Sorrow and Bliss

by Meg Mason

Discussion Questions

1. Martha receives an unnamed diagnosis near the end of the novel. Why did Mason present it so late in her story? Why was it not named? Would it have helped to know earlier that she had a diagnosis? (***Gail)*** Mason made a very deliberate decision to not mention the specific illness that Martha has, even though Martha says that labels can be very helpful…How do you feel about Mason's decision? Did it draw more attention to the diagnoses? ***(Maribeth)*** How does Mason convey the experience of living with mental illness without relying on clinical explanations or dramatic "breakdown" scenes?
2. Why did Mason choose names like Peregrine, Winsome, Jessamine, and Jonathan Strong?
3. Do you consider Martha to be an unreliable narrator?
4. How did you feel about the repetition of scenes *in Sorrow and Bliss* (the British Bake Off, the sofa story, the story of the woman in a hat in chapter one repeated near the end of the novel)? Did the repetitions help us to better understand her?
5. Martha seemed so unlikeable at the beginning (the couch story) but I began to like her because of the other characters, making me realize how important supporting players are. I'm curious about which characters other readers thought helped make Martha seem more likeable or sympathetic.

(Above from Gail Comorat)

6. Mason writes in a style that is basically a lot of short scenes separated by space breaks and grouped into a chapter. I noticed this, for instance, in the wedding chapter (164-170), where we move from the ceremony to after the honeymoon in 10 distinct "moments." Did this style work for you? What can you take from it for your own writing (maybe we don't need to agonize so much over transitions!)
7. Martha was so ugly to Patrick at the end that I had an almost visceral response to her. I didn't want to be in the same "room/book" with her, she was so toxic. I loved that for the most part Mason had me invested in and caring about a character who was not necessarily likeable but did she need to make Martha as hateful as she did?
8. Was the mother's "change of heart/behavior" believable?

(Above from Maribeth)

9. We are told as writers that our protagonist, even if flawed, should have characteristics that make us like them enough to root for them. Mason decided not to do this. What makes it work? Or does it?
10. Did anyone else like her mix of themes of mental illness and marriage and examining if love can conquer all?

11. In an interview, Mason stated that she didn't care about the likability of the characters, but rather, the relatability. Did she succeed in this?

(Above from Judy W)

12. In what ways does Martha function as an unreliable narrator? How does Mason signal gaps in her self-awareness without breaking the first-person frame?
13. How does the blend of dry humor and raw vulnerability in Martha's voice shape the emotional response to her illness and behavior?
14. The novel moves back and forth in time rather than following a straight chronological order. How does this structure reflect Martha's mental state and her process of looking back on her life? Does this structure create a sense of progress or recovery for Martha?
15. Patrick is presented as unusually patient and kind. How does Mason prevent him from becoming a flat or idealized figure?
16. How does Mason use precise everyday details (homes, food, brands, cultural references) to reveal character and create atmosphere (I was reminded of *Mrs. Dalloway*...)?
17. How does Mason develop the theme of motherhood and the desire (or reluctance) to have children through the novel's structure and language?
18. The title places "sorrow" and "bliss" side by side. How does Mason's writing style show that these two states can exist together?
19. Which craft decisions most help this highly personal story feel emotionally powerful and accessible to a wide range of readers?
20. What do you consider the strongest or most distinctive aspect of Mason's writing technique in this novel? How is it sustained throughout the book?