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BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

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## READING GROUP GUIDE

# THIS ONE IS MINE

A Novel by

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## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR OF *THIS ONE IS MINE*

*This One Is Mine* is your first novel. What was your path to becoming a writer?

My father created the sixties TV series *Batman* and went on to write a bunch of movies. When you're a kid, and your dad's job consists of walking around the house in socks all day, then having barbecues with Archie Bunker, Major Anthony Nelson, and Sebastian Howell III, you decide, I want *that* job.

I was an English major at Barnard. I could have happily spent my life as an English major—reading books, writing papers, maybe teaching, eventually writing a novel—but I wrote a spec screenplay that sold to Fox (and never got made). It was the late eighties, when basically anyone could get a development deal. The stuff I wrote was terrible. I was too young.

Around that time, I met Darren Star, and he gave me my first TV job, on *Beverly Hills, 90210*. That led to about fifteen years of TV writing. I was good enough at it, but I secretly knew it was too hard. Not old-fashioned-hard-work hard, but sweaty-something's-wrong-here hard. For the life of me, I couldn't come up with sitcomy joke-jokes, which mainly consist of a person walking into a friend's house without knocking, insulting them, then helping himself to a

bottle of water from the fridge. If, in real life, I was even once on the receiving end of such behavior, I'd probably burst into tears.

The last show I worked on was *Arrested Development*—a brilliant show I'm humbled and a little embarrassed to have my name on because it's all Mitch Hurwitz. (Mitch, if you're reading this, BIG KISS.) After that, I thought, hey, I'm going to try writing that novel.

*How was writing a novel different from writing for television?*

Television is collaborative. I was in a room with ten fabulously talented writers, all working together, with an infernal machine bearing down on us. We answered to actors and network executives. Plus, we were sleep-deprived, behind schedule, and lucky to pull it all together for show night. Multiply that by twenty-two episodes, add a couple of pant sizes, and you get a year in the life of a TV writer.

Writing *This One Is Mine*, I was very much alone. I wrote it with no agent, no publisher, no deadline, no concept that it would make the least bit of sense, let alone get published.

But, really, the biggest and scariest difference is that in TV, if the work wasn't great, I could always blame someone else. With my novel, it feels like I'm handing out something and saying, "Here's the best I can do."

*Where did you get your inspiration for this book?*

When I decided to write a novel, I had just finished rereading *The House of Mirth* and was in the middle of rereading *Anna Karenina*. I realized my favorite kind of story involves strong, singular women who set out to destroy themselves. Especially if the women are living in fancy houses, have lots of help, and commit adultery. Sorry, but I just love that. I decided simply to write what I liked to read. So I cobbled together a story.

*Tell us about the title.*

*This One Is Mine* comes from the poem in the front of book by the Sufi poet Hafiz. I love it because it's deeply passionate. Yet at the same time, it's impersonal and a little frantic, like, "You—you over there! I don't even know your name, but you're mine!" It fits with the theme of the book, in that at the beginning every character confuses love with possession. David sees Violet as *his wife*. Violet tries to buy Teddy's love and is wildly jealous of Coco. Sally feels as though she has more right to David than Violet. During the course of the story, all that changes.

*How did you approach writing these decidedly flawed characters?*

When I was writing the book, I'd ask myself, "If I was reading this in bed, what would keep me from turning off the light?" Which is asking a lot because, man, I love to sleep. So I made sure my characters threw themselves headlong into their pursuits. You might not sympathize with Violet risking a life of luxury, and even her child, for a shifty dirtbag like Teddy, but hopefully it's compelling reading. And if I've deprived my reader of precious sleep, I consider my job well done.

*Do you see yourself in any of your characters? Which ones were the easiest or most difficult to write?*

I knew the basic story I wanted to tell—woman having an affair; sister-in-law envying her. Constructing the characters, I tapped into aspects of myself and greatly exaggerated them. For Violet, it was the deadening effect of too much time in L.A. For Sally, it was self-will born out of anxiety. At the risk of being an author who claims my characters "wrote themselves," I will say that if you

have your characters want something really badly, it makes life a lot easier.

*What are you working on next?*

Another novel. My big idea is for it to be fast-paced, surprising, psychologically astute, gorgeously written, and deeply, deeply moving. Pray for me.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Violet is drawn to Teddy? What makes her risk “losing everything,” as David puts it?
2. How does the novel’s title, *This One Is Mine*, relate to the story? The book’s epigraph opens with the image of a slave block. Are any of the characters in the book “enslaved” in a way?
3. In the first chapter, David is upset with Violet for what he perceives to be her lack of interest in maintaining the household. Is his anger justified?
4. What does Violet find sad about Los Angeles? Where do you think this sadness stems from?
5. What do you think about Sally’s friendship with Maryam? Why does Maryam put up with her?
6. Los Angeles could be said to be a city of ambition. How do the characters’ ambitions relate to one another’s? What fuels those ambitions, and when do they get out of control?
7. In some ways, Sally seems to want everything that Violet has: a successful husband, financial security, a nice house, and stylish friends. Do you think Sally would be happy if she suddenly

had everything she wanted? What similarities to you see in Sally and Violet?

8. Do you see any similarities between David and Jeremy?
9. Teddy seems to have a set of problems that make Violet's (and everyone else's) pale in comparison. Do you think Violet is drawn to him because of or in spite of these traits?
10. What do you make of Sally and Jeremy's relationship? Do you think there is a way that it could ever have worked out?
11. Why is Violet happy when Sally tells her that she never really liked her?
12. In many ways, this is a very "L.A." story. To what extent do you think the characters' attitudes and actions are shaped by Los Angeles? Could you see this story taking place anywhere else?
13. At the end of the book, Violet, Sally, and David all visit Teddy in the hospital. In what ways did Teddy's arrival in their lives bring them all together? How might this story have turned out differently if Violet had never met Teddy at the health fair?
14. In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Anna is miserable in a loveless marriage and recklessly succumbs to her desire for the dashing Vronsky. What similarities do you see between Tolstoy's novel and *This One Is Mine*?
15. What other books did *This One Is Mine* remind you of? What was similar or different about them?



## BOOKS I LOVE: A LIST COMPILED BY MARIA SEMPLE

*Henderson the Rain King* by Saul Bellow

*The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins

*Ablutions* by Patrick deWitt

*Middlemarch* by George Elliot

*All About Lulu* by Jonathan Evison

*The Good Soldier* by Ford Maddox Ford

*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen

*Headlong* by Michael Frayn

*The Art of Fiction* by John Gardner

*On Becoming a Novelist* by John Gardner

*What I'd Say to the Martians* by Jack Handey

*The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James

*English Passengers* by Matthew Kneale

*When We Were Romans* by Matthew Kneale

*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

*Pale Fire* by Vladimir Nabokov

*True Grit* by Charles Portis

*American Pastoral* by Philip Roth

*Operation Shylock* by Philip Roth

*Last Night* by James Salter

*Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy

*Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* by Wells Tower

*The Travelling Hornplayer* by Barbara Trapido

*I'm Losing You* by Bruce Wagner

*The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton