

The
ATOMIC
WEIGHT
of LOVE

Exquisite Adaptations: A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



Exquisite Adaptations

A Note from the Author

I grew up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the birthplace of the atomic bomb. My father was one of the scientists who created the bomb; my mother, a biologist, was one of the well-educated, intellectually curious women whom bomb scientists tended to marry. At the conclusion of the war, my father, a research chemist, chose to stay in Los Alamos, and my mother joined him. I was brought up in a unique community, where physicists successfully challenged the accuracy of police radar guns and parents carefully designed neighborhoods so that their children could walk to school without once having to cross a street.

Many of the women I knew while growing up were unable to pursue their own careers. It was the 1950s, and for the most part a woman was expected to acquiesce to her husband's wishes and invest her talents in her children. I benefited from this dynamic; I owe the generous women of my childhood an enormous debt. But as I matured, and especially after I left Los Alamos for college, I wondered: What could these women have done and been? What more could my mother have

accomplished, had she been given the opportunities I was finding as a result of the women's movement?

I set out to tell the story of the women who married the men with extraordinary minds, the men who chose their wives in large part because these women were capable of appreciating the intricacies of their chosen fields of study. I wanted to highlight the sacrifices these women made, in the 1950s and onward, so that their husbands could pursue their science. And I wanted to think about how these women came to redefine themselves during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.

As I wrote, I thought a good deal about my mother, her mother, my aunts, and all the women who had come before me—women of incredible fortitude. I thought about the differences between me and my mother. She grew up impoverished during the Depression and came of age in the cataclysm of World War II. My time was characterized by the idyll of Los Alamos, the outrage of Vietnam, and the cynicism of Watergate. I wondered what a woman who could bridge our differences would look like. What might such a woman think? How might she feel about the dramatic changes brought on by the totality of these events? Meridian, the narrator of *The Atomic Weight of Love*, is this woman.

Robert Oppenheimer chose the location for his secret city well. Perched atop the spread fingers of several mesas in the mountains of northern New Mexico, Los Alamos is essentially an isolated university town on steroids. World-class minds focus not only on national defense but also on space exploration, medical breakthroughs, and environmental issues. Nature permeates the town, and plentiful hiking trails wind through aspen and ponderosa forests. Anasazi ruins sit atop sheer, flesh-colored canyon walls dotted with ancient hand and footholds dug into the tufa rock. Mountain lions, bears, and smaller animals populate

the canyons, and crows abound. This community—at the tail end of World War II and through the present—is the setting for my novel.

In *The Atomic Weight of Love*, Meridian Wallace marries Alden Whetstone, her University of Chicago physics professor, and follows him to New Mexico. She agrees to put her formal ornithological studies on hold for a year but attempts to continue her work on her own. Finding one crow she can identify by a malformed foot, she establishes a spot in a canyon where she can observe communal crow behaviors. As the years pass, Meridian settles into married life. In true Darwinian spirit, she adapts, tries to fit in by taking dancing and drawing lessons, volunteering, and making a good home. In 1970, Meridian meets a Vietnam War veteran who is twenty years her junior, and her concepts of partnership, love and obligation, womanhood, and what right she might have to her own ambitions begin to change.

Meridian's losses and her desire for more, while prototypical of women of the 1950s and 1960s, continue today, as do the questions they provoke. What lines do we draw in our relationships, and is it possible to find a viable balance between achieving our potential and loving someone? What is the right amount of compromise or adaptation? When does adaptation become self-abnegation?

My mother suffered a terrible loss when her husband died suddenly at age forty-three. He left her with four young children. Her courageous response was key to my growth as a woman: she went back to school and obtained her graduate degree in biology. In later years, she and I would talk about the fact that my father's death, while crushing, actually freed her to follow her dreams, to find a kind of fulfillment that she would not likely have found within their marriage.

Freedom exacted a high price from me, too. Publication of *The Atomic Weight of Love* comes when I have reached age sixty. Had my

husband not similarly died prematurely, I would likely not have been able to call an abrupt halt to one career so that I could pursue my dream of writing. But I wonder, too. Had my husband survived, could I have created a more appropriate level of compromise within my marriage? Meridian's story helps all of us to rethink the choices we've made, and to consider instead limitless possibilities.

Questions for Discussion

1. From a young age, Meridian has a dream, a driving desire to become an ornithologist. Her dream—involving the study of hard science—is unusual for a girl of her time. In what ways does her father’s influence, both before and after his death, affect her dream?
2. Meridian’s mother makes sacrifices to help her daughter reach the University of Chicago, where Meridian can pursue her studies. Yet, later in the book, she writes a letter to her daughter (pages 128–29) in which she seems to reverse her support of Meridian’s ambition. What do you think about the marital advice she gives her daughter, and what motivations do you think underlie that advice?
3. Meridian makes a concerted effort to follow her father’s advice, which is to “make do.” She adapts. When is adaptation a reasonable response? When does adaptation cross the line and become self-abnegation? Is sacrifice noble? What is “noble,” and what is inappropriate martyrdom?
4. Meridian falls for Alden’s intellect and the challenge he provides for her eager, bright mind. He accepts her—at least at the start—as

an intellectual equal, and he seems not to limit her because she is a woman. If love, as they say, is blind, how do we ever see the beloved accurately, beyond the images we create of the person we want to see?

5. At the party Meridian and Alden host for other physicists and their wives (pages 130–35), Meridian feels left out, marooned, as if she doesn't fit in—even in her own home. Have you ever felt stranded between the world of women and that of men? Do women and men fall into gender groups at social gatherings among your friends? What do you think drives this sort of self-segregation? Do you regularly socialize with people of the opposite sex?

6. What gifts and challenges does Belle's friendship bring to Meridian? How does Meridian's friendship with Belle differ from her later friendship with Emma? How do women's friendships illuminate their lives differently than the friendships between men?

7. Why do you think the author chose to take Belle from Meridian? How does Belle's death alter Meridian's life, teach her, or challenge her?

8. What do Meridian's observations of crows, of their relationships and communal behaviors, teach her about her own life? How do the crows both mirror characters' lives and provide an instructive contrast to them?

9. Clay is Meridian's catalyst. In what ways does he spur her to challenge her definitions of male-female relationships, the boundaries she has drawn in her life? What or who have been catalysts in your life? How did they change you or cause you to view things differently?

10. The women's movement helped to bring women accurate information about their bodies and their sexuality. How does Meridian's growing knowledge of herself as a sexual being change who she is, who she thinks she might become?

11. Compare and contrast the gifts Meridian receives from Alden and from Clay. What significance do those gifts have? What do they say about the giver, about his feelings toward Meridian and what he wants for her?

12. Did Alden love Meridian? Did Meridian love Alden? How do you know? Discuss Meridian's choice to let go of Clay and instead to stay with Alden. What does she mean when she says that leaving Alden "might change my definition of myself, were I to abandon the man who had, for most of my life, held my hand and set my course" (page 287)? Did she make the right decision?

13. What significance does Marvella's struggle to attend the college of her choice have in the novel? What does Marvella teach Meridian?

14. Meridian creates Wingspan, and in so doing she helps to shape the futures of scores of girls and young women. How can we find fulfillment later in life, when perhaps long-held dreams are no longer possible?

15. Meridian is resilient; she comes back from the blows of life and stands tall once again. How do we help our daughters to become resilient women, women who can endure the hard knocks of life and still thrive? Is this possible only through pain and loss?

16. What does the setting of Los Alamos add to the story? In what ways does the setting affect Meridian's choices, the direction of her life? What might her life have been had she stayed in Pennsylvania or Chicago? How does the setting of your own life affect choices you make?

17. Meridian is a careful, quiet observer of the natural world—of the changing of leaves, of hawks in snow, of birds, and of landscape. How has her way of being in the natural world affected you as a reader? Are you more aware of the animals that surround you each day, of the landscape in which you live your life? What have you seen today that you might not have seen before reading this novel?