

A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

A Short Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion



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Since the publication of *A Friend of the Family*, readers have often asked me how I managed to capture Dr. Pete's very male point of view. I've been flattered by the question, since many people seem to think I crossed the gender divide gracefully; in fact, the *New York Times* went so far as to call me a "ventriloquist." But my answer is pretty simple. While I know that men and women have their differences—if they didn't, there'd be no need for *Maxim* magazine or gynecologists—the truth is, as a writer, I've decided to disregard these surface dissimilarities. Instead, I've put my trust in the opposite notion: deep down, men and women are pretty much the same.

I've written two novels now from the points of view of men: one from the third-person perspective and one, this novel, from the first. These two books—especially *A Friend of the Family*—deal with parenthood, grief, life expectations, career ambitions, and love. Both contain brief sex scenes. Both are heavy on dialogue. Yet while writing these novels, I never let myself worry that I was "getting it wrong," that I was creating men who couldn't possibly behave like real men because they sprung from the imagination of a woman. While I did ask my brother, my husband, and certain male friends for their opinions about key activities—for example, what it's like to pee standing

up (answer: easy)—I didn't ask them how losing their mothers would make them feel. I didn't ask what they would do if their sons stopped talking to them or what it would feel like for them to be attracted to someone who wasn't their spouse. I simply imagined how these things would make *me* feel, and then I did my best to write about these feelings accurately. After all, I believe that although we might express our feelings differently, any man I know would feel the same strength of grief I would upon losing someone he loved, or a similar sense of guilt and lust and heartache upon falling for someone who belongs to someone else.

It was also freeing to realize that men are as various as women are, so while I was writing one man, I wasn't necessarily trying to represent all men. In drafting *A Friend of the Family*, I was obliged to make Dr. Pete an individual, more than just his gender. Which is why, one chilly February morning, I just took a deep breath and started writing this man. I was a thirty-one-year-old childless professor in Philadelphia writing about a fifty-three-year-old physician and father in New Jersey—but despite our differences, I knew this guy. I knew him!

So I wrote three pages. The next day I wrote three more. Soon enough, I was feeling pretty excited about Dr. Pete and his story, and I was writing ten pages at a time—until, about four months after I'd started, I'd completed a pretty tight first draft. I was so engaged by Dr. Pete's voice that I didn't allow myself to pause and wonder whether I was getting it right. I just kept imagining this particular character, what he'd say, how he'd behave. I believed in him utterly, so that disbelieving his gender would be like disbelieving his profession, or his age, or the fact that he lived in New Jersey. Pete Dizinoff was a man of his own. I was just transcribing him.

Creating another human being out of whole cloth is always an act of faith. Will anyone else believe in this person, in the choices he or

she makes? How can I convince others that my fiction is truth? The only way, as far as I know, is to create an engaging, honest character with an honest voice—and that isn't so easy, regardless of what gender the character is. But when a character appeals to me, and he or she has a good story to tell, I tell that story as best I can. Man or woman, adult or child, doctor or writer—I concern myself with the character, not with his or her demographics.

Then, when I'm done, I hand the book over to my wonderful readers and hope they find a certain truth in my characters. If they can forget that a woman wrote the book—in fact, if they can forget that the book was written by *me* instead of recorded by the protagonist—I've done the job I've set out to do. And then it's time to find a new voice, male or female, child or grown-up, doctor or professor, mother or father, and do it all over again.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss whether you think Pete Dizinoff is a reliable narrator—that is, whether you believe his account of the events in the story from beginning to end. Much of the novel is composed of Pete’s memories, but how do we know whether we can trust what he says? Are there such things as reliable memories?
2. Pete acknowledges his long-ago attraction to Iris Stern, who is now his best friend’s wife. How does that attraction manifest itself in his relationship with Iris’s daughter Laura?
3. Is Pete a bad person? Is he guilty of anything more than honesty? He claims that everything he’s done in his life—from moving to the suburbs to building his medical practice to ruining his friendship with the Sterns—has been for his son, Alec. To what extent do you believe him?
4. How do you think Elaine’s struggle with breast cancer affects her perspective on Alec’s future? Do you think her illness shapes her attitude?
5. Discuss Pete’s responsibility in the death of Roseanne Craig.

6. Pete is mystified at Laura's pregnancy, since when he was in high school, "nobody had sex with the Laura Sterns" (page 29). How is teenage sexuality presented in this novel? Is it a refuge? A crime? A normal part of adolescence?

7. Pete says throughout the book that he's a lucky man, although, when we meet him, he's living in the studio above his garage, his medical practice is in tatters, and he might be heading for a divorce. Why is Pete convinced he's so lucky? What is his definition of *luck*?

8. As a culture, we seem to expect life-altering friendships between women, not men. How does this book explore male friendship? How does this friendship differ from the friendships between the women in this book?

9. Elaine accuses Pete of only seeing things in "black and white"; Pete counters that "right is right and wrong is wrong" (pages 40 and 260–61). As far as he's concerned, what Laura Stern did to her newborn in the bathroom of the Round Hill Public Library is fundamentally indefensible. Elaine suggests that there are other ways to consider the event. Who do you agree with? Could there be a rational explanation for what Laura did, or are some acts inherently and inarguably evil?

10. Alec wants to travel around Europe for a few years, see the great museums, and sell his paintings on the street to support himself. Pete thinks this idea is about as preposterous as any he's ever heard. How do you think Pete would have treated Alec and his goals if Alec were not an only child? How did Elaine's fertility problems fuel the action of this novel?

11. What is the relationship between Joe and his father like in this book? What is the relationship between Joe and his older son, Neal, like? How does Pete assess these relationships when considering his own with his father and his son?

12. Iris tells Pete that you learn “to forgive your children” (page 204). Has she really forgiven Laura for what she’s done? How have Laura’s actions affected Iris’s marriage? Her career?

13. How are the families in this novel twinned? In what respect is Joe’s parenting of Laura a mirror of Pete’s parenting of Alec?

14. There are five deaths mentioned in this book: those of Joe’s father, Pete’s father, Laura Stern’s baby, Roseanne Craig, and Louis Sherman, the patient who died of septicemia. All physicians encounter death, of course, but how do these particular deaths shape Pete as a person? As a doctor?

15. Of all the relationships in this novel, the most important might be Pete’s relationship with the reader. What does Pete want from his reader? What does Pete need his reader to believe, and why?

16. During her confrontation with Pete at her apartment, Laura Stern refuses to change out of her flimsy pajamas. Why won’t she change her clothing? Why does Pete smoke her cigarettes?

17. How important is Pete’s Jewish heritage to the story of this novel? How important are his beginnings in Yonkers?

18. Why do you think Elaine stays with Pete at the end of the book?

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