

# Attachments Short Guide

## Attachments by Judith Rossner

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# Characters

While in college, Nadine, the heroine, admires her boyfriend Schlomo's mother for her career as a dentist and is ashamed of her own mother's inactivity. As an adult, although she freely chooses the role of housewife for herself, she eventually becomes frustrated and unfulfilled by it. "How could I have longed to be a housewife and mother when I grew up," she wonders, "when I'd grown up knowing that my housewife-mother was the loneliest of women?" She becomes jealous of Dianne's law career and angry "at still being stuffed into a role [she'd] partly outgrown." She regrets having never completed her degree and becomes insecure about her intelligence. Eventually she becomes convinced that "marriage is a weight that pulls me down" and she feels compelled to leave Amos "to make a life for myself."

Rossner uses Nadine as the embodiment of the neurosis that can be produced by an intense fear of loneliness.

She is the narrator, so readers sympathize with her to a point, but clearly normalcy resides in more self-sufficient characters, like Dianne. The Siamese twins, Amos and Eddie, function only as a symbol until the separation, but afterwards, although Eddie remains undeveloped, Amos matures into a real character. Always intelligent, he goes from being a nasty man to becoming a loving one, capable of giving and receiving affection.

He comes to rely on Nadine, who lets him down "just when our lives are getting good." His transformation from freak to person is convincing and highlights still further Nadine's extreme difficulty in coping with life.

## Social Concerns

The major social issue developed in *Attachments* is the need for a woman to have a meaningful life of her own.

*Attachments* addresses the sexual revolution of the 1970s, presenting it in relatively negative terms as having assumed too much importance. In describing her sexual fumbling with Schlomo in college, for example, Nadine is pleased with their lack of anxiety over their performance, free of "that sense that seems to pervade so many sexual transactions of the seventies, that our entire selves were at stake."



## Techniques

Attachments begins with a chatty tone that some critics have found annoyingly close. The language in the opening pages is clever and witty, as when Nadine calls the East, "The Yeast . . . thus conveying, quite unconsciously, both my awe of it as a mysterious place of feverishly fermenting intellects and my fear that I would not readily find a place in this mass." Soon, however, Rossner's persona runs out of verbal energy, and the narrative settles into a calmer but far less interesting flow of words. Critics have faulted the book for too much heavy underlining and an unattractive self-consciousness, which are probably valid complaints. As in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, Rossner uses dreams to convey inner feelings and desires, though the device is less necessary here since, as the narrator, Nadine can tell the reader directly what she is thinking.



# Themes

Loneliness is again a major theme in *Attachments*, as it was in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1975; see separate entry). Nadine's life is governed by trying to avoid loneliness, which is represented for her by the image of falling. In the early pages she admits that "during the first twenty-five or thirty years of my life I was too agitated to learn much. Too busy trying to keep myself from falling." The death of her parents in a freak swimming accident is a blow from which she never fully recovers. Periodically she wishes to be a little girl again, watching her parents swimming together, although that memory evokes also the loneliness of returning to a bed no longer cozy but now "a cold and lonely place."

The belief throughout *Attachments* is that each person has room for only one attachment at a time. The Siamese twins, Amos and Eddie, have each other and, although they like the companionship of Dianne and Nadine, such relationships are not essential to their emotional well-being. Once separated, however, Amos turns to Nadine for the support he previously got from his brother. When Dianne is pregnant with Carlotta, Nadine is intensely jealous and feels the "baby was making love to her." She feels terribly alone—Dianne has the baby and the twins have each other. Then closeness with Dianne's baby Carlotta fills her emptiness and she no longer needs the others. When Nadine herself has a baby, Dianne's Carly is pushed out, and so it goes throughout the book. The loneliness after rejection is a terrible thing, whether experienced by Nadine, by Carly, or by Amos.

Nadine was first attracted to the Siamese twins because they had achieved her dream of "being permanently attached to someone else so I could never fall." They were not freaks to her, having been "born to a condition I was spending my life trying to achieve." She imagines herself in the space between them, absorbing their togetherness, just as she had desired as a child to be in the pool with her parents, swimming between them. The twins did not have to talk to communicate.

Only after separation would they get some conception of what loneliness is, as evidenced by Amos's sometimes grabbing Nadine in the night "as though to break a fall." Amos is strong, though, and will survive after Nadine leaves him. Ironically, Nadine may not, for clearly loneliness is a way of life for her.

While *Attachments* presents loneliness as a natural enough feeling, to be so fixated on it as Nadine is not the norm. Rossner presents her terror of being alone, and her inability to accept love, as a deficiency. Once in the book, when Carly fits her Raggedy Ann with a "Tachment" like her daddy's, Nadine herself is appalled and throws it away. "If she has not yet considered the dangers of attaching oneself to others out of sheer terror at the alternative," Rossner writes, "she has at least absorbed the reality principle insofar as Carlotta must live with it."

Nadine has distrusted love all her life, beginning with her inability to accept her first boyfriend Schlomo's kindness, deliberately hurting and then losing him by rushing out



for sex with every available male on campus. She also deliberately alienates Alex, her next boyfriend, even though she loves him, when she feels his love does not match hers in intensity.

After a brief marriage to Joe Tumulty and his kids, she hesitates to marry again, finding it "far worse to have a wonderful man and lose him than never to have him at all." With the twins, there is no risk.

They have each other; her bond to them is merely symbiosis. When they are separated and become their own persons, even though Amos needs her more and is a more tender husband, he has lost his attractiveness for her. He has become ordinary, and their four-way marriage begins to come unglued.

That marriage foursome highlights still another of the themes of *Attachments*, the importance of friendships between women. Nadine always looked to Dianne for her intelligence, her stability, and her sense of right and wrong. Dianne is special to Nadine, too, because she knew Nadine's parents and, through her, Nadine's roots remain alive. Their friendship cools and intensifies depending on how full their lives are otherwise, but Nadine needs for her to be always available. The attachment of the men binds Nadine and Dianne as well. Nadine fears sometimes that "our friendship had gotten lost in our marriage" but realizes too, on the eve of the operation, that "Dianne is too precious to let out of my sight for five minutes."

Rosner has said in an interview that she has always been particularly interested in friendships between women because they are "more often very, very deep than between men and women." She feels it is "almost as though sex, heterosexuality, enables one not to get deeper." Sex serves as a substitute for putting feelings into words, she finds, and women understand each other better. That belief gets substance in the friendship here between Nadine and Dianne, who understand each other perfectly, even when in intense competition.



## Key Questions

The bizarre marriage described in *Attachments* is largely a metaphor for Rossner's deep interest in the human need to be "attached." The book should prompt meaningful discussion on the meaning of friendship and marriage, the insecurities associated with being alone, and the challenges faced by women in creating an intellectually and emotionally satisfying role for themselves.

1. Nadine envies the Siamese twins for being "born to a condition I was spending my life trying to achieve. They need never be alone, unattached." What are the realities of their condition? How does their real life compare with Nadine's idealized picture of them?
2. Explain the role of Nadine's parents in her conscious and subconscious thinking. What effects has her loss of them as a child had on her development?
3. How would you describe Nadine's friendship with Dianne? Upon what is it based? Is it a relationship of equals or does one take more than she gives?
4. What prevented Nadine's attachments to Schlomo and Alex from maturing? How did these early loves compare with her attraction to Amos and Eddie?
5. Explain Nadine's fear of falling.

How does it govern her behavior?

6. Discuss the role played by Dianne's daughter Carly. How does she increase our understanding of the other characters?
7. What is the book's view of marriage? 8. Are you attracted or repelled by the sideshow quality of this four-way marriage? Could Rossner have made these twins simply identical rather than Siamese? Would that have produced a better or lesser book?
9. Amos feared separation because he felt he would be the one to be sacrificed. Yet after separation, he develops into a better person. Discuss Amos' development as a character and your changing response to him.

10. Who does Rossner favor as her model woman—Nadine or Dianne?

What does juxtaposing the two say about female self-identity and fulfillment?



## Literary Precedents

No one has written fiction about this particular subject matter before, although there is some basis in fact for the marriage of Siamese twins. Rossner became fascinated by a picture of real Siamese twins who married sisters and had twenty- one children between them.

When the sisters could not get along, they moved to two houses, and the twins divided their time between them. They were never separated, dying in 1914, before successful operations were possible.

Although the subject matter is unique, Attachments has been called by Jerome Charyn "a kind of Lolita in reverse: the female's terrifying quest for identity through sexual power and lust. We purr at the exotic. We fondle it, we move up close to it, smother it, until it becomes more and more like ourselves . . . Funny, sexy, and sad, Attachments is a crazy treatise on 'love' as the ultimate executioner."

## Related Titles

Rossner takes the fear of loneliness another step forward in this book. She states more explicitly a theme that was begun in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1975; see separate entry), that a woman needs to have a meaningful life of her own. The friendship between Nadine and Dianne in *Attachments* sets the stage for the full development of the bonds of female friendship to be explored in *August* (1983).

# Copyright Information

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