

The Weekend by Charlotte Wood

Summary

People went on about death bringing friends together, but it wasn't true. The graveyard, the stony dirt - that's what it was like now ... Despite the three women knowing each other better than their own siblings, Sylvie's death had opened up strange caverns of distance between them.

Four older women have a lifelong friendship of the best kind: loving, practical, frank and steadfast. But when Sylvie dies, the ground shifts dangerously for the remaining three. Can they survive together without her?

They are Jude, a once-famous restaurateur, Wendy, an acclaimed public intellectual, and Adele, a renowned actress now mostly out of work. Struggling to recall exactly why they've remained close all these years, the grieving women gather for Christmas at Sylvie's old beach house - not for festivities, but to clean the place out before it is sold.

Without Sylvie to maintain the group's delicate equilibrium, frustrations build and painful memories press in. Fraying tempers, an elderly dog, unwelcome guests and too much wine collide in a storm that brings long-buried hurts to the surface - and threatens to sweep away their friendship for good.

The Weekend explores growing old and growing up, and what happens when we're forced to uncover the lies we tell ourselves.

Discussion questions

1. The author's note explains that this novel is a tribute to her parents' romance. A few actual threads of that story (such as the monastery) are included, but this novel celebrates the essential 'thematic' elements of that romance - the accidental nature of fate and the enduring nature of a great love. Discuss.
2. 'If we were married I could forbid you.' (p 42) Marriage is a constant theme – Jocelyn's memory of not being able to remove her teenage engagement ring is symbolic of the constraints placed on women in 1963. And yet if he had been able to demand her commitment, perhaps she would not have felt she owed Ellen her care? Discuss.
3. Why does Jocelyn marry Duncan? In order to wipe away the outcomes of her decision to abandon Martin? Or is it easier to commit to someone when you are not entirely convinced of

your capacity to hurt or love them?

4. 'They are clung together on the edge of a cliff. They jump.' (p 20) Does this describe the act of committing to another person accurately? Is it always a plunge into the unknown?
5. The attitude to defacto relationships in 1963 makes one aware of the great changes which have been worked in society's attitudes since then. What other major social changes does this book illustrate?
6. 'They say you can inherit it,' she says. 'Violence, I mean.' (p 69) Child abuse was a topic in *Pieces of a Girl* as it is in this novel. 'She wants more than anything ... to hurt her.' (p 85) Is the abuse of a child always a possibility even by the gentlest or the most charming of people?
7. 'Jocelyn tries not to think about Ellen and provocation and violence.' (p 98) Is Ellen the real abuser rather than Thomas? Is violence ever justified?
8. 'So young it begins, the hatred of women.' (p 236) The shocking incident in the Alhambra echoes Thomas's alleged treatment of Ellen. The Thomas/ Ellen story is never really concluded. What did you make of their situation?
9. 'The child will love the mother through the heart of her rage, but the aunt must stay calm or be cast adrift.' (p 84) Are baby sitters and carers in a 'lose-lose' situation? Is this why it is often hard for people to protect children from their abusive parents? Are the bonds too strong to break? 'The mind of a child, the endless acceptance of new unthinkable things.' (pp 63-4) Are all children as malleable as Sandra or has she learned to accept the unthinkable? Even her letter to Jocelyn conceding that her mother had hidden her letters suggested compliant acceptance of the fact rather than bitterness. Discuss.
10. The water represents the idyllic time they shared when they first met and yet the garden becomes their sanctuary. Is water a predominately positive or negative symbol in this novel in your opinion?
11. Accidents of fate often cause unimagined changes in lives. What other possible scenarios might have occurred in this novel? What other turning points were there which might have resulted in a different outcome?
12. Martin's outburst against Frank is followed by him thinking that 'this silly boy may be his salvation.' (p 173) What does this mean?
13. 'This life had acquainted Martin with hatred.' (p 175) 'Is this failure of courage the only thing keeping a monastery together?' (p 188) Is the religious life often a destructive experience or is Martin simply unsuited to it?
14. Is love a religious vocation? Does it require extraordinary faith to preserve it? Discuss.

