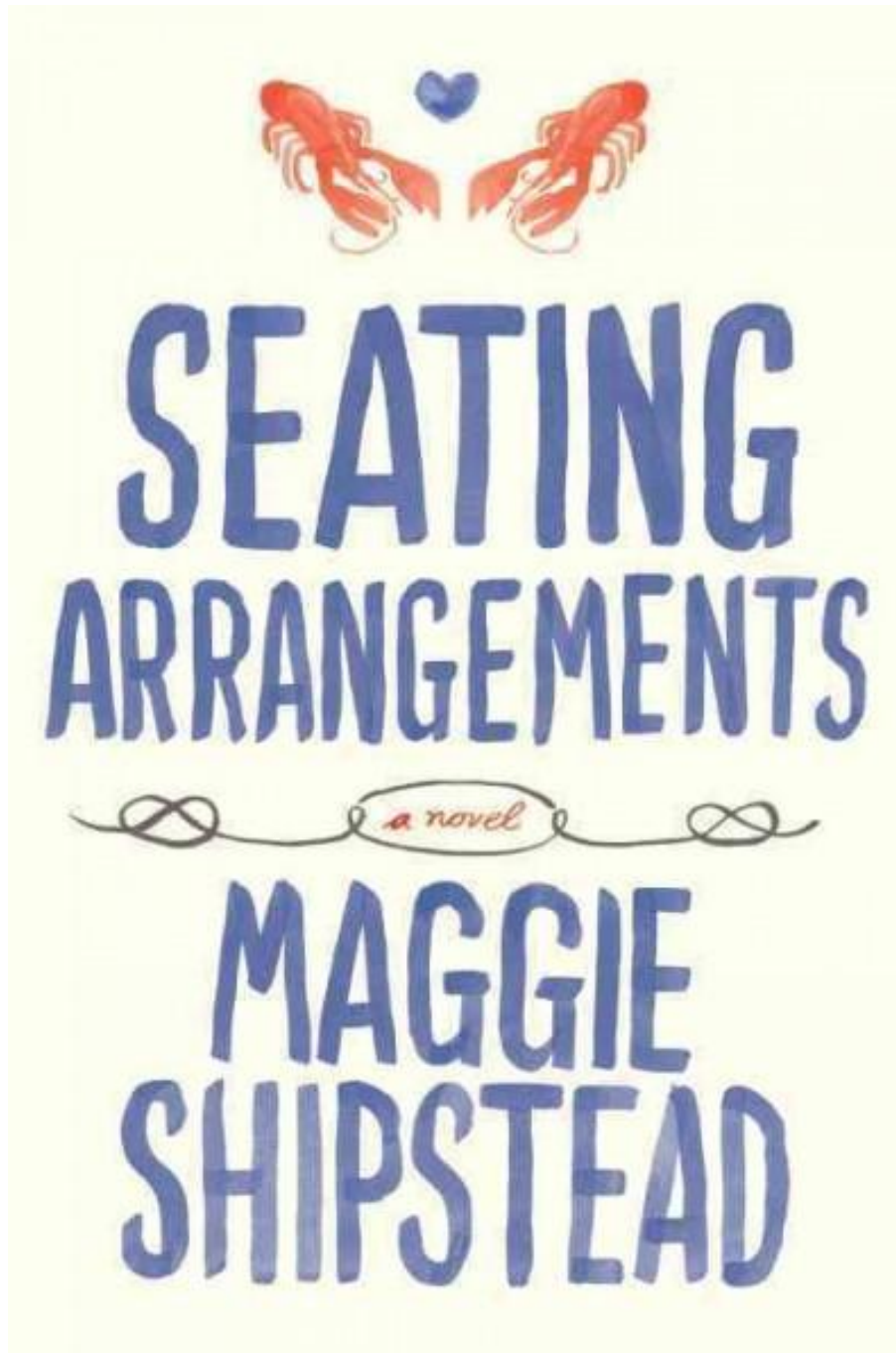


About the book...



Maggie Shipstead's irresistible social satire, set on an exclusive New England island over a wedding weekend in June, provides a deliciously biting glimpse into the lives of the well-bred and ill-behaved.

Winn Van Meter is heading for his family's retreat on the pristine New England island of Waskeke. Normally a haven of calm, for the next three days this sanctuary will be overrun by tipsy revelers as Winn prepares for the marriage of his daughter Daphne to the affable young scion Greyson Duff. Winn's wife, Biddy, has planned the wedding with military precision, but arrangements are sideswept by a storm of salacious misbehavior and intractable lust: Daphne's sister, Livia, who has recently had her heart broken by Teddy Fenn, the son of her father's oldest rival, is an eager target for the seductive wiles of Greyson's best man; Winn, instead of reveling in his patriarchal duties, is tormented by his long-standing crush on Daphne's beguiling bridesmaid Agatha; and the bride and groom find themselves presiding over a spectacle of misplaced desire, marital infidelity, and monumental loss of faith in the rituals of American life.

About the author...



Maggie Shipstead was born in 1983 in Orange County, CA. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tin House*, *VQR*, *Ecotone*, *The Missouri Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Mississippi Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Five Chapters*,

Subtropics, and *The Best American Short Stories 2010*. "La Moretta," a story published in *VQR*, was a 2012 National Magazine Award finalist for fiction. Maggie is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, a former Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford, and a recent resident at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris.

Reviews

Booklist

The trope of the wedding weekend, with its contrived conviviality hastened by the joining of disparate but soon-to-be-connected tribes of families and friends, is zestfully yet acerbically parsed in Shipstead's crackerjack first novel. A seriocomic romp in a Meet the Fockers vein, Shipstead's satire follows the presumptive merging of the über-WASP Van Meter and Duff clans on the occasion of the marriage of seven-months-pregnant

Daphne to steadfast Greyson. The ensemble of petulant sisters and stalwart mothers, tipsy aunts and boorish brothers is led in all its hauteur and debauchery by Daphne's father, Winn, a crusty Boston banker more concerned with his unsuccessful bid for membership in the Pequod Club than with his family's happiness on this vital weekend. As he seeks to assuage the affront with an ill-timed dalliance with Daphne's bridesmaid, past wrongs, present slights, and future injustices coalesce in a stew of zany proportions. Yet, for all its madcap quiriness, Shipstead's adroit escapade artfully delivers a poignant reflection on the enduring if frustrating nature of love, hope, and family.

Library Journal

This debut answers the question of whether the rich are different from you and me. The answer is yes, because we wouldn't be caught dead in slacks with whales embroidered on them. Like so many recent movie comedies, the novel takes us into the home and then the summer home of a wealthy New England family in the days leading up to a daughter's wedding. We have misbehaving bridesmaids and the bumbling father of the bride, who, in this case, is lusting after one of the bridesmaids. Oh, and the bride is seven months pregnant. But never mind that, her father is beside himself because he can't get a membership in the local country club. The characters are an accumulation of over-the-top WASP-like traits: Harvard educations,

social clubs, old money, bigotry, family secrets, and funny nicknames like Winn and Bidy. Shipstead's yeoman prose describes the family's mishaps in cinemagraphic detail. VERDICT A hilarious, if somewhat tasteless, escapist read.

BookPage Reviews

“An intimate social satire”

The premise of Maggie Shipstead’s debut novel sounds like a typical beach read: A family gathers at a New England summer home for a wedding weekend and—surprise, surprise—nothing goes as planned. But Shipstead’s writing is so precise, her characters so nuanced, her plot so unexpected, that *Seating Arrangements* is anything but a breezy poolside read. One thing that sets the novel apart from the pack is its narrator. We don’t get the story of Daphne Van Meter’s wedding from the bride herself, or from her troubled, envious little sister Livia, as one might expect; rather, it’s the middle-aged father of the bride, Winn Van Meter, who leads us through the twisting, turning events of the weekend.

Winn loves his daughters and his wife, but he doesn’t understand them. In fact, he doesn’t seem to understand much. He is obsessed with outward appearances and his social status—to the detriment of his family, his marriage and his mental health. Shipstead completely inhabits Winn and all his

neuroses, painting a devastating picture of a man in crisis during what should be one of the happiest times of his life. This is social satire at its best, a novel examining a group of people who seem to have it all and are, for the most part, completely falling apart. The bride is beautiful and happy, but she's also heavily pregnant. Livia, the maid of honor, is too busy nursing her own heartbreak to fulfill her sisterly obligations.

Seating Arrangements is not a novel about a wedding. It's a novel about family, marriage and what it means to belong. Like J. Courtney Sullivan in **Maine** or Galt Niederhoffer in **The Romantics**, Shipstead places deeply flawed characters in an idyllic setting and creates an unforgettable world.

Kirkus Reviews

New England blue bloods suffer through three days of wedding festivities in Shipstead's debut, a bleak comedy of manners--think a modern-day Edith Wharton on downers. Winn Van Meter (Deerfield, Harvard), a banker apparently oblivious to the recession, and his stoic wife Biddy (ancestors on the Mayflower) are throwing a wedding for daughter Daphne (Deerfield, Princeton) on the Massachusetts island where they always summer. Winn certainly approves of Daphne's fiancé, whales-on-his-belt preppy Greyson Duff, whom she met at Princeton and whose parents own the entire Maine island where they summer. He is less thrilled that Daphne is 8 months pregnant. To make matters worse,

Daphne's younger sister Livia (Deerfield, Harvard) was impregnated by her Harvard boyfriend, Teddy, around the same time. What sticks in Winn's craw is not Livia's pregnancy or the abortion after her Teddy dumped her, but rather the embarrassment she caused by announcing her pregnancy in a drunken rage one evening at the Ophidian, a Harvard club. Winn takes club membership very seriously. Even his dangerous attraction to Daphne's bridesmaid Agatha (Deerfield) is less compelling than his desire to get into the Pequod Club where he's been lingering on the waiting list; ironically, Teddy's parents, whom Winn treated badly in his college days (the Vietnam era although Winn hardly noticed) have influence at the Pequod. Once Greyson's family arrives, a game of sexual musical chairs begins. Winn plays around with Agatha in the laundry room. Pursued by Greyson's self-proclaimed Buddhist brother Francis, Livia instead hooks up with his black sheep oldest brother Sterling. The next day Livia and Winn walk into the garage and catch Sterling *in flagrante delicto* with Agatha, whose predatory sexual appetite is never explained. More embarrassing if less sexual incidents follow. The one outsider, bridesmaid Dominique (Deerfield, U. of Mich., but Egyptian!!), observes their escapades with a jaundiced eye. Despite Shipstead's flair for language and scene setting, her characters are worse than cartoonishly unlikable--they are, with the exception of Dominique, yawn-provokingly uninteresting.

Publishers Weekly

Vibrant prose and moments of keen insight lighten an otherwise lackluster debut in this comedy of manners set during the days preceding a wedding. Daphne Van Meter is getting married at her family's New England summerhouse, her advanced pregnancy a blight on the festivities for the older WASP set. Her father, Winn, feeling increasingly irrelevant at work and in the eyes of his family, toys with the idea of adultery, though his real passion is gaining admittance to Waskeke island's exclusive golf club. Daphne's younger sister Livia, unable to recover from her recent abortion and breakup, makes halfhearted attempts to find a rebound interest as the weekend progresses. Also on the scene is Biddy, Winn's solid if unspectacular wife (she falls asleep during sex and only wants Winn to be discreet if he cheats). The characters are either bland or unsympathetic, and with little plot, the book lacks energy. Readers looking for a thoughtful beach read may find moments of distraction in Shipstead's linguistic dexterity, but the glacial pace and dull characters will likely put them to sleep.

Discussion questions

(<http://www.randomhouse.com>)

1. "The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, /
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends /

Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. / And their friends, the loitering heirs of City directors; / Departed, have left no addresses." This is the novel's epigraph, from "The Wasteland," T. S. Eliot's epic poem of ruin and desolation. How does this verse relate to *Seating Arrangements*? Why has the author elected to place it at the front of her novel?

2. Winn is obsessed with status, with matters of appearance and pedigree and joining all the right clubs. What do you think the author thinks of Winn? What did you think of him? Is he sympathetic? Does your view of him change over the course of the novel? Do you think Winn himself changes or grows over the course of the novel?

3. How is Daphne different from her father? Is her world view different or is it the same? How do Daphne's and Livia's values differ?

4. Discuss Dominique's role in *Seating Arrangements*. How is she different from the other characters in the novel, and how does this alter the reader's perspective?

5. Discuss the scene where the whale explodes. What do you think the whale symbolizes for the author? What do you think the explosion is meant to dramatize or represent?

6. On page 164, Biddy draws herself a bath and spends a quiet moment reflecting on her predicament and her marital expectations after Winn's inescapably obvious attentions to Agatha following her fall from the deck. "The obviousness was what she could not tolerate. She had known what she was when she married him, had expected to be the kind of wife who looked the other way from time to time, but she had also expected him to be discreet. And he had been. She assumed there had been other women, but she had never come across any evidence of them, which was all she asked. A simple request, she had thought: cheap repayment for her forbearance, her realism, her tolerance. At times his discretion had been so complete she had allowed herself to believe maybe there *hadn't* been others, but she didn't like to risk being foolish enough to believe in something as unlikely as her husband's fidelity." What is Biddy's view of marriage? Does the author share this view? Do you? Is fidelity essential to a good marriage? What exactly is a good marriage, in your view? In Shipstead's?

7. Aunt Celeste brings levity, acerbic wit, and a rather dark personal history to a host of subjects that are often treated sanctimoniously, among them, romantic love and the possibility of living happily ever after. What is Celeste's contribution to the Van Meter family, and to the novel as a whole? What is your opinion of her? The author's?

8. In what way does the Duff family differ from the Van Meter family? How are they aware of their differences, whether social, financial, or historical? Do you think the author is pointing out their differences primarily, or their similarities?

9. On page 170, Winn recollects a story he was told one night at the Vespasian, while still a young man, about his grandfather's inheritance. How is this story significant, and how has it informed the truths and myths of his family history?

10. In chapter eleven, Livia and Francis have a fascinating conversation in which the author provides several nuanced reflections on varieties of love: maternal, filial, familial, romantic. How do these ruminations embody—or shape—our perception of love and its obligations, in the world of *Seating Arrangements* and in the world at large?

11. Following the aforementioned conversation, Francis says to Livia, "Another reason I like you is that I think we have similar roles in our families. We're the critical ones. We represent a threat to their way of life, a new order." What does he mean? How, in particular, might Livia be perceived as a threat to her family's way of life? Is she more or less of an iconoclast than her aunt Celeste?

12. Discuss the debacle of Winn's bridal toast in which he equates marriage with death. Do you think the

author intends the reader to perceive this as farcical or tragic?

13. Look at the end of chapter seventeen, which closes with Livia listening to her parents in their bedroom and the line, "Their door shut behind them, and she heard the murmur of their voices, the unknowable language they spoke only to each other." How does this recast our sense of Winn and Biddy's marriage?

14. Discuss the epilogue and, in particular, the final image of Daphne and Winn dancing. What note does the author strike at the novel's conclusion? How has the novel, and the family, recovered from its various catastrophes and regained its balance after the tawdriness of the events that preceded it and the spectacularly deflating effect of the patriarch's wedding toast? Is this a happy ending? Do you think the author intends it to be so?

15. Is it surprising, given the novel's themes and its central voice—an older, patrician male—to discover that its author is a twenty-eight-year-old woman? Why or why not?

Readalikes

Maine by J. Courtney Sullivan

J. Courtney Sullivan tells the story of the Kellehers, a group representing three generations of women. As summer begins, the women congregate at the family cottage in coastal Maine; once there, they must learn to deal with one another as they juggle a host of secrets. Maggie is unmarried and pregnant, and unsure of what her next step will be in life, while her mother Kathleen must try to put up with the very family she once tried to escape. Daughter-in-law Ann Marie masks her discontent as a homemaker through an obsession with dolls, and maternal figure Alice prepares to give the cottage away once and for all to her church parish. Can these women learn to support one another as they make some of the most important decisions of their lives?

Postcards from the Edge by Carrie Fisher

Suzanne Vale, as we learn from her daily journal entries, is in rehab, trying to figure out her life and overcome her drug addictions. The real struggle comes later when Suzanne is released from the clinic, clean and ready to work. But in Hollywood, drugs aren't the only addiction: sex, money and image are but a few of the other temptations. With therapy, work, a few good friends, and a large helping of acerbic humor, Suzanne learns to cope, thrive and even find love.

August: Osage County by Tracy Letts

The Westons of Osage County, Oklahoma, are gathering for a reunion in this darkly humorous play about the modern dysfunctional family. Family patriarch, Beverly, muses to his Native American housekeeper, Johanna, that his wife, Violet, is succumbing to an addiction to heavy painkillers, partly to suppress the agony of cancer, mostly to safeguard her from having to cope with her past and present demons. When Violet appears, drugged into a paranoid stupor, Beverly is confronted with the grim reality of his life, and disappears. The family gathers five days later, reminiscing about their missing father and about one another in various illuminating anecdotes. Violet's wild moods and aggressive animosity put her at odds with everyone, most of all her three grown daughters, each of whom is dealing with her own turmoil: Eldest Barbara struggles to keep her marriage together with her philandering husband, Bill; middle child Ivy is revealed to be having an affair with her first cousin, Little Charles; and youngest daughter Karen's fiance, Steve, turns out to be far less than the perfect man she thinks he is. When one character turns up dead and others resort to a brutal physical confrontation, the family spirals further downward into chaos and confusion, setting the stage for one dramatic revelation after another. *August: Osage County* is the winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

[So Much for That](#) by Lionel Shriver

In *So Much for That* by Lionel Shriver, Shep Knacker is preparing to live his dream. He has plans to retire with his wife, Glynis, to a tropical location with the money from the sale of his business. All his dreams go out the window when Glynis announces that she has cancer. Shep gives up his tropical island life to become the dutiful caregiver, while his ungrateful wife undergoes life-saving treatments at his expense. Their health insurance will not cover the bills, so Shep picks up the tab, watching his hard-earned nest egg dwindle away to nothing. Shep's life is further complicated when his best friend, Jackson Burdina, announces that his teenage daughter, Flicka, is also sick and he is running out of money for her care.

Three Stages of Amazement by Carol Edgarian
Lena Rusch and her successful surgeon husband, Charlie Pepper, have it all: a strong marriage, prosperous careers, a wonderful family, and hope for the future. When the stock market crashes, killing Charlie's new business venture, and the couple suffers the loss of their unborn child, their love, security, and dreams for the future are put to the ultimate test. *Three Stages of Amazement* follows the highs and lows of Lena and Charlie's relationship as everything in their lives seems lost, hope seems to have run out, and the future looks grim. The novel is a poignant and heart-wrenching tale of love and loss, success and failure, romance and heartache in modern-day America.

The World Without You by Joshua Henkin

The Frankel family comes together at the family vacation home on the Fourth of July--but not to celebrate a national holiday. Instead, they are there to mourn the passing of the youngest of the Frankel clan, Leo. Parents Marilyn and David are distraught at learning about the death of their son. Leo, a journalist, was killed in Iraq while on an assignment. As the siblings arrive, it is obvious that each one is very different, and dealing with personal issues. Clarissa, the oldest, is having trouble conceiving a child. Lily, an outspoken lawyer, feels no need to marry or start a family. Noelle, a born-again Jew, lives with her husband and children in Israel. And then there is Leo's widow, Thisbe, and the young son he left behind. Throughout the novel, readers learn about the strengths and weaknesses of this family, witness sibling rivalry, and discover secrets that characters have kept for years.



Ann Arbor District Library