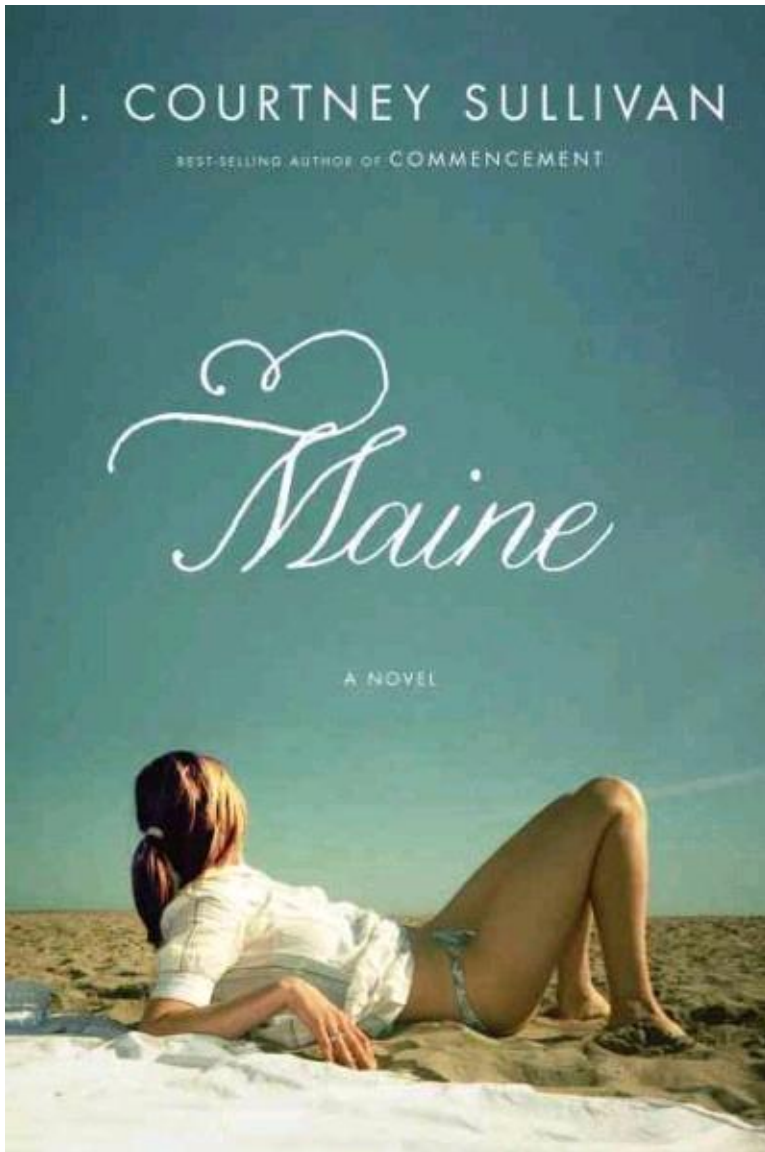


About the book...



In her bestselling debut, **Commencement**, J. Courtney Sullivan explored the complicated and contradictory landscape of female friendship. Now, in her highly anticipated second novel, Sullivan takes us into even richer territory, introducing four unforgettable women who have nothing in common but the fact that, like it or not, they're family.

For the Kellehers, Maine is a place where children run in packs, showers are taken outdoors, and old Irish songs are sung

around a piano. Their beachfront property, won on a barroom bet after the war, sits on three acres of sand and pine nestled between stretches of rocky coast, with one tree bearing the initials "A.H." At the cottage, built by Kelleher hands, cocktail hour follows morning mass, nosy grandchildren snoop in drawers, and decades-old grudges simmer beneath the surface.

As three generations of Kelleher women descend on the property one summer, each brings her own hopes and fears. Maggie is 32 and pregnant, waiting for the perfect moment to tell her imperfect boyfriend the news; Ann Marie, a Kelleher by marriage, is channeling her domestic frustration into a dollhouse obsession and an ill-advised crush; Kathleen, the black sheep, never wanted to set foot in the cottage again; and Alice, the matriarch at the center of it all, would trade every floorboard for a chance to undo the events of one night, long ago.

By turns wickedly funny and achingly sad, *Maine* unveils the sibling rivalry, alcoholism, social climbing, and Catholic guilt at the center of one family, along with the abiding, often irrational love that keeps them coming back, every summer, to Maine and to each other.

About the author...



J. Courtney Sullivan is the author of the New York Times bestselling novels [Commencement](#) and *Maine*. *Maine* was named a Best Book of the Year by *Time* magazine, and a *Washington Post* Notable Book for 2011. Courtney's writing has also

appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *New York* magazine, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *Men's Vogue*, and the *New York Observer*, among others. She is a contributor to the essay anthology [The Secret Currency of Love](#) and co-editor of [Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists](#). She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Reviews

Booklist

Sullivan's follow-up to *Commencement* (2009) introduces, as it did, four female characters, this time bound by the serpentine tangle of family. At the beginning of summer, three generations of Kelleher women descend on the family's beach home in Maine, as they have for half a century already. Changing point-of-view from one to another of the four protagonists, Sullivan creates deeply observed and believable, if not altogether sympathetic, characters, and as much is learned about one woman through the eyes of the three others as from her own

perspective. Moody matriarch Alice, her uninvolved hippie daughter Kathleen, brown-nosing daughter-in-law Mary Ann, and newly-single, thirtysomething granddaughter Maggie each has a simmering-below-the surface inner-monologue that lights a spark, and Sullivan makes sure we can only anticipate an explosion. Sullivan gracefully meets the challenge of crafting a cast clearly pulled from the same DNA soup, without a clunk or hitch in the machinery. Expect interest from book clubs and fans of its popular predecessor.

Library Journal

Beautiful, fractious, and 83 years old, Alice Kelleher rules her children - especially her daughter, Kathleen, and her daughter-in-law, Anne Marie with her cruel and callous speech. Granddaughter Maggie fares a little better, largely owing to her desperate need to serve as peacemaker. At the heart of this compelling novel of three generations of women emotionally stunted by fate and willful stubbornness is the family vacation property in Cape Neddick, ME, where the Kellehers have convened for six decades. Thirty-two-year-old Maggie is single, newly pregnant, and abandoned. Her mother, the abrasively immature at sixtyish Kathleen, leaves her California "worm poop" farm and lovely partner, Arlo, to get Maggie to come to her senses regarding this pregnancy. As for Anne Marie, she struggles to maintain the outward appearance of the saintly martyr watching over Alice, who could slay an elephant with her narcissism. VERDICT In her second novel (after *Commencement*), Sullivan brilliantly lays out the

case for the nearly futile task of these three generations of badly damaged Irish Catholic women seeking acceptance from one another while failing badly at self-acceptance.

Kirkus Reviews

Everyone has dark secrets. It's why God invented confession and booze, two balms frequently employed in Sullivan's well-wrought sophomore effort.

Alice Brennan is Irish American through and through, the daughter of a cop, a good Catholic girl so outwardly pure that she's a candidate for the papacy. But Alice, more than that, is an Irish rose, "one of the most special young women out there, just waiting for someone to take notice." When Sullivan (*Commencement*, 2009) introduces to her, someone has taken notice, and decades have rolled by, and Alice Kelleher is now reflecting on 60 years of life at a beachside cottage that her husband won at gambling. She spends her days drinking red wine, reading, "watching the waves crash against the rocks until it was time to make supper," and avoiding her children's pointed demands that she not drink so much—and especially that she not drive once she'd had a few belts. As Sullivan's tale unfolds, there are plenty of reasons that Alice might wish to avoid taking too close a look at her life: There's tragedy and heartbreak around every corner, as there is in every life. So it is with the intertwined tales of her daughter and granddaughter, who are more modern creatures, all bound up in confessional groups of their own, yoga, homeopathy and all the other stuff of the contemporary examined life. Sullivan spins a leisurely yarn that looks into why people

do the things they do—particularly when it comes to drinking and churchgoing—and why the best-laid plans are always the ones the devil monkeys with the most thoroughly. The story will be particularly meaningful to Catholic women, though there are no barriers to entry for those who are not of that faith. Mature, thoughtful, even meditative at times—but also quite entertaining.

Publishers Weekly

Sullivan follows debut *Commencement* with a summer spritzer that's equal parts family drama, white wine, and Hail Marys. The story follows the struggles of three generations of Kelleher women: drunken Alice, the mass-going matriarch; her rebel daughter, Kathleen, a Sonoma County farmer; Kathleen's sister-in-law, the dollhouse aficionado Ann Marie; and Kathleen's daughter, Maggie, an aspiring writer. Rather than allowing the characters to grow or the plot to thicken, the novel's conflict derives almost entirely from the airing (or not) of various grievances (Alice believes herself responsible for her sister's death; Maggie is pregnant, single, and terrified; Kathleen is still the bitter person she was before she sobered up; Ann Marie has a martyr complex). The Kelleher summer home on the Maine coast is the putative center around which the drama revolves, yet it is the women's common love for Daniel, the patriarch rendered faultless in death, who does the most to bring the women together. The book's tension is watered down at best, like a sun-warmed cocktail: mildly effective, but disappointing.

When conflict finally does break the surface, the exhilaration is visceral but short-lived. Late in the story, Kathleen tells Maggie, "It's going to be okay," to which she responds, "It has to be." Unfortunately, the reader never gets much chance to worry otherwise.

Discussion questions

- 1.** The epigraph pairs two quotes; the first is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh*: "Alas, a mother never is afraid, / Of speaking angrily to any child, / Since love, she knows, is justified of love." The second is from a letter written by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "Just do everything we didn't do and you will be perfectly safe." Why did the author put these quotes together? Which characters do you think they refer to?
- 2.** If you had to choose one word to describe the overriding theme of *Maine*, what would it be?
- 3.** Which of the women in the novel would you say is a good mother, and why? Who resents motherhood the most?
- 4.** Discuss how each of the four main characters --- Alice, Kathleen, Maggie, and Ann Marie --- approaches religion. Who seems to have the most comfortable relationship with God?

- 5.** What was Alice's motivation for changing her will? Why did she wait so long to tell her family?
- 6.** Speaking of secrets, many of the characters in the novel keep substantial secrets for one reason or another. Whose is the most damaging?
- 7.** What role does alcohol --- and alcoholism --- play in the novel? How do the characters use alcohol (or abstain from it)?
- 8.** "Even after thirty-three years of marriage, Ann Marie sat at every family dinner and listened to them tell the same stories, over and over. She has never met a family so tied up in their own mythology." (page 140) What is the mythology of the Kelleher family? Who is helped the most by it? And harmed the most?
- 9.** What does Ann Marie's obsession with dollhouses tell us about her character?
- 10.** After Daniel's funeral, Alice says to Kathleen, "You killed him, and now you want me dead too, is that it?" (page 189) Why does she lash out like this?

11. Why did Daniel's death have such an impact on the family?

12. What did you think of the revelation about Mary's death? Was Alice right to blame herself?

13. On page 301, Maggie says to Kathleen, "I actually want this baby. I don't feel it's a mistake the way you did with us." Why does Maggie feel this way about her mother? Do you agree with her assessment?

14. And on page 310, Kathleen says to Alice, "News flash, Mom, you really weren't that talented. None of us stopped you from becoming anything. That was a stupid childish dream like everyone else has." How does this relate to Maggie's earlier outburst? How does the notion of sacrifice play into each woman's story about herself?

15. How did Ann Marie misread Steve so completely? And why does Kathleen's witnessing the event change her attitude towards Ann Marie? Why do you think Kathleen reacted the way she did?

16. What kind of mother do you think Maggie will be? Who will she take after most: Alice, Kathleen, or Ann Marie?

17. Discuss the last lines of the book: "She prayed until she heard footsteps behind her, coming slowly down the aisle, a familiar voice softly calling out her name: 'Alice? Alice. It's time.'" Is this Father Donnelly, Daniel, or someone else?

18. Which of these women would you like to spend more time with? Are there any you'd never want to see again?

Readalikes

[*Blackbird House*](#) by Alice Hoffman (2004)

Hoffman's collection of interconnected short stories is centered by a Cape Cod farmhouse whose history is told through its inhabitants from colonial American days through the 19th and 20th centuries. Woven into each atmospheric story is the haunting presence of a white blackbird, a fitting emblem for the oddity and grief of the stories' characters who must face adversity with a stoical determination.

[*Burnt Mountain*](#) by Anne Rivers Siddons (2011)

Thayer Wentworth's favorite place as a child was the camp

she attended in the summer. It was the only place where she felt she could be her tomboy self, away from the critical eyes of her classmates and family, and it was also the place where she first experienced love with a boy named Nick Abrams. As an adult, Thayer has married an Irish man named Aengus, and they move into a house not far from a summer camp. When Aengus begins visiting the camp as a storyteller, Thayer finds that her marriage may not be as secure as it seems.

[*The Road Taken*](#) by Rona Jaffe (2000)

Jaffe reflects the major events of the 20th century in this family saga that begins in 1900 with the birth of Rose Smith. She loses her first love to influenza and marries Ben Carson, moving to New York's Greenwich Village to raise her family. Rose's three daughters and their relationships show the changes in social values as the century proceeds. Part of Rose's household is her brother Hugh, whose homosexuality illustrates the evolution of sexual attitudes. Other events, such as World War II, the Cold War, and the AIDS epidemic, all impact the four generations dramatized in this highly readable domestic and social chronicle.

[*Sea Room*](#) by Norman G. Gautreau (2002)

Set in a Maine seaside village during World War II, the novel tells the story of three generations of French Canadian lobstermen--grandfather Pip Dupuy, father Gil, and 10-year-old Jordi. Gil enlists, leaving his plan of

building a new sailboat for his son uncompleted. While he's away, the family is victimized by a man attracted to Jordi's mother, and his attention escalates into destruction and violence. This is a coming-of-age story that builds on a convincing evocation of its period and local Maine details.



Ann Arbor District Library