

Dive from Clausen's Pier by Ann Packer

About the Book

A riveting novel about loyalty and self-knowledge, and the conflict between who we want to be to others and who we must be for ourselves.

Carrie Bell has lived in Wisconsin all her life. She's had the same best friend, the same good relationship with her mother, the same boyfriend, Mike, now her fiancé, for as long as anyone can remember. It's with real surprise she finds that, at age twenty-three, her life has begun to feel suffocating. She longs for a change, an upheaval, for a chance to begin again.

That chance is granted to her, terribly, when Mike is injured in an accident. Now Carrie has to question everything she thought she knew about herself and the meaning of home. She must ask: How much do we owe the people we love? Is it a sign of strength or of weakness to walk

away from someone in need?

The Dive from Clausen's Pier reminds us how precarious our lives are and how quickly they can be divided into before and after, whether by random accident or by the force of our own desires. It begins with a disaster that could happen, out of the blue, in anybody's life, and it forces us to ask how we would bear up in the face of tragedy and what we know, or think we know, about our deepest allegiances. Elegantly written and ferociously paced, emotionally nuanced and morally complex, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier* marks the emergence of a prodigiously gifted new novelist.

Amazon.com Review

Carrie Bell is the worst person in the world. Or so she would have you think. In the gripping, carefully paced debut novel of personal epiphany, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, by O. Henry Award winner Ann Packer, Carrie's very survival is dependent upon her leaving her fiancé, even after he dives into shallow water at a Memorial Day picnic and becomes

paralyzed. Things hadn't been going so well for the Madison, Wisconsin, high school and college sweethearts. Carrie knew, deep down, that she wasn't going to become Mrs. Michael Mayer. But expectations and pressure from all sides--his family, her mother, her best friend Jamie, Mike's best friend Rooster--force Carrie to shut herself up in her room and sew outfits of her own design as if in a trance. Then one night she slips out of the only universe she's ever known. Many hours later she finds herself on the doorstep of a high school classmate living in Manhattan. Carrie's adventures in the city--quirky roommates and a new romance with an older, emotionally impenetrable man--confuse her in her quest both to forgive herself and to embark on a career in fashion design. Packer writes in a convincing voice and packs a lot into this novel; she infuses Carrie with enough humanity and smarts to choose her own version of "happily ever after." --*Emily Russin*

From Publishers Weekly

Packer's engrossing debut novel begins without ostentation. On Memorial Day,

Carrie Bell and her fiance, Mike Mayer, drive out to Clausen's Pier for their annual ritual, a picnic with their friends, a trip they make the way a middle-aged couple might, in grudging silence. Before their resentments can be aired, Mike dives into too shallow water, suffering injuries that change their lives. If Mike survives, he will survive as a quadriplegic, and Carrie faces unexpected responsibilities. Ultimately, Carrie does what is both understandable and unthinkable. She leaves her hometown of Madison, Wis., and shows up on the doorstep of a friend in New York City. There she discovers a different world, different friends and a different self. The hovering question--what will Carrie do? Abandon Mike or return to him?--generates genuine suspense. Packer portrays her characters--both New Yorkers and Madisonites--deftly, and her scenes unfold with uncommon clarity. But if Packer has a keen eye, she has an even keener ear. The dialogue is usually witty; more important, it is always surprising, as if the characters were actually thinking--one of the reasons they become as familiar to the reader as childhood friends. The recipient of several

awards, Packer is also the author of *Mendocino and Other Stories*. Clearly, she has honed her skills writing short fiction. What is unexpected is the assurance she brings to a larger canvas. In quiet but beautiful prose, Packer tells a complex and subtly constructed story of friendship, love and the hold the past has on the present. This is the sort of book one reads dreading to know what happens to the characters, but loves for its wisdom: it sees the world with more clarity than you do.

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About the Author

Ann Packer was born in Stanford, California, in 1959, and grew up near Stanford University, where her parents were professors. She attended Yale University and then, after five years working at a publishing company in New York, she went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, selling her first short story to *The New Yorker* a few weeks before receiving her degree. A fellowship at the

Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing followed, and she spent two years living in Madison, Wisconsin, which would later become the setting of her first novel, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*.

While living in Wisconsin she published short stories in literary magazines and had a story chosen for inclusion in the annual O. Henry Awards prize stories anthology. With support from the Michener-Copernicus Society of America, she completed her first book, *Mendocino and Other Stories*. The National Endowment for the Arts provided a fellowship, and she spent much of the next decade working on *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*. A critical success that became a national bestseller and was translated into ten languages, *Dive* received a Great Lakes Book Award, an American Library Association Award, and the Kate Chopin Literary Award. Ann's second novel, the bestselling *Songs Without Words*, was published in 2007, and she is currently at work on a fourth work of fiction.

Ann returned to her native Bay Area in 1995. She lives with her family in San Carlos.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why is Carrie unable to cry until Mike awakes from the coma (p. 1)?**
- 2. What effect does Rooster have on Carrie's emotional turmoil during part one? Is Rooster fair in his attack on Carrie outside the library (p. 76)?**
- 3. When Carrie and Mike see the bride and groom on TV in the hospital, Carrie thinks: "If his next words were *Let's get a minister over here and get married tomorrow, I would say yes*" (p. 91) What feelings are driving her at this point? What might have happened to Carrie and Mike if Mike had persisted in getting married after the accident?**
- 4. What does Mike mean when he says: "It was like we were already married—we'd gone too far" (p. 370)? What went wrong or changed in Carrie's and Mike's**

relationship? Did Carrie or Mike change, or did their circumstances change, or both?

5. Carrie tells the reader: "For him [Mike], it was all about the future. For me, the past" (p. 69). How does Carrie's past inform her present? What do each of the three memories of her father mean for Carrie (pp. 28-9)? What Carrie does not remember about her father is "nearly infinite . . . A whole book of things, an entire encyclopedia—a volume that I tried and tried to fill at the Mayers'" (p. 29). Might Carrie have stayed with Mike—and the Mayers—for longer than she would have because she was trying to fill the void left by her father? What influence does Carrie's memory of her father have on her decision to leave Madison—and then, ultimately, to return? By returning, is Carrie escaping her father's legacy?

6. When she leaves Madison, Carrie seems to believe that people are defined by the actions or perceptions of other people. She says: "Because we were caretakers of each other's habits and expressions, weren't we, witnesses who didn't just see

but who gave existence?" (p. 128). Remembering Kilroy's touch, she says, "How extraordinary . . . that someone could touch you and make you into something" (p. 330). Carrie's mother asserts that "people aren't defined by what they do so much as they define what they do" (p. 318). Are people defined by what they do, or by how others perceive them, or by neither? Does Carrie's opinion on this topic change by the novel's end?

7. How does Mike's family react to his accident? How do his friends react? Are these reactions typical or expected in the face of such a tragedy? What about Carrie's outward behavior in reaction to Mike's tragedy makes her behavior so surprising to their families and friends? Are there typical or expected ways people react to tragedies generally, and what do deviations from this expected behavior signify?

8. Carrie explains her love for sewing: "It was the inexorability of it that appealed to me, how a length of fabric became a group of cut-out pieces that gradually took on the shape of a garment" (p. 11).

How is the process of sewing, and Carrie's own projects with expensive silk fabrics, a metaphor for Carrie's emotional evolution? Does playing pool have a similar meaning for Kilroy?

9. Is it Jamie's call that propels Carrie to finally return home, or is some other event the catalyst for her return? Does guilt or obligation play a role in Carrie's decision to stay in Wisconsin? Is she trying to prove something to herself or to others? Is she acting truly selflessly? Is she settling, giving up or being true to herself?

10. Could Carrie properly be called a heroine? What would have been the heroic path for her to take?

11. Carrie poses the question: "How much do we owe the people we love?" When she leaves Madison, she seems to view the answer as an all or nothing proposition: "What I had discovered was that I couldn't give up my life for Mike—that's how I saw it at the time, that's the choice I thought I had to make. And because I couldn't give up everything, I

also thought I couldn't give up anything" (p. 128). Does Carrie see her answer differently at the end of the novel? What does Carrie give up for Mike? Did she need Kilroy in order to have something other than herself to give up for Mike? What does Kilroy owe his parents? Can love be separate from obligation? How might Jamie's or Rooster's or Kilroy's definition of love differ from Carrie's definition?

12. How do the tones and styles of part one and part three reflect Carrie's different state of mind before her time in New York City and afterward?

13. What is Carrie looking for in a relationship? What characteristics of Kilroy attract Carrie that were or are absent in Mike?

14. Is Carrie's resolution of her relationship with Kilroy satisfying? By "being there" in Carrie's life, what does Kilroy teach Carrie about herself? What does Lane teach Carrie about herself?

15. Is the resolution to the mystery surrounding Kilroy satisfying? Is "the

tragedy named Mike" different for Carrie than for Kilroy (p. 359)?

16. Why are the minor characters of Harvey (Mike's new roommate in the hospital) and Harvey's wife (pp. 199–200) so significant to the novel's themes of love, obligation and choices?

17. Mike and Rooster theorize about the irony in names such as the dentist, Dr. Richard Moler, or the orthopedist, Dr. Bonebrake (pp. 18–19). Do the names in the novel—e.g., Carrie Bell, Kilroy, Rooster—have any ironic meaning?

18. While Mike literally dives from Clausen's Pier, who figuratively dives from Clausen's Pier? What metaphoric images does the title conjure up for the reader before and after reading the novel?

19. Envision an inverted version of The Dive from Clausen's Pier written from Mike's point of view in which Carrie had been the one to have had the accident. How might their lives have played out differently? What does this exercise

**reveal about their relationship and
Carrie's character?**