



FAMILY PICTURES

Jane Green

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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

A
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Selection*



A Conversation with Jane Green

*“I came to love
Maggie; in the
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for me.”*

In your previous novel, *Another Piece of My Heart*, you drew upon your own life experiences to write about blended families. How did you arrive at the idea for *Family Pictures*? How personal is this novel?

As with all of my novels, it’s not my story—thank heavens—but there are parts of me all over this book. My latest obsessions always go in, hence the candle-making, and friends who read it say they saw parts of me in both Sylvie and Maggie.

Both Sylvie and Maggie read like “real” characters. They are immediately relatable; each elicits empathy on a deep and lasting level. How *do* you create such memorable characters? Do you feel you *know* them before you tell their stories? How did you find each woman’s voice? Was one easier to write than the other?

I do put work into building the characters before I start writing, and usually have a very strong visual. I didn’t think I’d enjoy writing Maggie as much as Sylvie, whom I adored from the beginning, but I came to love Maggie; in the end she became more vivid for me.

Once Mark is out of the picture he more or less stays off the page. How do *you*, his creator, envision him throughout the novel’s last act? Do you think he feels genuine remorse? What do you think were the real motivations for his actions? Do you have any sympathy for Mark—or did you intend for him to be a true villain?

Most of the stories I read about men leading double lives are clear that the men involved are sociopaths. They are seasoned liars, which wasn’t what I wanted for Mark. I pitied him, and I wanted to have some sense of *why* he did what he did. He didn’t set out to hurt anyone but found himself in a situation he didn’t know how to get out of—finally in love with someone he was worried he was going to lose, and in a marriage that was more of convenience, one that had history, than one with a true partner.



You dealt with a lot of serious issues in *Family Pictures*, from marital infidelity to financial fraud to anorexia nervosa. Did you perform any specific research for the book? What, or who, were your sources of information?

Thank God for the Internet. Lots and lots of reading, including memoirs from women who had been through betrayals, and particularly women with eating disorders.

Can you give us a glimpse of what your writing life looks like? Do you work in a home office? Do you do drafts by hand or on a computer? Do you think—or talk—about writing even when you're not?

I do have a home office, but need to leave the house to write, as if I am going to an office job. I leave the house every morning and take my laptop to a small writers' room in town, where I sequester myself away for a few hours with noise-canceling headphones and lots of coffee. The characters and story live in my head constantly while I am writing my book, but I tend not to talk about it. I have also started taking myself off to self-imposed writing retreats: small inns, or farms belonging to friends, where I see no one, talk to no one, do nothing other than write.

What advice would you give to an aspiring novelist? What was the most meaningful writing advice you were ever given?

My best advice is write, as in don't think about writing, don't talk about writing, don't go to endless writers' conferences: just write, for the truth is in the action. Someone once told me years ago to focus on the characters, for once you get the characters right, they tell their own stories, and I have always found that to be true.

About the Author

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Do you read a lot?

I read incessantly, although often when in the midst of writing a book I avoid fiction for fear of subconsciously plagiarizing, and tend to stick to memoirs and biographies, which can also inspire the characters, but hopefully in a good, non-stealing sort of way!

Are you working on a new novel now? If so, can you give us a sneak peek of the plot?

I've just finished a novel that is my favorite of the last few years. It's the story of a woman married to a wonderful man, with two daughters, who should have everything in life she needs to be happy. In her forties, she is certainly content, but is finding life a bit...dull; a bit...pots and pans: she worries that in the midst of her life there is nothing left to look forward to. When a younger man starts paying attention to her, she welcomes the attention, thrilled that someone, anyone, is noticing her, thrilled to feel beautiful again, relevant. She thinks she is someone who would never have an affair, but where exactly do you draw the line, and what happens if that line isn't as straight, nor as strong, as you intended?



An Original Essay by the Author

“What Sylvie and Maggie Didn’t Know: Some Further Thoughts on Love and Deception”

As human beings we tend to expect that most people we meet, particularly in our social circle, operate under the same moral code as we do. We expect them to be moral, trustworthy, to be the people we expect them to be.

The older I get, the more stories I hear about people who are not who you think they are. Whether it’s a neighbor having an affair with half the neighborhood, a wife in love with her trainer while her husband travels and knows nothing, or indeed a man with a secret family on the other coast (which is a true story, and played a huge part in the inspiration behind the book), you cannot take people at face value.

The initial inspiration was a man I knew who was beloved by all who knew him. He traveled extensively, had a wife and two children, and was the hit of all special events. One day the insurance company called the wife to talk about a car accident, involving their car, which she insisted they didn’t own. It turned out he had another secret family, including two children, and neither knew of the other family’s existence.

We all have secrets, and I am fascinated by how these secrets impact other people, and what happens when those around you discover that the constructs we all build to present ourselves as who we wish to be in the world, are false, and what happens when those constructs break down.

Reading
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*Behind
the Novel*



Recommended Reading

***The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* by Teddy Wayne**

The story of a Justin Bieber-esque young pop star, I found the relationship between the precocious boy and his mother/manager heartbreaking and compelling.

***This Is Where I Leave You* by Jonathan Tropper**

Because no one writes about family, with all its love, turmoil, and dysfunction, better than Jonathan Tropper.

***Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn**

A huge bestseller, it is the perfect novel about a theme I find endlessly fascinating: people not being what or who they appear to be.

***Beautiful People* by Simon Doonan**

Bursting with warmth and humor, this memoir from fashion guru Simon Doonan, about growing up in a slightly crazy family in the suburbs of London, is both hilarious and lovely.

***Seating Arrangements* by Maggie Shipstead**

A WASPy family fallen on hard times, it has wonderfully astute insight into a certain kind of family.

***This Beautiful Life* by Helen Schulman**

Watching a close family come apart at the seams due to an innocent mistake made by their teenage son is a compelling, and all-too realistic, horror story.



Reading Group Questions

1. First, a show of hands: Who among you knows someone who appeared to have a picture-perfect life—only to see it all come crashing down? Take a moment to talk about perception versus reality in marriage and in family life. Did reading *Family Pictures* force you to take a closer look at the lives of your friends, your neighbors, yourselves? And if so, what did you see?
2. When we first meet Sylvie, she is contemplating what her life will be like once Eve goes away to college and she is on her own. Do you think it's common for mothers to feel this way? Discuss the ways in which the female characters in *Family Pictures* struggle to find and define themselves in the domestic realm and beyond. You may wish to share your own personal experiences as well.
3. In an early scene with Sylvie and their friends, Mark tells a story about how his identity was stolen years ago. "That's why I'm paranoid," he said. "I know that people aren't necessarily who they say they are." This is a recurring theme throughout the book; it's also an example of how the author uses foreshadowing to set the stage for the eventual, shocking truth about Mark. What other examples can you recall? Could you predict any of the plot points? What were the most powerful "aha!" moments in *Family Pictures* for you?
4. Sylvie performs exhaustive online searches to locate photographs of Mark and his other family. Maggie's landlords learn everything about her scandalous past via Google. Eve chats on Facebook to make new friends and Grace and Buck do the same to stay in touch. Talk a bit about the characters' "virtual reality" in *Family Pictures*. What issues of privacy and/or oversharing do we *all* face in the Internet era? Are we closer to each other than ever before? Or does living in the second dimension allow us to carefully curate our identities . . . and lead double lives?

Reading
Group
Gold



Keep on
Reading

5. In the marital realm “we’re flawed,” says Sylvie. “None of us is infallible.” Do you agree? Do you view the laws of marriage in black and white? Or do you tend to see them in shades of gray? (E. L. James pun not intended!)
6. After Mark’s deception tears their lives apart, Sylvie is shielded by her friend Angie’s fierce love and loyalty; Maggie finds comfort in the company of Patty, Barb, and Mrs. W; and, in the end, Sylvie and Maggie are healed by each other. Talk about the power of female friendships in *Family Pictures*. (You may choose to bring Eve and Claudia/Grace into the discussion as well.)
7. “I have lost everything,” Maggie says. “But in doing so, I can’t help but start to wonder what ‘everything’ meant.” How would you define Maggie’s *everything*? What is your own definition of “having it all”?
8. Eve’s eating disorder is one of the darker elements of the novel. Why do you think she starved herself? What was she trying to show or hide, control or let go of? Moreover, how did Eve’s illness function—for better or for worse—as a narrative device to bring all the characters closer together?
9. Another show of hands: Even though they’re obviously not related by blood—and did not know each other at all until they were young adults—do you find the love affair between Eve and Chris acceptable? Or too close for comfort? Discuss your reasons.
10. The real definition of a “modern family” is as good as anyone’s guess. What is your impression of the final snapshot we are left with in the novel? Is everybody in this family happier, as Sylvie suggests, than when Mark was in it? How do the losses measure against the gains? Do the ends justify the means?