

The Girls from Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship Study Guide

The Girls from Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship by Jeffrey Zaslow

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Plot Summary

"The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" by Jeffrey Zaslow tells the story of a group of women from Ames, Iowa. They had a special bond when they were young, and stayed close as they grew older and spread around the world. The book is a demonstration of the unique bond of female friendship.

Photos cover the table showing pictures of 11 girls mashed together. They have pictures of themselves as children, teens and adults. Now the women are 44-years-old, and they gather together every year or so to reminisce. They are the girls from Ames, Iowa. Their lives are very different from each other now, but together they share a past and a friendship that will last their entire lives.

This summer they are gathered at Angela's place for four days. Marilyn takes pictures of the reunion. The daughter of the town pediatrician, she has always been the responsible one of the group.

Karla struggles to fit in with the others. She needs her sleep and misses her children dreadfully. The girls remember Sheila, the one girl who never made it to womanhood after her tragic death in her early twenties.

Kelly is in the process of finalizing her divorce and doesn't want to talk about the lost of child custody. She knows her friends will dig deep into the heart of her problems, and she isn't ready for that yet.

The girls remember so many things—good and bad. As they raise their own children, they are reminded of some of the choices they made in the past. Looking back, they appreciated the adults in their lives. Friendships and romances also come to mind as they realize how honest they are around each other.

Growing older with a group of friends is a good thing. They are solid in who they have become, and some are making changes in their lives, pursuing venues they might not have considered decades earlier. Marilyn researches the death of her brother and contacts the man who caused the accident. She and her sister both let him know that things ended out all right for their families.

Mysteries in their lives are understood better. New maturity gives them the courage to go back and ask questions they would never have asked before. The girls find out more details regarding Sheila's death, and while they didn't learn the entire truth, the death doesn't appear as sinister as they initially thought.

Two of the girls battle cancer themselves. When this happens, the others come in to support them and offer comfort. Both beat the cancer. As their children grow older, they begin to meet each other and form their own friendships.



When the hard cover copy of this book comes out, all the Ames girls head back home for book signings. The people in Ames are very welcoming and supporting. The girls realize that people around the world relate to, and are encouraged by their story and their friendship.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

"The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" by Jeffrey Zaslow tells the story of a group of women from Ames, Iowa. They had a special bond when they were young, and kept close as they grew older and spread around the world. The book is a demonstration of the unique bond of female friendship.

Chapter 1 - The Girls in the Photos

There were photos spread over the kitchen table. In them, 11 girls mashed together countless times. The pictures covered a wide span of time, ranging from pictures taken in the high school cafeteria to pictures taken when some of the women were in their twenties and thirties. The "girls" were now 44-years-old, and while they have changed, their friendship has not.

Gathered together, the girls sort through the photos. This latest reunion is taking place at Angela's during the summer. There are 11 girls here. The only one that is missing is Sheila, and many feel as if she is there as well.

The girls had been gathering like this for all their adult lives. They get together every year or so. Even though they are 44 now, when they get together they are much younger in their heads and in their hearts. They all loved growing up in Ames with its cornfields and proximity to Iowa State University. The girls didn't always get along, but they vowed to remain together throughout their lives. Now, among them, they found nine first husbands and two second husbands; they brought 21 children into the world; and they buried five parents. They have moved in and out of 17 different states,

This summer they are gathering at Angela's place for four days. They talk about the past, and they discuss what might happen in the future. They're there to support each other with life changes. During those four days, they laugh together and cry together, ignoring the outside world. How did it all begin?

When asked, they answer that they almost seemed to have known each other before they really knew each other. They have so many memories in common, and their lives intersected with each other many times, but they don't really recall formal introductions. Eight of the eleven girls went to public school during their elementary school years. They met up with the private school girls in junior high school.

The girls were drawn to each other by their own quirks, and they were fast friends by the end of junior high. Their parents welcomed the other girls into their homes, and the girls each had unique relationships with each parent. By high school, the group was very solid although not every girl was close every other girl in the family. Still, they were all linked to each other in some manner.



Karla was very diligent about keeping a scrapbook, and she had many of the notes they girls passed to each other in class. She also kept mementos from significant events in their lives. Each girl in the group had their own unique personality that they contributed to the group. Kelly was the most opinionated; Diana looked like a supermodel but she was never arrogant; Sheila was a cute flirt with a big smile and natural charm; Jenny with the group organizer; Angela was vivacious; Karen was the popular girl with a mother who understood teens; Sally tended to stay in the background, and Cathy like to call her "authentic"; Cathy was self-confident and sassy; Marilyn and Jane were studious and intense; and Karla was the funny friend who was full of life and had a great laugh.

Chapter 2 - Marilyn

Marilyn is taking pictures of the reunion. This is a good job for her because she works well as part of the group, but also likes to be on the fringe. She sometimes feels ambivalent toward the other girls. When she is around, the other girls find themselves acting more proper and showing more caution. She takes every decision seriously herself, and never wanted to let her family down. This might have had something to do with the circumstances surrounding her birth.

On September 25, 1960, before she was born, Marilyn's parents took their four children on a drive to a farm. They were in a car accident and six-year-old Billy was killed. The family struggled in their grief, and Dr. McCormack had a vasectomy reversal so they could have another child to love. The vasectomy reversal worked and Marilyn was born on April 8, 1963.

Throughout her entire life, Marilyn knew that she was brought into the world to bring life to a grieving family, and her decisions reflected that. She never wanted to do anything to disappoint them. Marilyn was especially close to her father. He was a unique man who really knew how to talk with adults and children alike. All the girls felt comfortable talking with him and coming to him for advice.

As the town pediatrician, Dr. McCormack was highly regarded. This was another reason Marilyn was careful with the decisions she made. She didn't want to damage his professional reputation. Her closest friend among all the girls was Jane. Like Marilyn, Jane was more serious and academically inclined. Both girls had a history of grief in their past — Jane was the only Jew in the group and many of her mother's relatives died in World War II. Marilyn asked her about her religion and grieved with her.

After many years practicing as a pediatrician, Dr. McCormick began showing signs of senility. He retired suddenly, afraid he would harm a patient. When he died at the age of 79, all the girls grieved with Marilyn. They knew and understand what a loss she was coping with.

Chapter 3 - Karla

Karla is cranky at the reunion as she struggles to cope with sensory overload. She needs her sleep, and she is missing her children. All the moms love their kids, but Karla



shows her love by spending time with them, preferring to be with them rather than to ever go out. All the girls know that it's going to be tough to room with Karla, but Kelly volunteers.

Karla was born on April 25, 1963. Her mother nursed her for five days then gave her up for adoption. Decades later, Karla can't believe a mother could do that, and she is always at her children's side. Her adoptive parents were thrilled to have her, and they gave her a good childhood.

Many of the girls had a connection to Karla's adoption, and that comforted her. Over the years, Mrs. Derby, Karla's adoptive mother, tried to locate her birth mother (whose name was listed on the birth certificate). About a decade prior, she read an article written by a woman with the same last name. There was a picture of the woman, and she looked very much like Karla. The woman had written about the prevalence of cancer in her family. Mrs. Derby called the woman, but the woman insisted she wasn't Karla's mother.

Karla's relationship with the other girls began in infancy. She was very shy, especially with boys, but was more confident when she was with the other girls. The others loved her sense of humor and love of fun. Things changed a bit in high school Karla became enamored with a boy named Kurt and began to spend more time with him than her girlfriends. They warned her about him, but she didn't listen. She married him, and they had a daughter in 1990, but Kurt didn't want to stick around to be a father. He left them when their daughter, Christie, was three months old.

Chapter 4 - Sheila

On the second morning of the reunion, Jenny pulls out some old photos, and there is one in particular she can't wait to share. It's a photo of Jenny and her dream crush at the prom together. Confused, she tries to remember what happened because she never went to the prom with him. She realizes that Sheila cut out his image and inserted it over the image of Jenny's real date.

Sheila was a cute girl with a bright smile and zest for life. She constantly had boys interested in her. The girls always remember her as the carefree, boy-crazy teen. She never became a woman. One of five beautiful children with extremely good-looking parents, Sheila tried to find her place in the family. Her mother was a classic beauty, and her father was a dentist. Their house was highlighted in "Better Homes and Gardens."

The girls never felt like she put on airs, and they noted that she could connect with others in an inspiring way. She was particularly close to the elderly. Sheila would find the oldest and sickest ones in the nursing home, grab their hand and sit down to have a chat with them.

Her father died young, and Sheila went off to school at Iowa State. She decided to train in a field where she could counsel grief-stricken families. On a Saturday night in March of 1986, she was out with a man she knew who worked for Budweiser. According to stories told, she stopped at a friend's house to go to the bathroom, but he wasn't home. Somehow she fell from the building and died two days later. The girls wondered if she



had been pushed off the building. They asked her mother about it at the funeral, and she said there were many unanswered questions, but the truth wouldn't change anything. Sheila was gone.

Chapter 5 - Kelly

Kelly is very outspoken and liberal. The other girls judge her and worry about her, but they love her. They said that as long as they remember, she has been predictably unpredictable. For 20 years she taught high school journalism. Her students either don't know what to make of her or consider her the most inspiring teacher they ever had.

At this reunion, the girls talk about "Kelly's swinging email." Jenny had sent an email with photos of her son. Kelly hit "reply all," mentioned the beautiful boy, then told her girlfriends about her first experience with swingers. She didn't realize that the letter went out to numerous relatives and friends.

While she had some risqué notes, she was also the one who wrote the most literary and thoughtful comments to the group. Email has been a great bonus for the group. They remembered when they first began using it. Each one could decide whether or not to get involved in discussions. The women used it to get advice from each other on parenting. Kelly wrote impassioned essays on the uncertainties of motherhood and womanhood.

Kelly's parents were teens when they had her. Still, they were some of the strictest of all the parents. Kelly became an expert at covering her tracks. She and Diana were very close, and she often felt like a second to her beautiful friend. Fortunately, they went after different types of guys.

Always supporting one cause or another, Kelly found herself fighting through protesters at an abortion clinic when she was older. That day in 1983 was the 10th anniversary for the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, and she unknowingly chose a historic site to terminate her pregnancy. Years later, after she had her other children, she felt no regret over the abortion. She hadn't been ready, and she felt that giving up that baby allowed her to have the other three.

Now Kelly is leaving her husband. She doesn't say much about it or about losing custody of the children. She knows the girls will be blunt and dig deep, and she isn't ready for that. The girls find it interesting that she is the group rebel, but she stays close to home.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 6 - The Things They Remember

There are many things the girls remember, some are good, and some bad. All of the memories are a part of their history. The girls remember silly things such as the boy at St. Cecilia's who was able to pick his nose and suck his thumb at the same time. They remember when Cathy was sent home from St. Cecilia's for wearing culottes. They also remember when they were seventh graders, flirting with college boys.

They remember the cold October day in 1979 when Pope John Paul II came to celebrate mass. Six of the Ames girls joined more than 300,000 people at a large farm to see him. They also remember a day in the late spring of 1980 when Jean was sunbathing in her backyard and was shot by a BB gun.

As the girls moved away and became adults, they found new friends, but these new friendships don't have to bond of the longtime memories. The girls are real with each other and can't be fake. If they tried to be fake, everyone would call them on it because they have known each other all their lives, and they know what is true.

Cathy's life is different from all the other girls. Many of the others married and had children, but she lived in Los Angeles and worked as a make up artist to celebrities. Her friends in Los Angeles are fascinated by the fact that she chooses to spend so much time with people she knew when she was young. They wonder what she still has in common with them. She knows that they each know the core of each other, and they remember that there's a young girl in each of them who is full of life still.

The girls haven't looked at all the scientific studies that show the benefits of friendship, but they don't have to. They see the results themselves. Marilyn points out that it's good for her mental health to know there is a group of people she can turn to as a safety net. Jane thinks the distance between the girls actually make some closer in certain ways because they have their own separate lives and don't have to be so careful about what they say.

The girls have a bond that is unique. They know what it was like growing up in an area known for its corn fields. Those cornfields became an important part of their life. Marilyn's older brother died at that intersection of cornfields. Karla, Cathy, Sally, Jean, Karen, Kelly and Diana began to work in cornfields at the age of 13. It was hard work, but it helped bond them. They also partied in the cornfields as they grew older.

Chapter 7 - The Intervention

Recently a popular topic of conversation is the way that girls today treat each other. The moms think the girls are very harsh with each other and don't want to think that they are



ever like that. However, they are reminded by Jenny of a time when they were just as mean. They staged an intervention regarding Sally and her behavior, and it's something they will never forget. Sally was not one of the coolest Ames girls. She didn't really understand how to fit in with the group, although she was very close to Sheila. The girls gathered with her one evening at a slumber party to talk about it, but instead of nicely telling her what their concerns were, they lambasted her, telling her everything they thought was wrong about her and what she needed to change.

Later on, Sally realized that the intervention was life-changing for her. Some of what the girls had mentioned was true, and she went home to her mother who comforted her. That was a good lesson in parenting. Overall, the intervention made her a much stronger person.

Chapter 8 - FBB and Other Secrets

The girls were so close to each other that they could behave any way they wanted with each other—even rudely. They could also let down and really open up their hearts to each other. If they had a problem, they would go to the others for advice. They were also able to talk with each other's parents about situations with boys that made them upset. Marilyn found herself in a situation where she had too much to drink, and later realized she might have been date raped. She called Dr. McCormack and was able to tell him what happened. He talked with her about sexually transmitted diseases, gave her a shot of penicillin, and morning-after pills. She also learned not to let herself get into that sort of position again.

Chapter 9 - Defining Love

Kelly and Karla disagree about love. Kelly thinks that people are supposed to have many different special loves in a lifetime, and Karla believes in a single soul mate. They remember their weddings. In the summer of 1990, Angela and Karen got married just a few days apart. The Ames girls went to Karen's wedding and took a road trip down to Kansas City for Angela's. Karla brought her five month old daughter, Christie, to Karen's wedding, and the other girls fell in love with her right away. It was as if the girl belonged to all of them.

After Karen's wedding, Karla left Christie with her parents before going to Angela's wedding, but she couldn't handle the time away from her daughter and had to leave the festivities early to get back to her. During the trip, she told the others about a man she had met. His name is Bruce. Later, they were married.

One day when Christie was just under two years old, she disappeared on Karla. It was terrifying. She found her down the road, watched by some strangers in a pick up truck. The family dog kept pushing the girl into the ditch so she wouldn't go to traffic, and the dog protected the girl from the strangers until her mother came. Later, Karla shared the moment of panic she felt with the other Ames girls. She reminded them what love is all about.

Chapter 10 - "If Not For You"



As they look through the photos, the girls review the boys that they had in common back in their teen years. The conversation begins to turn to their lives after they left Ames, but those conversations don't go far. They were too distant from each other in those times.

Marilyn remembers the struggle she had when she went away to college. She missed her girlfriends, especially Jane. As the other girls spread out around the country they too struggled with missing their friends. Just before leaving college for the summer, Marilyn was in a computer center. She had nothing to do so she decided to play with the computers and make a message for Jane. Days later, Jane fed the cards into the computer at her school and saw the message. The friendship of the girls had now entered the computer age.

Jane eventually met a man who really appealed to her. The only problem was the fact that he wasn't Jewish. Karen's mother talked with her and told her to go with her heart, and Marilyn offered the same advice. They were married in 1989, and Marilyn was by her side. In 1990, Marilyn met a fellow board member who appealed to her. They decided to get married after dating for a while. Jane was her matron of honor.



Chapters 11-5

Chapters 11-5 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 11 - The Bonds of Pop Culture

The girls are going to a restaurant in downtown Raleigh. It's the reunion's only night out. The girls are asking Cathy about the latest trends in California. They laugh at some of the latest fads the celebrities come up with.

The girls have always been there to keep each other current with pop-culture. They kept current on singers and celebrity crushes throughout their younger years. While the town didn't have many movie stars or TV stars coming through it, the girls were very familiar with musicians who came through on concert tours.

When they were younger, most of the girls felt that Rod Stewart was just about the sexiest thing going. As they got older, they still thought so. At the reunion, Cathy commented that "now he's ugly sexy." The girls loved sharing their celebrity encounters over the years, and in 1991, Angela went to see "Thelma and Louise." There was an actor the film that reminded her of a journalism major she knew from her days University of Missouri. She waited for the credits roll to see if it really was he, and it was. His name is Brad Pitt.

Since Cathy was a makeup artist for celebrities, she had many stories to tell. However, she knew that was not appropriate to reveal some things, even to her best friends. She was also used to avoiding name dropping, so she only told stories once in a while. One story she told was when she was called into cut Sting's wife's hair, and she was asked to cut the singer's hair as well. While she was doing so, his son came into the room and so did Madonna. Another time Cathy was on tour with Michael Jackson, and she was asked to do his makeup.

Chapter 12 - Their First Child

There is a Christmas card Jane particularly loves. It's a photo of Karla and her family. The children are eight, nine, and eleven. Christie, the girl they all fell in love with when she was a baby, is starting to lose her little girl looks, and they can see the teenager to come.

The girls from Ames love watching all 21 of their kids grow and enjoy seeing their personalities develop. Christie had a special place in their hearts because she was the first one. She also had a life-filled glow about her and just seemed extra special. During the summer of 2002, Christie began feeling ill. After numerous tests, she was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia. She learned about an organization called Caring Bridge, which allows families of ill children to post messages and updates on their website. She began using that to update everyone on her health situation. The girls



were amazed at her sense of optimism and hope that the young girl kept her online diary.

Karla was so busy with the doctors and hospital stays that she didn't keep in touch with the others, even when they reached out to offer her support. The girls did what they could to help, gathering funds to get her housecleaner and keeping in touch with the family. Kelly would visit in the hospital on Wednesdays until she realized that Karla was getting too upset and stressed about the visits. She just wanted to spend time with her daughter.

As they read the online journal, the girls in the group realized how much the illness was affecting them. Sally realize that she was turning into a better, more loving mother and a better teacher because she had a new awareness of how each kid in her class was extremely important.

By May of 2003, the doctors considered Christie to be in remission. Everyone was extremely relieved. At the reunion that year they celebrated their 40th birthdays and the fact that Christie was in remission. It opened up conversation about serious topics such as when Angela's brother died of complications from AIDS in 1999. Once again they were able to cry together and laugh together. Karla shared her fears about the cancer stating that it was all so fragile, and she didn't know what she would do if she lost her daughter.

Christie continue keeping her online journal even when she was in remission. Then, on June 16, 2003, she wrote that her mom has been noticing that she had been bruising a lot. The girl went in for more testing and discovered that the cancer was back. She had relapsed. Christie spent her 14th birthday in the hospital. It was January 9. On February 20th, Karla posted an entry letting everyone know that Christie had died. All the Ames girls came together for the memorial service to support their friends.

Chapter 13 - Tears in the Ladies' Room

As they had dessert during the reunion, Jane asks to say a few words. Her daughter, Hannah, just celebrated her bat mitzvah, and for her project, she raised money for Caring Bridge. It helps Karla to know how her daughter affected everybody.

The weeks and months following the memorial service and funeral were very difficult for Karla. The girls kept checking in on her, and her husband was there for her, but she struggled to make it through each day. The girls used email to keep in touch with her and with each other regarding her grieving process. Jane reminded her of how much they loved her and of how much they looked Christie.

Now that they were getting older, the Ames girls were not strangers to grief. Karen also knew the pain of losing a child. Five months into her pregnancy with her second child she discovered that the baby had spina bifida, and they had to terminate the pregnancy.

Cathy had recent dealings with death as well. When Cathy's mother died, her father asked her to do the make up on her mother so she would look best. She appreciated



the opportunity to offer this act of love. During the funeral, the Ames girls gathered together, and they began crying. They cried for Cathy's mom, they cried for Karla, and they cried for Christie. At that funeral they saw Sheila's mom for the first time in many years and asked about the young girl's death. They ran to the bathroom to cry just as they did in high school. It was their refuge.

Chapter 14 - Cooperation and Appreciation

The girls all enjoy talking with each other about their children. They talk about how times have changed and how spoiled kids are today. They offer advice to each other for things that have worked for them. They also enjoy discussing the quirks of each of their children. Everyone has something to contribute, even the unmarried, childless Cathy. She offers nutritional advice.

Jenny was the mother of the youngest child in the group. One time she asked the girls a question regarding her young son, and nobody responded. When she asked them why they hadn't responded, they realized that so much time has gone by since their children were little that they didn't know what advice to offer her. At the reunion, she surprises the girls with the news that she is once again pregnant. They gather together to take a photo, literally engulfing her in their good wishes.

Chapter 15 - News from Ames

When they get together, one of the main topics of conversation is always the latest news from Ames. They catch up on news such as who had cosmetic surgery, and they also learn about the latest deaths. Now they have the Internet to help them keep current with the news from Ames.

During one visit back to Ames, Marilyn looked up the story of her family's car accident. She read about her brother's death, and learned the name of the 15-year-old boy who caused a car accident. She decided to contact him, and she researched until she found him. She called him up and asked if she could send him a letter. She said she needed to do that for closure. He agreed. Marilyn told her girlfriends about the letter, and they gave her full support.



Chapters 16 - Afterword

Chapters 16 - Afterword Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16 - Through Kell'yy Eyes

This chapter focuses on Kelly. She is getting a divorce and is working through the emotions resulting from her separation from her children. Looking back, the girls notice how times have changed. They remember when they weren't supposed to be playing soccer with boys and were told that girls could not pole vault. Now it's a different world, and one of the best changes is the fact that a woman can make her own choices.

Diana was an accountant, and she took time off to raise her kids. Now she works 20 hours a week at Starbucks because she wants to. She enjoys listening to her co-workers and talking with them. Kelly loves the idea that Diana chose this sort of job. Kelly also thinks highly of Jenny who works in politics. The small-town girl moved down to Washington D.C. to work in the political arena.

Chapter 17 - Mysteries and Memories

Over breakfast on the last full day of the reunion Jean tells the others that she has noticed that the girls are showing up in her dreams a lot more. It might be due to the fact that they are sharing so many memories. All the girls note that there is a dreamy quality to some of the memories that they share. This is particularly true for the memories that involve mysteries and unanswered questions. Over the years, they have found the courage to ask questions they were scared to ask when they were younger. This helped in solving some of the mysteries.

Marilyn continued communicating with Elwood, and her older sister wrote a letter to him as well. In these letters, they were able to express the good things that had happened to their family after that tragic occurrence. It was very healing for them and for Elwood as well.

The girls also reconnected with Sheila's family. They learned that her younger brother, Mark, had a four-year-old son with a rare form of cancer. They kept in touch with the boy through the Caring Bridge website. Now that his son is going through cancer treatments, Mark has more of an appreciation for what his sister did while she was alive. Sheila loved kids, and she loved helping families. As they talked with Sheila's family, the friends talk about the night Sheila died.

There was still a mystery surrounding the event, but they realized it might not have been as sinister as they initially thought. It was suggested that they pool together resources to offer a scholarship in Sheila's memory. It would be for a female student who is kind to everyone and who is well-liked. Classmates would nominate the winner.

Chapter 18 - North of 40



Things began to change for the girls from Ames. Now middle-aged, they moved in different directions. Bruce and Karla decided to move to Montana, and Angela decided to start the second business called Finality Events. Diana continued to be happy with her job at Starbucks and began to concentrate more clearly on ways to "give back." She reached out to help others and to listen to them, and she became passionate about the environment.

Now in their mid-40s, the women know they are at a crossroad. The girls are reminded how important friendship is as time goes by. Women live longer than men, so it's even more important to keep close to girlfriends.

Chapter 19 - The Game

Angela has a surprise for everybody on the final night of the reunion. It's a game. They are so close, and they have known each other for so long, but this game has them answering questions about themselves. They offer information nobody else knows. They learn a lot about each other. During the game Kelly admits that she's looking for what most of the others have. She's looking for a really good relationship with a man.

Chapter 20 - The Women From Ames

Before dawn on Monday morning, the girls get up and get ready to leave. They say their goodbyes and head home. Within hours of their arrivals at their own homes, they are already e-mailing each other. Already they are planning the next reunion. Their stories continue.

Three months after the reunion, in September 2007, Kelly writes to tell everyone that she has breast cancer. Marilyn offers to drive down to be with her for doctor appointments if necessary. The others also offer support in their own ways and based on their own connections and knowledge.

A year after the reunion at Angela's, the girls get together again in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. Kelly is doing much better, and the doctors think that they have gotten rid of the cancer although there might be some cancer cells in her body.

Kelly has moved and is loving life in Montana. There were some tough times when she thought about Christie, but she is moving on. Jenny lost the baby that she was carrying at the reunion at Angela's. At the Berkshires reunion she let the girls know that she was pregnant again. Later, she gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby girl.

In October 2008, Angela found out that she had breast cancer, too. Hers was a very aggressive form. The story of the girls from Ames doesn't end here. It will have many more chapters build new interactions and new insights. The girls always have each other.

Afterword



In 2009, the Ames girls went home after the release of the hardcover edition of this book. Hundreds of townspeople gathered to show their support. Each woman talked about what Ames meant to them, and Angela talked about her cancer journey lightly and humorously.

After the book came out, the Ames girls heard from readers, learning how they connected. They learned about other close friendships. Now, the children of the Ames girls are becoming good friends. There is talk of having mother/daughter weekends.



Characters

Christie

This character was the first child born to any of the friends. Her life made a huge impact on the girls. From the first time they met her, she seemed to belong to all of them. When she escaped from her mother and was found by the road when she was just under two-years-old, all the girls felt an amazing connection and understood a new depth of love.

Seeming older than her years, the girls watched this girl grow. They were amazed at her ability to talk with adults and by her cheerful outlook. When she developed cancer, they stood by her and supported her in any way they could. She continuously amazed them with her positive attitude, and they clung to her updates on Caring Bridge. She died at a young age after struggling with cancer.

Dr. McCormack

This character was Marilyn's father. He was an amazing man who was the town pediatrician. One of his children died in a car accident before Marilyn was born. He had a reverse vasectomy in hopes that life would replace the death.

This man was extremely wise and relatable. He welcomed his daughter's friends into their home and talked with them frankly. The school asked him to come in to talk with the students about sex, and he covered the topic thoroughly, without embarrassment.

When Marilyn was date raped, she called him. He told her about sexually transmitted disease before giving her a shot of penicillin. After that, he gave her a morning after pill and talked with her about avoiding being put in that position again. The man began showing signs of dementia, and stopped practicing abruptly when he realized he could hurt someone. He was 79 and completely senile when he died. It was a great loss to them all.

Karla

This character was adopted. She was the first Ames girl to have a child herself.

Marilyn

This character was the daughter of a pediatrician. She was always responsible and conscientious.



Kelly

This character was the most free-spirited of all the girls — predictable in her unpredictability. She taught high school journalism, was divorced, and has two children.

Cathy

This character lived in Los Angeles and worked as a makeup artist for celebrities. She wants to become a screenwriter.

Diana

This character was known as the beauty of the group. She married, had three daughters and works at Starbucks by choice, although she is an accountant by training.

Jenny

This character was the last of the friends to have a child. She was an assistant dean at University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Jane

This character was the only Jew in the group of friends. She was studious and worked as a psychology professor.

Karen

This character was the daughter of an auto dealer. She had the nickname "Woman."

Sally

This character was quiet and didn't fit in with the group too well. They held an intervention to show her how they thought she should act. She was a teacher and the only friend remaining in Iowa.

Sheila

This character was the daughter of a dentist. She was cute and flirty. She counseled families with ill children and never married. This character was the only Ames girl who never grew up.



Angela

This character was the newest member of the group. Her father managed a hotel. She ran a PR firm in another state.

Elwood Koelder

This was the name of the 15-year-old boy who caused the car accident that killed Marilyn's brother. Many years later Marilyn and her sisters reached out to him, telling him things ended out all right with their family.



Objects/Places

Ames, Iowa

This was a friendly college town where the girls grew up and met each other.

Iowa State

This was a college that employed many of the parents of the girls and their classmates.

Minnesota

This was where Marilyn and Kelly lived as this book was written.

Arizona

This was where Diana lived as this book was written.

Chicago

This was where Sheila moved to after leaving Ames.

North Carolina

This was where Angela lived as this book was written.

California

This was where Cathy lived and worked as this book was written.

St. Cecilia

This was a private school where three of the girls met.

Maryland

This was where Jenny lived as this book was written.



Corn Fields

These were a big part of the girls life in work and play.

Boyd's

This was the ice cream shop where many of the girls worked.

Caring Bridge

This is the organization that provides web pages so cancer patients can share their stories with others. Christie used it as an online journal, and the girls from Ames read it to see what was happening.

Themes

The Health Benefits of Friendship

The friendship the girls had was important to both the mental health of the women and to their physical health, although they didn't necessarily know that. What they did know was that their bond was special, and they didn't want to break it. From a young age, they were there to listen to each other and support each other. If one stood on the fringes of the group, another one came along to support them and make them feel as if they fit in.

As they grew older, they kept in touch with each other. They asked each other questions about their own health, about relationships and about the children. Mentally it gave them a safety net, knowing that the other girls were there to support them. Scientific studies show that there is a very positive impact from friendship in the lives of women. The 14-year project at Flinders University in Australia showed that close friendships help prolong women's lives even more than close family ties. Researchers from Duke University studied hundreds of unmarried patients that had coronary heart disease. They found that of the patients who had close friends, 85% lived at least five years. This rate was double the survival rate of those who did not have friends.

There are many psychological benefits of having long-term friendships. Not only does it help yourself, but it also affects the way you treat others. Gerontologists say that friends who have been friends for a long period of time are more understanding about health issues than family members.

How Friendship Changes Over Time

The girls from Ames don't even really remember how their friendships initially came about. In some ways it seems as if they had always known each other. Different groups of girls went to school with each other, and each girl in the group had one or two other girls that they were particularly close to.

From very early on, they each had different roles in the group. Each offered their own contribution whether it was adding fun to the group, adding stability, or chronicling events. When they were together, they were a powerful force that sometimes turned other people away.

Some of the girls in the group preferred to stay on the fringe of the group. At one point, the girls didn't want one member in their group. They staged an intervention and told her everything that they didn't like about her and what she should change. She still had some close friends in the group who stood up for her, and she got through the situation and it made her stronger. The intervention was something that they all look back on and regret now.



After they left high school, the girls went to college and kept in touch through letters. At the very dawn of the computer age, they started sending notes to each other using computer cards. When the Internet became popular, all the girls were once again reunited in group communications that they could choose to take part of or not.

They got together every year or so, and these get-togethers reflected their ages. They didn't go wild and crazy like when they were young, and the conversations turned towards their children and their professional lives. They supported each other in life and death as their parents died and so did some of their children.

In their adult lives, some of the quieter girls became solid woman with strong personalities. Some of the close friendships changed due to religious beliefs and political beliefs, but everybody still remained close. No one knows what the future holds, but the women know that they will always be there for each other.

How Friendship Helps One Get Through the Rough Patches in Li

One of the great benefits of friendship is the fact that there is always a net to fall back onto. This was how the woman of Ames felt about their group of friends. They were always there for each other through rough patches in life. Together they celebrated the good, and they stood by each other in bad times.

This is shown by the way they supported each other after Sheila died. It was also shown in the way they handled Christie's fight against cancer. They were constantly there to support the family any way they could. When visiting seemed to overwhelm the mother, the girls found different ways to help.

They pooled resources together to get a house cleaner so their friend wouldn't have to worry about home maintenance while she cared for her daughter. They checked in with her family and wrote letters of support. They all went to the funeral so they could be there in person for their friend.

When two of the women in the group got cancer themselves, the rest of the friends were there to support them once again. They were also there for each other through divorces, miscarriages and job changes.

The rough patches in life didn't have to be serious all the time. The girls from Ames would also help each other get through small problems, particularly when it came to parenting. They worked together to come up with plans to deal with things. They even found a way to keep Sheila alive by pitching together to start a scholarship fund in their friend's name.



Style

Perspective

This book was written by Jeffrey Zaslow of "The Wall Street Journal." He was a columnist who co-authored the popular book, "The Last Lecture." The author was a man writing a book about friendships among women. At the close of the book, the author states that he is asked all the time about the difference between male friendships and female friendships. While writing this book, he learned a lot about female friendship and the benefits of the friendships that women share.

He was curious and very thorough and his research. He spent a lot of time with the women, and he interviewed them individually. It wasn't always easy, and sometimes feelings were hurt. However, everyone was dedicated to highlighting the importance of the friendship among the girls from Ames so it all worked out in the end.

The author had great respect for the women and for their friendship. It showed through in his writing. He constantly pointed out how unique their friendship was and how amazingly wonderful it was for all of them.

Tone

"The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" by Jeffrey Zaslow is written in third person perspective with first-person input. For example, the author would write sentences such as "As Karla saw it, she had to..." He knew what Karla was thinking because he interviewed her. Still, he wrote with a third person perspective. This perspective helps a reader connect to all the characters in the book without preference. He gives an overall view of the girls in the inner workings of their friendship.

Structure

The book opens with a picture of five of the girls when they were young. This visual imagery is followed by a Table of Contents, which shows that the book contains a title page, a copyright page, a dedication, and an introduction before the chapters begin.

The introduction is several pages long. It is followed by 20 chapters, which average 10-20 pages each. The chapters are numbered and named by a brief word or phrase important to the chapter.

Images are interspersed throughout the book so the reader can clearly see the girls as they were in the past, and as they were when the book was written. After the last chapter, there is an Afterword, which gives an update on the women. There is also a link to a website so readers can get more current information on the girls.

Quotes

We root each other to the core of who we are, rather than what defines us as adults—by careers or spouses or kids. There's a young girl in each of us who is still full of life.
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 98.

But those with the most friends outlived those with the least friends by 22 percent. In fact, researchers say a woman who wants to be healthier and more psychologically fit in her old age is better off having one close friend than half-a-dozen grandchildren.
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 99.

"There's this comfort zone," says Marilyn. "It's good for my mental health to know there's a group of people I can turn to at any moment in my life, and they'll be my safety net."
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 100.

Bottom line: Women talk. Men do things together. Researchers explain it this way: Women's friendships are face to face, while men's friendships are side by side.
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 102.

(Meanwhile, a Harvard Medical School study found that for women without close friends to talk to, the sense of isolation can be as damaging as smoking, overeating or drinking too much alcohol.)
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 105.

When people really want to define themselves, they look beyond how they decorate their houses or what they do for a living or what songs are on their iPods. In the poll, the number one answer was "I am most defined by my friendships."
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 106.

"Stay close to your girlfriends," Cathy's mom would tell her.
Chapter 6. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 108.



But I've come to see that our job is to help our kids become people who are capable and believe in themselves enough to deal with the world. Our job is to help our kids function in the world.

Chapter 7 "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 122.

"Sometimes the only thing keeping a woman from falling over is the girlfriend right beside her."

Chapter 11. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 220.

"Having these women in my world has meant not only acceptance, but radiant joy and laughter that knocks me right out of my chair. Through our darkest moments, we have lifted each other up. In every moment of grief we've shared, our laughter is a life vest, a secure promise that we will not go under."

Chapter 16. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 262.

"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

Chapter 20. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 301.

And if you become weary, I will carry you. When we both start to stumble, our sisters will be there, walking beside us, ready to catch us and help carry us up that mountain.

Chapter 20. "The Girls From Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship" p. 307.

Topics for Discussion

What was so unique about the friendship of the women at the reunion?

How do these women represent all women around the world?

What was Sheila's role in the group, and what was her impact on them?

How did Christie change the group?

Why was Dr. McCormack so special to the group, and how did his own daughter feel about him?

What are the benefits of female friendship. Contrast this with male friendship.

How has the friendship of these women changed over time?

How did the world respond to the book and why?