Olivia Short Guide

Olivia by Judith Rossner

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Contents

Characters

Olivia focuses primarily on the women, Caroline and Olivia, with the men in their lives — Angelo, Leon, and Pablo — in supporting roles.

Caroline is bound to be a person in her own right, although she has not the strength, most of the time, to stand her ground. She feels her early life "rested on false assumptions" about both her parents and Angelo; she knows she is being mistreated by Angelo but confines herself for years to small food rebellions — keeping butter in the house, feeding risotto to Olivia. When she does get the strength to leave, she feels "disembodied." She recognizes that she misses not just her daughter but "myself." She finds a new, more independent self through her cooking classes and TV show, but feels acutely the need for "someone who was like a husband but like a father as well."

Leon seems the perfect candidate, although his stubbornness about children and his reluctance about marriage keep him from fully satisfying her needs.

She sees their keeping their two apartments "with two separate locks and keys and no inside connection" as "a perfect metaphor." A loving person, Caroline feels an acute need for a child "who loved me, enjoyed me," a desire Olivia is unable and unwilling to fulfill. Midway through the book, Caroline takes a walk to Grand Street, an old Jewish neighborhood, to conjure up memories of her grandparents in hopes of finding satisfaction there. She decides that her grandmother's "peacefulness was framed by, and rested upon, tradition," so she tries to recapture a Jewish heritage that had never mattered much to her. By the end, fortified by a new closeness with Livvy, a baby to dote upon, the security of marriage to Leon, and a Jewish support system, she seems at peace with herself.

Olivia's coolness and even hostility toward her mother throughout most of the book seem primarily the acting out of resentments for wrongs real and imagined coupled with the usual ups and downs of being a teen-ager. She is insecure about her mother's love, as shown by her fear of asking her mother if she can stay beyond the summer's visit in New York, and she resents any competition for her mother's attention, as shown by asking plaintively "What will happen to me?" when she is told of Caroline and Leon's relationship.

She wants independence (a job, her own phone, privacy) yet is unable to stand up for what she really wants — to follow through on her dream of going to Harvard. After running away to Florida with Pablo, she admits to her mother, "I don't want to get married! I don't want to have a baby!" but she is trapped. Her Catholic upbringing, her fear of going against Pablo, her belief that to get an abortion would be to commit murder make it impossible to follow her mother's advice that having the baby "might be a sin against your self. And the baby." Although she makes the moral choice, her psyche cannot accept the reality, and she blocks out an entire year of her life, refusing to accept the baby and withdrawing into herself until she climbs into the baby's cradle, thumb in her mouth, tucked into the fetal position.

When she awakens, gradually, she finds a new closeness with her mother, a growing incompatibility with Pablo, and an eagerness to resume her life as a student. A hopeful sign at the end that she might be accepting her dual responsibilities is her rescuing of the baby from a fall on the stairs. When the baby reaches for "Mama," meaning Caroline, Olivia seems about to hand her over, then changes her mind and instead holds Donna on her lap while discussing with her mother what her college major might be.

None of the male characters are developed in any significant detail in this story. Caroline says, early in the book, "I enjoyed, and later married, an outline and a cliche," and Angelo remains that throughout. He is loving and passionate before marriage, dutiful but indifferent within marriage, a doting father, a cheating husband, the ruler of his home. Once he has remarried, he and Caroline become almost friends in their conversations over Olivia. Pablo is similar in his traditional Catholic upbringing, his commitment to Olivia after she becomes pregnant, his devotion to his daughter. He is kind and patient, serves as an interpreter between mother and daughter in troubled times, and develops a closeness with Caroline in the difficult months after the baby's birth. But he, too, is only an outline. In Rossner's mind, "Pablo wasn't another Angelo, I was pretty sure, but he was another Catholic."

Leon fares little better, becoming the "Jewish doctor" who can be won over by a good Matzo ball soup, who is considered the perfect catch by Jewish parents, yet is not especially devout about traditions. He is particularly flat regarding the abortion issue, with his superior attitude toward women who "want babies" and his cynicism about pregnancy, especially among teenage girls. He enjoys Caroline's company and her cooking but invests little into the relationship and seems to resist involvement in the day to day crises in her life.

Social Concerns

Olivia, Rossner continues several Inwell-established themes in her writing, particularly the need for a woman to have a life and identity of her own, and the worth of family and tradition to provide stability (thus the subtitle (or, The Weight of the Past). Superimposed on these themes in this novel is a very 1990s concern — the moral dilemma of abortion in the face of teenage pregnancy.

Caroline Ferrante, the heroine of the book, is a talented cook-turned-TVcooking-show-hostess, who bases much of her identity and sense of worth on her virtuosity in the kitchen. The child of college professors who expected an academic life for her, she dropped out of college, followed her love of food and cooking to Italy, married Angelo, a charming but unfaithful Italian vintner, and returned to New York after a failed marriage of ten years. There, in her cooking classes, she discovers herself to be "a showoff, an entertainer, much cleverer in my stage kitchen than in everyday life." The show is a huge success, but her producers are always pressuring her to change herself — to become a glamorous blonde for TV, to talk less and do more during the show, to introduce a fictional story line into the series. She resists these efforts, feeling that just by being on TV, she has compromised her identity. "I wasn't being seen. It's some character they're mostly seeing. And that's when you're being yourself!" Similarly, she resists the attempts of the men in her life to squelch her creativity, as when she secretly adds forbidden dishes to the restaurant menu when Angelo is away or when she clings to her separate apartment as her own haven even when happily involved in an affair and eventually marriage with Leon. But her rebellions are mild, on the whole, and Rossner's support of women's liberation much less decisive than in her previous writing.

Family and tradition are once again stressed as an essential base on which to build. For Caroline, that means returning to her Jewish roots, which had been largely ignored through her youth and early adulthood. Troubled by her daughter's anti-Semitism, she becomes all the more determined to introduce Jewish custom into everything from casual conversations to her cooking show. When an angry Olivia once calls her a "fake Italian" for stereotyping the Italians, she responds by calling herself "a real Jew who likes Italy and Italian food. Not a fake Italian." As her life grows more and more complicated, with Olivia's pregnancy, her own growing involvement with Leon, and her need to balance having Livvy's boyfriend Pablo and Leon's kids all in residence in their double apartment, Caroline comes to appreciate her Jewish roots more and more. She devotes one entire cooking show to defining "what it means to be an American Jew who doesn't practice Judaism," more for herself than for her audience. In the closing chapters of the book, she asks her parents for a menorah, the traditional Jewish candelabrum, for Christmas, and institutes the Jewish Friday night family dinner. She thinks fondly of her father's mother, who kept tradition and who knew exactly who she was, and hopes that some of that stability and acceptance will come into her life by returning to her Jewish past.

The heartache of teen-age pregnancy is made poignant through the dilemma of her seventeen-year-old daughter with dreams of Harvard whose boyfriend, a twenty-seven-

year-old Latino, only wants to marry her and raise their baby. Catholicism and Judaism go head-to-head on this issue, with Pablo and Livvy, both Catholic, feeling strongly that it would be wrong to kill the baby and Caroline and Leon believing just as strongly in the Jewish law that "the mother's life takes precedence over an unborn, an unformed, child's."

The dilemma is further complicated by Caroline's own love of babies and her desire to have another of her own, a plan to which Leon is adamantly opposed. Caroline knows what it is to marry for the good of the baby — after all she did it herself seventeen years earlier for Livvy and would do it again. But she also knows what it is to marry someone with whom one has nothing in common. Rossner makes the dilemma real for her readers as they follow Livvy through her almost-abortion, her running away to get married, the forbidden fruit of her acceptance to Harvard, the church wedding she does not really want, her regression into infancy after the baby's birth, and Pablo's own heartache as he tries to mother the baby and deal with his seriously depressed and later collegestudent wife, who is gradually shutting him out of her life.

Techniques

Olivia, like other of Rossner's books, begins at the end, using a chatty, confessional voice to introduce the main character's memoirs. This confessional aspect is accented by occasional italicized, unspoken thoughts, often contradicting the words Caroline speaks aloud. Occasionally she lapses into preachiness, as in her belaboring of the Catholic view of marriage and abortion or her dwelling at length on aspects of Jewishness. Transcripts of episodes of her cooking show reveal not only the depth of her knowledge and appreciation of good food but, in her digressions, some of her most deeply held philosophies.

Her aside in one show that "food is sort of sex above the neck" reveals much about how she views cooking — as a sensuous experience, an expression of creativity, a vehicle for communicating with those we love. Angelo succumbs to her rich caponata, a gustatory delight of eggplant, olives, lobster, shrimp, tuna, cocoa, and almond slivers. Leon falls for the perfect matzo ball soup. Cooking serves as therapy, as when Caroline takes out her anger at Livvy in a passionate, impromptu pasta dough lesson for her class. Kitchen time is quality time, as shown by young Caroline's cooking Italian with Anna, or baking cookies with Ovvy, or making chocolate pralines with Livvy.

Even Leon enters the kitchen to make pancakes with Cara in the early flush of love. Olivia's rejection of her mother's exquisite food for a steady diet of burgers reflects her rejection of other aspects of her mother as well. Food is clearly a metaphor in this book, one in which Caroline is fluent. "It's so much easier to deal with food than people," she says. "The difference between people and food is that if you take identical pieces of food and treat them identically, they will turn out the same way." People seldom do, which is why her life in the kitchen is so much more under control than her life outside of it.

Themes

Rossner has once again created a story in which relationships are the primary focus — between parent and child, between husband and wife — and in which the need for love and approval are central. The "weight of the past" in this book involves not only cultural roots, as already discussed, but also one's personal past, as he/she relates to family.

Caroline felt orphaned as a child, not literally but spiritually, since her parents were always busy at home with their academic responsibilities, her older siblings always seemed to take precedence in family activities, and her cooking talents were admired but undervalued. As a result, she gravitated toward a series of loving housekeeper/cooks, including the beloved Anna Cherubini, whom she followed to Italy and mourned as a mother upon her death. Out of fear that her parents will not approve of her life with Angelo in Italy, she delays inviting them, then resents being displaced by her daughter Olivia in their hearts during their visit. This competition for Olivia's affection persists throughout the book, and her need for parental approval does as well.

Mother-daughter bonds are especially significant in Olivia. Caroline is appalled to be labeled just a "birth mother" by Olivia and longs to be her real mother, a role that in Olivia's mind is held by her father's mistress Mirella. All Olivia seems able to remember of their early years together in Italy is that her mother was always angry with her, as a result of some incidents that arose from the pressures of being the chef at the family restaurant. Caroline cannot get this perceived failure as a mother out of her mind and, in fact, desires a baby with Leon mainly to get a second chance. She loves spending time with her sister's son Max and later with Leon's children because they can help fill "the gaping hole Livvy had left in my heart." Yet she acknowledges that, while these other children bring her joy, "no one of them had given me the intense pleasure my own daughter once had, or left me as desolate as she had more recently." She sees Livvy's coming baby as a means to "redeem myself with my grandchild for the sins, real and imagined, visited upon my child."

Olivia, for all her hard exterior with her mother, desperately wants her love and approval as well. She is a very believable adolescent daughter, with the typical love-hate feelings toward her mother. Her perceived rejection by her mother at age ten, by Mirella after her father's betrayal, and now by her adored father (for his new wife Annunciata) have left her especially vulnerable. But not until the crisis of her pregnancy and the birth of her child is she able to allow herself to become friends with her mother, to admit that "if you think I don't remember you were right about everything, you're wrong."

Male-female relationships in this book all seem to be marked by a domineering male, whose behavior is sometimes overt and sometimes more subtle. Angelo demands obedience, and Caroline usually complies. She accepts his double standard regarding wives and mistresses and his macho attitudes about how to raise Olivia. Many of the same patterns emerge later in Livvy's relationship with Pablo, perhaps because of the men's similar cultural backgrounds, although Pablo is a much nicer man. Leon, too, is a nice man, although just as domineering in his understated way. His conviction of being

"finished being the father of babies" is non-negotiable, no matter what Caroline's needs might be. His being swept into Caroline's family problems makes him "feel as though I'm being suckered." His behavior prompts Caroline to reflect on men's attraction to twenty-year-olds "who weren't toting around the baggage of lived life," and had "no children of their own, . . . no careers that had to be accommodated, unless it was some hotshot New Woman career that earned so much money it seemed for a while real life would be expedited instead of screwed up." Although Caroline and Leon do marry and seem to manage their differences, the basic selfishness of men in their relationships with women is clearly a major statement of this book.

The past, for Rossner, is both a source of strength (the traditions) and of anguish (the painful memories). On the first page, Caroline admits that, "as soon as I began writing, I was swamped by memories that weren't the ones I'd intended to evoke." Our families are ours for life. "Blood is stickier than desire, less subject to the owner's whim, or to the wear and tear of time.

Unacknowledged bonds are no less powerful and may even, like mushrooms, grow better in the dark." We are the prisoners of our memories, even if they are wrong. At one point Caroline observes that "the world our children carry around behind their eyes is vastly different from the one we see, that even as adults, we trust our memories over what reality tries to convince us happened." Thus the weight of the past that Rossner chose as her subtitle, a weight that pervades her entire narrative.

Key Questions

Olivia's subtitle, The Weight of the Past, emphasizes what should be a major avenue of exploration in this novel — the extent to which our past personal and cultural "baggage" controls our present actions. Discussion groups may wish to consider how a person's roots — being Catholic, Jewish, Italian, etc. — influence his/her thinking, drawing on both Rossner's characters and their own personal experiences. Patterns are also set by our past interactions with the people in our lives, as Caroline's and Olivia's expectations of each other are built on memories of their early years as mother and daughter. Rossner raises questions as to whether we can overcome these set ways of thinking. Whether the past is a source of strength or a handicap is a philosophical question worthy of in-depth exploration.

1. What is the "weight of the past" Rossner refers to in the subtitle to this novel? Does she view the past as a burden only? Does the past ever serve as a source of strength or joy? What message does Rossner seem to convey about the value of the past?

2. Is the relationship between Olivia and her mother a believable one?

Would mothers and daughters treat each other in this way? Who dominates the relationship? What might have improved the communication between them?

3. Is Caroline a good mother?

4. How would you characterize the men in this novel? Are they all cut out of the same mold? What statement does Rossner seem to make about the relationships between men and women? Is her assessment fair to men? Is it true to your experience?

5. Caroline often accuses Olivia of being anti-Semitic, yet Caroline herself might just as easily be accused of being anti-Catholic. Discuss the stereotypes of the two groups presented in this book. What does the book say about prejudice?

6. Defend or attack the prevalence of cooking and food in this book. Is it an integral part of the development of Rossner's themes or only filler?

7. Why did Rossner choose Italy as the focus of this book — its food, its landscape, its people? How does that setting enhance her themes?

Literary Precedents

One critic has linked this novel to Woody Allen for its depiction of Upper West Side Jewish Manhattan and to Edith Wharton for its mores, but its main literary precedent seems to be none other than Rossner's own earlier novels, with which it shares significant themes about love, tradition, and female identity. The writing is lighter in this one, more filled with domestic detail. Occasionally it bogs down in pedantic lectures on food or preachy speeches on cultural differences. Critics range from saying, in Booklist, "she's back in top form in this bouillabaisse of a novel" to lamenting in The New York Times Book Review what might have been: "had Judith Rossner stirred those ingredients with her usually light hand, this might have been a delicious stew. Perhaps it only needed to cook a little longer, but somehow the recipe is wrong."

Related Titles

Olivia continues the move away from the feminist position of her early books, a departure that became obvious in His Little Women (1990). With each new novel, Rossner seems to become more traditional, seeking to return to her Jewish roots and the institution of marriage to provide the security she needs. Just as Nell longed for the refuge of a home life with Shimmy in His Little Women, Caroline now acknowledges her need to be "contained" by the "idea of marriage," which keeps her from the unpleasant feeling of "floating loose, without custom to fall back on, a frame to hold you." The search for parental love and approval, the need for a sense of personal self worth, and the importance of friendships between women, so common to Rossner's work, are again present here.

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