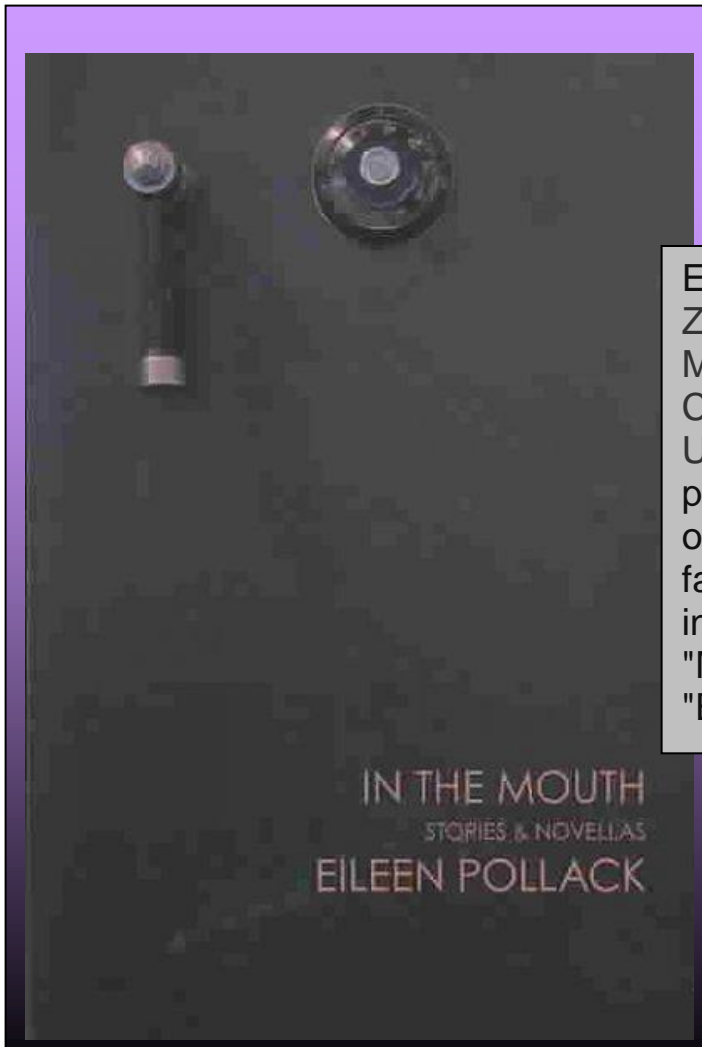


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



Eileen Pollack, The Zell Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan presents a collection of stories that highlight family relationships, including "The Safe," "Milt and Moose," and "Beached in Boca."

About the Author



Eileen Pollack was born and grew up in Liberty, N.Y., the heart of the Jewish Catskills, where her grandparents owned and operated a small hotel and her father was the town dentist. A graduate of Yale University with a BS in physics, Eileen later earned an MFA from the University of Iowa, where she was awarded a Teaching-Writing Fellowship. She is the author of a collection of short fiction, *The Rabbi in the Attic And Other Stories*, a novel, *Paradise, New York*, and a work of creative nonfiction called *Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull*, which won a 2003 WILLA finalist award. A new collection of stories and novellas called *In the Mouth* was published in April 2008 by Four Way Books.

She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Michener Foundation, the Rona Jaffe Foundation, and the Massachusetts Arts Council. Her stories have appeared in journals such as *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *SubTropics*, *Agni*, and *New England Review*. Her novella "The Bris" was chosen to appear in the Best American Short Stories 2007 anthology, edited by Stephen King, while her stories have been awarded two Pushcart Prizes, the Cohen Award for best fiction of the year from *Ploughshares*, and similar awards from *Literary Review* and *MQR*. She lives in Ann Arbor.

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews *Starred Review*

Incisive, beautifully crafted stories about family relationships, focused especially on the dynamic between fathers and daughters. Pollack (*Paradise, New York*, 1998, etc.) looks lovingly and longingly at the way families work, particularly when death is impending. It's hard to choose favorites here, for all are worthy. "The Bris" examines the life of James Sloan, who has been living a lie, and now, on the point of death, charges his son Marcus with the task of finding a mohel who will perform a bris so he can be buried next to his wife in an Orthodox cemetery. As James's health declines, Marcus's anxiety and desperation increase, for the rabbi refuses to countenance the bris for both religious and personal reasons. (A competitive player, the rabbi won't even consider the request until Marcus wins at least two games in a set of tennis.) Marcus is finally led to take matters into his own hands, as it were. "Uno" introduces us to Heloise and Mitch, who on holiday at the Sunshine Lodge (where the food is so pure "you needed a spiritual license to be allowed to eat") meet a family that

includes Sarah and Meribeth, Siamese twins who help call into question Heloise's tidy world. The longest piece is "Beached in Boca," a nuanced story that weaves together three narrative lines with great delicacy. Wendy has come to visit her father in Boca Raton only to find out that he has AIDS. Dealing with the jolt of this revelation, she examines her own sexual history and her inability to commit to her current lover, a 60-year-old professor from Montana. At her father's condominium complex she meets (and is strongly attracted to) Adam Haber, whose father recently committed suicide because the body of a former lover was found in a barrel in the basement of his house. Delicate but dazzling.

Library Journal

The five stories and one novella collected here by award-winning author Pollack (*Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull*) are good but ultimately flawed. "The Bris" features the middle-aged Marcus, whose elderly father, thought to have been Jewish, asks Marcus to have him circumcised. The story takes darkly funny turns, as when an indigent mohel demands \$500 for the circumcision. Pollack thoughtfully describes the love between Marcus and his father and the sacrifices they have made for each other, especially evident as Marcus takes drastic measures to satisfy his father's wishes. In "Uno," Heloise, who's attracted to suffering, has trouble accepting her healthy family life and thus turns to adultery. "The Safe" concerns a woman who overcomes her fear of showing affection to her son by learning why her father was afraid to show her affection. Though these stories are emotional and hard to forget, Pollack's ideas are sometimes clouded by overdramatic, clichéd writing. In "The Bris," for instance, it's annoying to read that Marcus's father has a meal that tastes so good it brings "tears to his eyes" and later Marcus falls "to his knees" over the stress he's experiencing. "The Safe" suffers from a strange image of a woman licking chocolate from her child's fingers as an example of an affectionate parent. An optional purchase for most libraries.

Literary Criticism

How's this for brave? One narrator, a son, is obsessed with fulfilling his dying father's request for a belated circumcision, even at the son's own hands. How's this for unflinching? Another narrator, a mother, is troubled by something as normal but taboo as a kind of lust for her newborn son's attentions. In the six stories and novellas that make up her latest collection, Eileen Pollack exhibits the fearless gift of taking the "un" out of unspeakable.

Best of all: she does it with precision. A nursing mother admits "vague irritation" at her newborn's insistence at her nipple "as if a street-corner beggar kept pulling at her arm." A young doctor reluctantly asking intimate questions of a

woman patient is "shy as a boy whose mother has asked him to unhook her brassiere."

Widening her lens, Ms. Pollack stares unblinking at the larger groups to which these all-too-human behaviors obtain. She scores Christians for being "stingy, not only with their money but with their love," as well as a bunch of Hasidic Jews for channeling money for a camp for retarded teens into a getaway for themselves. (If anti-Semitism can ever be said to be funny, she tests its outside limit.) Even a well-meaning married couple, subset of a group we all recognize if can't necessarily name, doesn't escape the marksmanship of her pen: "They signed petitions. They volunteered. They were just a little too earnest. It wasn't that their lives were untroubled ... They saw heartbreak every day. But these troubles didn't seem to trouble them. It was as if they were standing in the rain, talking about how wet they were getting, but you could see the water rolling right off their Gore-Tex shells."

One senses that it's anger as well as affection--and often a blend of the two, with grief for the human comedy tossed somewhere in the mix--that fuels her remarkable specificity. The shaggy head of an old man smells of "urine, sardines, and Vitalis." Another who keeps the trunk of his car "cleaner than most people kept their mouths," replaces a divot during a golf game with "the care a plastic surgeon might bestow upon repairing a young girl's face." In between forking bites of beef macaroni into his maw, yet another old-timer delivers a hug so monumental that it leaves him "as shaken as a soldier who has darted across a field to grab a fallen comrade." Gentleness shares space in the heart with brutality.

Perhaps inevitably, nowhere is Ms. Pollack more fraught than in describing the act of making love between middle-aged people with parent troubles. In the final story, "Beached in Boca," the woman is someone who prefers her beach water choppy. The man is a toy importer, someone whose father has scandalized his Florida retirement community with a particularly unseemly murder and who is endeavoring to care as little as possible about anything anymore. Nevertheless there's this: "He pressed one hand against her breast while sliding the other hand up her thigh. For some reason, she was reminded of the flat wood box in which a person could slip a coin and make it disappear. All those years importing novelties seemed to have given Adam Haber the sleight-of-hand required to remove a woman's underwear without taking off her shorts. He could palm her hand and make it vanish, and then, with a sideways smile, lay it back inside her ribs. It was a trick, but not a bad trick."

Source: Rose, Daniel Asa. "In the Mouth." *Ploughshares* 34.2-3 (2008): 209+. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions for *The Bris*, award-winning story from *In The Mouth*

1. Why does Marcus feel betrayed when he learns that his father, James, wasn't really Jewish?
2. How important are religious rituals in your life?
3. Discuss James' notion as to why Jews are not stingy (p. 31)?
4. Marcus asks, "how could such an honest man have lived a lie his whole life?" How hard would it be to live a lifelong lie?
5. Marcus asks, "if you live as a Jew for 70 years, are you not a Jew?" Discuss.
6. Rabbi Dobrinsky lectures Marcus on ethics. How ethical is this Rabbi's behavior?
7. Whose objections to the circumcision seem more plausible, Dr. Schiffler or the Rabbi?
8. The old mohel refuses to do the procedure. Do you agree with his reasons?
9. Marcus calls his father a generous man but says he didn't give it all. Discuss Marcus' notion that you must keep on giving.
10. How much do children owe their parents?
11. What do you think of Marcus' plan to solve the burial problem?

Further Reading

Rabbi in the Attic and Other Stories by Eileen Pollack

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1054254>

(Call number: Fiction Pollack)

Pollack's first collection displays a sure sense of tone, a sensitivity to character and a nice ear for colloquial American English. Her stories focus, for the most part, on young girls growing into womanhood, sometimes pushed through that process prematurely. The tales are most effective when they eschew the more melodramatic possibilities of material that includes madness and a variety of

fatal and crippling accidents (inevitable when one of the recurring characters works for an insurance claims adjuster). Her characters struggle to understand a world they are unable to control, a world in which air conditioners fall haphazardly from windows and crush total strangers, and inept young rabbis think they hear the voice of God.

Paradise, New York by Eileen Pollack

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1151380>

(Call number: Fiction Pollack)

We first meet Lucy Appelbaum, the heroine of *Paradise, New York*, in 1970, as a nine-year-old girl enjoying her family's Catskills hotel, the Garden of Eden. Ten years later, having found nothing else at which she can distinguish herself, Lucy tries to save the Eden by capitalizing on a wave of nostalgia for the Borscht Belt and running the hotel as a sort of living museum of Yiddish culture. In the course of the season, Lucy battles her grandmother's attempts to sabotage Lucy's success, her parents' superstitious fears of anything that attracts attention to the Jews, and her brother's contention that what Lucy is doing is more a matter of ego than authentic religious feeling. In the meantime, Lucy comes to realize her love for Mr. Jefferson, the hotel's longtime black handyman, and begins to face the barriers that stand between them. On top of all this, Lucy must contend with a Hasid who buys the chicken farm next door; a cell of ancient Jewish Communists who instigate a strike among Eden's overworked young staff; a gay chef and gay baker who want to prove to the world that kosher cuisine can satisfy the most sophisticated gourmet; and Jimmy Kilcoin - an Irish Catholic Insurance adjuster known as "the Don Juan of the Catskills" - who is determined to seduce Lucy before summer's end.

Author's official website

<http://www.eileenpollack.com/>

Information on the author, events, and her blog.

Read-Alikes

Come to me: stories by Amy Bloom

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1080820>

(Call number: Fiction Bloom)

Practicing psychotherapist Bloom has written 12 powerful short stories in a debut collection that abounds in psychological insights. Deviant human behavior is portrayed compassionately and honestly. In the story "Love Is Not a Pie," a young girl learns the meaning of love when she witnesses her mother and father's involvement with another man in a menage a trois. In "Only You," a woman who is obsessed with her hairdresser finds out that he delights in

dressing up in her clothing. ``Silver Water" depicts a family who must cope with the illness of their schizophrenic daughter. ``Sleepwalking" portrays a moment of incest between a mother and stepson who comfort each other during a time of grief. Many of the stories feature the same characters and show the same family from different points of view and at different points in time.

Birds of America by Lorrie Moore

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1140414>

(Call number: Fiction Moore)

Birds of America is a stunning collection of twelve stories by Lorrie Moore, one of our finest authors at work today. With her characteristic wit and piercing intelligence she unfolds a series of portraits of the lost and unsettled of America, and with a trademark humor that fuels each story with pathos and understanding.

Goodbye, Columbus, and five short stories by Philip Roth

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1057945>

(Call number: Fiction Roth)

Goodbye, Columbus is the story of Neil Klugman and pretty, spirited Brenda Patimkin, he of poor Newark, she of suburban Short Hills, who meet one summer break and dive into an affair that is as much about social class and suspicion as it is about love. The novella is accompanied by five short stories that range in tone from the iconoclastic to the astonishingly tender and that illuminate the subterranean conflicts between parents and children and friends and neighbors in the American Jewish diaspora.

Extras!

Enjoy traditional Jewish foods when the book club meets. Examples: Matzo balls, stuffed cabbage, challah, and potato latkes.

