her love for him isn't real? What do you think of Rudy and Curtis's relationship, over all? How did your feelings change about him over the course of the book? When he told Rudy he has leukemia, did you believe him? What do you think Rudy's dream means?
6. There's a remarkably small amount of jealousy and possessiveness among the Graces. Do you think this is realistic? Have you had the same experiences with your women friends?

7. When you tally it up among the four of them, the Graces experience just about every tragedy known to womankind -- cancer, infidelity, alcoholism and drug abuse, mental illness, infertility, and devastating heartbreak, to name a few. Do you think the author has woven these themes in realistically? Would you say this group of women experiences more than their share of suffering? What about joy?
8. The only time the idea of romantic love between women comes up in the book is via Jenny, Henry's lesbian plumber mom. Why do you think the author wrote Jenny into the story? What purpose does she
9. serve? Do you think Jenny really assumes The Saving Graces is founded on the same basic ideas as the women's group/commune she belonged to in the late '70s? Is it? If so, how is it the same, and how is it
10. different?
11. Have you ever belonged to a formal group like The Saving Graces? Do you think it's difficult to form close friendships with women later in life, after school and other settings? How do you think friendships among women change as they age?
12. At one point, Emma describes Isabel as her "mentor, although neither of us would ever say that out loud, and certainly we'd never use that word." Do you think that's an accurate way to describe their
13. relationship?
14. What about mothering -- is Isabel the mother figure in The Saving Graces? Or is Lee? Do you think any one member takes more than she gives, or is it all pretty equal?
15. Why do you think Lee holds out for so long trying to have her own baby? Do you think she's justified in feeling so angry and desperate, especially when she has a loving husband, a good job, a nice home -- and other people have much bigger problems, like her friend Isabel, who's dying? How do you think Lee's experience with infertility affects her reactions to what's going on with Isabel?
16. Isabel says "sometimes kindness is as excruciating as cruelty." What do you think she means by that?
17. Why do you think the author wrote in Isabel's encounter with Sheldon Herman, the old man on the bench?
18. When Isabel and Kirby sleep together for the first time, she's able to forget for a moment that she's dying -- then abruptly remembers again. Do you think that sex and death are related in any way?
19. What do you think of the scene where the Graces take on Curtis? Is it realistic? Is it everybody's fantasy, in some way, to have their best friends there for them in the hardest moments? Can you really have help with these things, or do you need to face them alone?
20. Do you think Emma and Mick will make it as a couple? Or were they brought together by the desire for something they couldn't have, and, now that they have it, their passion will be diminished?
21. Which of the Graces do you think grew the most over the course of the book, and in what ways?