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A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Cookbook Collector (Goodman) - Discussion Questions

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Discussion Questions

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Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *The Cookbook Collector*:

1. Start with the obvious: the two sisters, Emily and Jess Bach. How are they different? Do they share any traits in common? How would you describe their relationship to one another? Do you identify or sympathize with one over the other?
2. What do you think about George Friedman, a man who tells "his life history with objects"? What does this regard for beautiful objects—and his need to collect them—suggest about his priorities in life?
3. What about the other love interests—especially Jonathan and Leon? Describe them, their obvious differences, and their respective relationships with Emily and Jess?
4. Much has been made, by reviewers and the author herself, of this novel's likeness to Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Have you read *S & S*? If so, what similarities do you see? Have you also read *The Three Weissmanns of Westport* (2010), another sendup of *Sense and Sensibility*? If so how does *Cookbook* compare with *Weissmanns*?
5. On her website (<http://www.allegregoodman.com>), author Allegra Goodman makes this comment about her inspiration for the novel:

I don't cook, but I love to read cookbooks. I know I'm not alone in this, and I began to think about this phenomenon of reading instead of cooking, and dreaming instead of living. I thought—what would it be like to write a novel about hunger? Hunger to taste, to build, to collect, to profit, to love.

How do the ideas expressed here—dreaming rather than living and fulfilling the hunger for life—get played out in the novel?

6. Dismissing the benefit of hindsight, what do you think of Emily's offer to Jess to purchase Veritech's IPO stock at a reduced rate?
7. Emily, again: why does she confide Veritech's secret project to Jonathan? What consequences does sharing that secret have on their relationship? What does it suggest about trust and doubt between two people?

8. How does Jess go about attaining the remarkable cookbook collection? What makes the books so desirable? What is their symbolic significance to the theme (and title)?

9. The novel uses shifting narrators. Why might the author have used such a structure? Do you enjoy the different perspectives...or would you have preferred a single narrative voice?

10. Some readers felt Goodman tries to weave too many subjects into the plotline— IPO's and dot-coms, 9/11, Jewish mysticism, environmentalism, cookbooks, parent-child relationships, materialism, doubt, secrets.... Do you feel the author was successful in pulling all the plot strands together? Or do you agree that too much is, well...too much?

11. How does Goodman's use of co-incidence sit with you? Are the coincidences too blatant, too impossible (i.e., wouldn't the sisters know their mother's maiden name)...or do they work?

12. Do Emily and Jess become more similar by the end of the book—do their differences begin to fade? What does each character learn through the course of the novel? How do they change or grow?

13. Are you satisfied with how the book ends?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)

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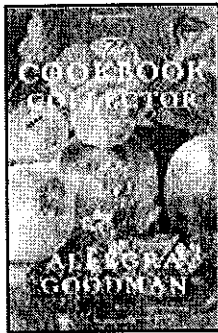
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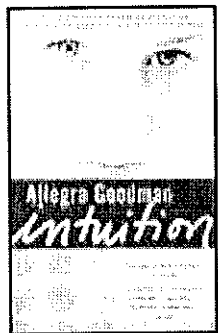
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An Interview with Allegra Goodman



Critics cannot find enough superlatives with which to describe Allegra Goodman. She writes big -- thick, juicy books exploring serious themes, filled with a diverse cast -- without ever being smothered by the size of her canvas. In her books you'll find horrific tragedies, but also the miraculous humour that enables humans to keep going, in even the darkest of circumstances. There's a humanity to her work, as well as a lush, sensuousness that clings to the skin, like scent, long after you've finished reading.

Born in 1967 in New York City, Goodman grew up in Honolulu, where her parents worked in academia -- her father is a philosopher, her late mother was a scientist. Her younger sister is an oncologist, but as for Goodman, she's wanted to write since she was seven years old.

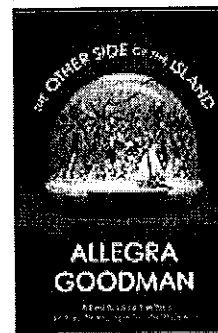


And like all the best writers, she loves to read. Get her talking about new or favourite books and watch her eyes widen, while she practically bounces in her seat. An infectious giggle punctuates nearly everything she says, but make no mistake, she's an astute critic, and a writer of serious intent, however lightly she wears her erudition.



Her latest novel, *The Cookbook Collector*, a *New York Times* bestseller, was recently released in the UK, where Bookslut caught up with her on a recent trip to Edinburgh. Encompassing the dot-com boom and bust, eco-warriors, Jewish mystics, 9/11, and rare book collecting, *The Cookbook Collector* is a story for and of our times.

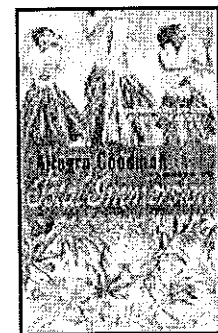
Reviewers compare *The Cookbook Collector* to *Sense and Sensibility*, and you to Jane Austen, but I've never heard you refer to it that way. Your point of reference is Leo Tolstoy. What is it about Tolstoy that appeals to you?



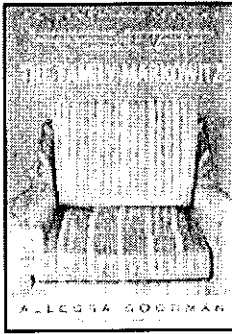
His use of multiple points of view and the way he disappears into all of his characters. I love the way he can be an old man, he can be a young girl getting ready for her first dance, he can be a drunk guy, he can be a general planning a battle... He does have that very dogmatic narrative voice as well, but I love his chameleon-like ability to disappear, and the fluidity with which he does that.

Surely that's the job of any writer?

Yeah, but there are writers who write in the third person, about different people, but it's always the same point of view. Tolstoy's aesthetic is his style. Another writer who works really well with multiple points of view and different sides of an argument is George Eliot. There's a more panoramic and a more world historic scope to their work. That's what I've always loved.



You say you enjoy it when female writers tackle big themes and work on a big canvas. I get angry when the phrase "domestic novel" is used as a pejorative. Loads of great dead male writers wrote in that genre. Trollope, for instance.



He was very interested in politics and religion, as well. And absolutely, those familial relationships are key, so, for me, “domestic novel” is not a pejorative at all. It does become a gender thing, when women are pigeonholed, but do women tackle the bigger issues? There are women who are more overtly political. Someone like Lionel Shriver, for example. I like her very much. My friend Gish Jen, the Chinese American writer, her new book, *World and Town*, is very much about war and peace. It’s about a Cambodian family displaced by war and genocide, trying to make a life for themselves in America. People like Gish Jen and Anne Tyler, also, are talking about racial identity. So women are definitely tackling big things. I’m not sure they always get appreciated for it.

Which leads me to comparisons drawn by Gabriel Brownstein, writing for *The Millions*, between yourself and Jonathan Franzen. Brownstein argued that you both wrote similar, epic novels, but that only Franzen’s was hailed as contender for the “Great American Novel” -- because he’s a man.

First of all, it’s nice to be contrasted with Jonathan Franzen. There was Jonathan Franzen’s novel and everybody else’s novel. I’m happy to be the one contrasted, if they want to pick a novel. I think his aesthetic is pretty different from mine. The [critic] made some good points about the differences.

Saying, for instance, that his prose bursts through the door while yours enters quietly.

Yes, but that is not because I am shy or female, it’s because I am interested in disappearing. Franzen [also] admires Tolstoy very much and references Tolstoy constantly throughout *Freedom*, but his aesthetic is very different from the disappearing negative capability of Tolstoy. His characters all sound like a very articulate Jonathan Franzen. He’s not really a disappearing sort of writer. He’s a bold brash writer. Honestly, I was very happy that a work of literary fiction was number one on the bestseller list and got that kind of attention. We’re on the same team. I applaud him.

How do you disappear and keep each voice distinct?

It has to do with imagining your way deeply enough inside of your characters. I start with character and motivation, thinking about what they want, who they are and the details of their lives and their histories. I try to make them real enough to myself that when I write scenes with the characters talking to each other, I know what they would say in a given situation. You set up your structure, you’ve done your research, and then you improvise. That’s the most fun.

You name characters carefully. Do certain names have special meanings for you?

You know, it’s funny. Sometimes I realize it later. In *Intuition*, Marion Mendelssohn is a woman scientist of an older generation when women were really embattled in the sciences -- not that they aren’t now -- but she was one of the pioneers. The first thing I think about is the generation of the character and who their parents are, because names really come from parents. I was thinking that the editor who discovered me years ago at *Commentary* magazine was named Marion Magid, so I sort of named Marion after her. And then Robin, the young post doc who comes up against Marion, and desperately wants approval and wants to be listened to when she thinks there’s something wrong, again, it was a name of her generation. But later on I was thinking about the fact that there’s a sort of Robin Hood motif in this book. She is going after the big boys. This was unconscious. So that’s an example of how those names play out. [Finding the right name] helps characters become real for me, just like an actor would put on certain costumes or an accent to get in character.

You have faith and belong to your religious community. I'm curious about its impact on your work.

The question "What is a Jewish writer" is really interesting. There are Jewish writers who are not religious writers, for sure, they're culturally Jewish. They have a sense of themselves as a Jewish person of Jewish parentage. Their identity may come from their historical position and politics, and the Holocaust, and for some Jewish writers, with the way that their family immigrated into America, and about becoming an American Jew. There are all these different valences of Judaism. Particularly in older generations of Jewish American writers, their Judaism was cultural. It had to do with the kind of food they ate and the jokes they told. It may even have had to do with a heritage of Yiddish, which is a secular Jewish identity right there. I think believing in God and being a Jew who embraces the religious aspects of Judaism is actually very liberating, because you don't need to identify with all the cultural stuff. For me, growing up in Honolulu, far away from the Lower East Side, Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*-type of stuff, which I barely know, I don't need that to be a Jewish American writer. I'm not fixed in that time. It's very relaxing. You may have noticed this: a lot of people, especially Jewish people who aren't in the faith or are atheists, they spend a lot of time talking about why they don't believe in God, and justifying it and dealing with it. If you do believe in God, it's a given. You don't have to talk about it anymore, so it's freeing yourself up to be Jewish in other ways.

In *The Cookbook Collector*, the main characters, Emily and Jess are asking themselves how to live, and who to ask for guidance.

Fiction is uniquely suited to explore some of those questions in a non prescriptive way. That is a central question to my book, and especially for young women, like these two, who are wondering how they should live, and along with that, asking auxiliary questions: Who should I be with? What should I put my faith into? What should I value? What should I discount? Who should I trust? Those are the great questions of novels.

Can you remember books that helped you answer those questions? Are there moments marked with a pin on the calendar of your life as a reader?

When I was in college, I had a moment like that with *The Portrait of a Lady*, which I really struggled to get into. The pace was so slow, and I found Henry James very pretentious. Then he was like a spider, he weaves his web and slowly, slowly: you're trapped by his plot; you see his artistry. What happened was that I got really sick. Being flat on my back, I had finally slowed down to the pace that I needed to go to really appreciate James. There was a moment when I thought, "This is an amazing work of art, this is so moving, and what he knows about people and the way we manipulate each other, the way we suffer!" It blew my mind.

To come back to your more philosophical question, when you read and you're thinking about how to live, the unique thing about fiction is that you don't have a conversion experience, like, "Ah ha! Now I know that I'm going to apply the lessons from this book into my life!" Really good fiction operates on you more like a slow poison -- in a good way. It enters your bloodstream and changes the way that you look at the world without your realizing it.

Are there authors you loved when you were younger, who you can't abide now? For example, I can't read D. H. Lawrence; I feel my moment for him has passed.

Everyone has different stages in their lives when different books are important. I also love D. H. Lawrence, and went through a phase when I read a lot of his books. I think his poetry is amazing. But I don't need to read him right now. The same with Dickens. I still love him, but [not] in the same way.

When I was 12, 13, 14, that was the time when he touched me the most. There are things he wrote that now I think are so over the top that some of it feels a little coarse. There are also other things you just marvel at. He was such an amazing artist in that he did the high and the low and the middle. He was basically writing the television of his day, as well as the great novels. If he was alive he'd be like Aaron Sorkin. He would blog, he'd be doing screenplays and he'd have a deal with Fox.

***The Cookbook Collector* explores the obsessive need to possess things. What did you learn about people who collect?**

Collecting can be a displaced desire for other things. Instead of eating, for example, you'd read cookbooks. Your things become an end in themselves. Collections can take over your life; pleasure turns quickly to obsession. The other thing that really interested me is the way that collections can mean different things to different people. If a collection is passed down, it could be reinterpreted by the new owners. The initial motivations of the now dead collector and the relationship to objects or books that he brought together can be reinterpreted and redefined by new viewers. That is a motif throughout *The Cookbook Collector*. Not just with the collection of rare cookbooks, but also with the letters that Jess and Emily's mother left with the girls [before she died].

And here we come back to those moments in your life when you read things one way, and then read them another way at a later date. Jess, when she was 12, cheated and read all the letters at once and they didn't really mean as much to her as they may have done. I was interested in the activity of reading and the way the reader is part of the creative process of creating the text. That's the way art works. And the way history works, as well. Jess, when she's discovering these cookbooks, comes to them with all of her experience, and she's also changed by them. So they're writing her and she's reading them.

You provide sensuous descriptions of George's home and belongings. It struck me that he couldn't express his personality directly, and instead was going, "These objects will tell you who I am."

It's the narrative about himself that he is creating through objects. It's a little bit strange in some ways and touching in other ways. His stuff attracts Jess, and it's also an obstacle. We all have the desire for an authentic conversation with someone, where you are really, honestly expressing your beliefs and exchanging your ideas. At its best, that is what a real relationship is about, and that's what George and Jess find.

We spoke earlier about community's ability to give sustenance. Do you think that explains the popularity of Facebook and Twitter? I see them as indicative of our desperation not to float about in the world untethered.

I think people are desperate to connect with each other, but I think Twitter and Facebook are more like the collections as displacements. You can constantly be telling strangers and friends everything you're doing but you don't have to really sit down face to face. Or the desire to sit down face to face becomes displaced into that. It's the same as that really deep motif in my book of replacing deeds with words and replacing emotions with text.

As you write you're constantly revising. How do you make sure you move on, rather than polish one paragraph obsessively, for months on end?

I am decisive. I'm the kind of person who loves to go through closets and get rid of things. And that's how I am as a reviser. Usually when I get rid of stuff, I'm right. A lot of times it's like having the scaffolding to a building. You needed it at that time, but now it's done, you have moved on and don't

need it anymore. My only real trouble is lack of time. Sometimes I only have time to do the revision, and I do that just to keep it in my head. That's about dealing with constant interruptions. It's trying to keep holding on to the thread of the story and not letting it drop.

So the pram in the hallway -- your four kids -- hasn't hindered your creativity, then?

If you don't have good childcare it is the death of creativity. You get the pram out of the hallway and you get a babysitter and you move on. That's easier to say now. My kids are 18, 15, 11 and 8. I don't have any babies, but I still spend most of my time driving my children around. It's the parent thing.

Are you one of those writers who refuses to read when she's writing?

No, I can't stop. Again, it's a conversation. I don't want to be alone; I want to see what other people are doing and enjoy their work. I am one of those people who rereads *Mansfield Park* every five years. I reread *Moby-Dick* every five or six years. It's one of my favorite novels, I love it so much. I love the way Melville creates an epic in a whaling ship, how he takes classical themes and makes them new. I love his inventiveness with language. I love all the details about the ship and the dissecting of the whale. I love the obsessiveness; I love the poetry. To me, it really is the Great American Novel.

My teachers regularly plumped for The Great Gatsby.

I think *The Great Gatsby* is really overrated. Maybe this is not the moment in my life when I have patience for it. To me it's very jejune, very adolescent. There are things about it that I can understand are important in the modern novel, details that are wonderful and delicate. A lot of the time, what we say is great is the thing that is important to us for our own reasons. It says more about us as readers.

I accept all your criticisms, but *Gatsby* still appeals to me.

The stuff that I say about *Gatsby* you could also say about some of those D. H. Lawrence novels -- he was so young, it's full of purple prose, it's self-indulgent. The question is, is the good stuff good enough that you don't care about that? And at certain moments of your life you may say yes, and at certain moments you may say no.