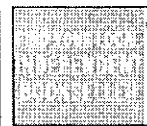




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## Reading Group Guide

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### Eat Cake by Jeanne Ray

**List Price:** \$14.00  
**Pages:** 288  
**Format:** Paperback  
**ISBN:** 0451211979  
**Publisher:** NAL



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More About This Book



## About This Book

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Step-Ball-Change* and *Julie* and *Romeo*-now in trade paperback for the first time...

Ruth has always found baking cakes to be a source of relief from the stresses of life. And now-as her husband loses his job, her life-of-the-party father arrives for an extended stay (much to the dismay of her mother, who also moved in recently), and her teenage daughter perfects the art of sulking-Ruth is going to have to save the day. And let the crumbs fall where they may...

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## Discussion Questions

1. Ruth soothes her family conflicts with cake. Do you use food to soothe and

comfort your family? In your particular case, is doing so more healthful or harmful?

**2.** The loss of Sam's job presents new challenges to his marriage with Ruth. Have you or your husband (or someone else close to you) ever suddenly lost their job? How did that affect your relationship(s)?

**3.** When the novel opens, Ruth's mother, Hollis, has moved in with Ruth's family because a robbery of her home, in which the door was kicked in, so destroyed her sense of security that she's no longer comfortable living alone. Many ordinary people are the victims of crime. Drawing from your own knowledge and experience, discuss what some of the long-term affects of non-violent crime might be, and how as a society we might or might not underestimate the impact of those experiences.

**4.** Florence Allen, a nurse, has a healing influence on several members of the Hopson family. Has someone from outside of your own family ever helped you out during a moment of crisis?

**5.** Camille is sometimes utterly self-absorbed, and at other times remarkably caring, confident, and capable. In fact, it's funny when she starts acting more responsible than her own parents! In what ways does Jeanne Ray's portrait of Camille jive with, or depart from, your own impressions of today's teenagers?

**6.** Once Ruth's cake baking business takes off, she's overwhelmed by the sudden need to fill all those orders. Have you ever been in a situation when success took you by surprise, and at first you didn't know how you would cope?

**7.** Do you think that we as a society need to take more time to figuratively "bake cakes"? How might you make more room in your own life for the small but significant pleasures that make life worth living?

**8.** Do you like the way the book ends? Did Amy make the right choice? How do you see Amy's and Nick's futures unfolding?

**9.** Do you have a dream that you secretly long to pursue? Would you like to share it with the group, and discuss what might be holding you back from going after it?

**10.** Have you tried the cake recipes in the back of the book? How did they turn out, and what response did you receive?

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## Jeanne Ray

c. 1940-

Entry updated: 02/22/2007

**Birth Place:** Nashville, Tennessee

Career

Further Readings About the Author

Media Adaptations

Personal Information

Sidelights

Source Citation

Writings by the Author

**Personal Information:** Born c. 1940, in Nashville, TN; married third husband, Darrell Ray (a retired minister), c. 1988; children (first marriage) Ann Patchett, another daughter. **Education:** Attained nursing degree. **Addresses:** Home: Nashville, TN. Agent: Lisa Bankoff, International Creative Management, 40 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

**Career:** Registered nurse, currently employed at First Clinic, Nashville, TN; writer.

### WRITINGS:

#### NOVELS

- *Julie and Romeo*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Step-Ball-Change*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Eat Cake*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Julie and Romeo Get Lucky*, Pocket Books (New York, NY), 2005.

**Media Adaptations:** *Julie and Romeo* has been optioned for a feature film by actress Barbra Streisand; *Julie and Romeo*, *Step-Ball-Change* and *Eat Cake* have all been produced as audio books.

### "Sidelights"

Jeanne Ray says that her favorite word is "gumption," and her writing career demonstrates that she has gumption in abundance. A registered nurse who had spent decades working and raising children--one of them award-winning novelist Ann Patchett--Ray embarked upon a writing career at the age of sixty, never having sought to publish anything prior to that time. Inspired by the lack of romantic literature aimed at mature adults, and incensed by the subtle suggestions that a vibrant love life is unattainable for people over sixty, Ray decided to pen novels that would effectively portray the rich variety of

romance available to senior citizens and their adult children. Her novels *Julie and Romeo*, *Step-Ball-Change*, and *Eat Cake* all feature older women who still embrace life and love, even as their careers, families, and responsibilities create roadblocks to happiness. *Book Page* correspondent Stephanie Swilley observed: "Without being saccharine, Ray's characters have just enough witty banter that when the table is set, you can't help wishing there was an extra place for you."

Ray does not flinch from the realities of life, but in her books the characters react to vicissitudes in affirming ways, with humor and optimism. Ruth, the protagonist of *Eat Cake*, takes comfort in baking, even *dreaming* of baking, as her home becomes inundated with ailing parents, sulking teenagers, and a husband in the throes of a mid-life crisis. Julie Roseman, the central figure in *Julie and Romeo*, overcomes the objections of her children and even a meddling ex-husband as she pursues a budding romance. In an interview with *Absolute Write*, the author said that she wants her readers to feel, after reading her works, "that vital human involvement is possible at any age." Judging from the critical and commercial response to her books, she has accomplished her goal.

Ray said she was inspired to write *Julie and Romeo* after seeing a magazine at the grocery store. The magazine proposed to describe sex at age twenty, age thirty, and age forty--but went no further. In *Absolute Write*, Ray noted: "Suddenly I was moved to write a story about two attractive people over sixty who fall passionately in love. I had no idea that I could do that, mind you, I was just highly motivated." With the help and encouragement of her novelist daughter, Ray worked on the manuscript and got it sold. Movie options quickly followed.

*Julie and Romeo* pays homage to the Shakespeare play, but with a twist. Once again the story begins with two feuding families, the Rosemans and the Cacciamanis, who own rival floral shops in a Massachusetts town. Divorced with grown children, Julie Roseman is struggling to keep her shop in business when she meets Romeo Cacciamani, who is in similar straits. Their interest in one another is immediate and genuine, but hard feelings abound all around them--their children object, Romeo's elderly mother objects, and even Julie's ex-husband tries to put an end to the budding romance. In the end, unlike Shakespeare's doomed lovers, Julie and Romeo find joy with each other and make peace with their separate households. "Ray's beguiling first novel succeeds on the level of romantic entertainment," declared a *Publishers Weekly* critic, who added that the author "handles her material with vitality and humor, and demonstrates a talent for witty dialogue." Danise Hoover in *Booklist* described *Julie and Romeo*, which achieved best-seller status, as "an engaging, charming springtime of a novel."

Carolina McSwain, the heroine of *Step-Ball-Change*, runs a dancing school. She has been happily married for more than forty years, but her equanimity is suddenly challenged from all sides. The foundation under her house is crumbling, her daughter seeks funds for an outrageously expensive wedding, and her sister seeks shelter from a divorce, biting terrier in tow. The plot thickens as Carolina and her husband try to muster the funds to fix their house and float the big wedding, while also mediating in a series of romances that arise in their extended family. A *Kirkus Reviews* critic liked the way Ray "so painstakingly constructs her story and fleshes out her honorable characters." In *Library Journal*, Rebecca Kelm called *Step-Ball-Change* "a second gem," adding: "This novel, like time with a good friend, is over far too soon."

A classic "sandwich" situation sets up in *Eat Cake*. Ruth loves to bake cakes, approaching the whole process as an almost religious experience. It is not surprising, then, when she takes to her kitchen as her life becomes complicated beyond her wildest expectations. First her mother moves in, then her long-lost father. As the older couple argue and re-live their bitterness toward one another, Ruth's husband leaves his job, and her teenaged daughter exudes her own brand of angst. It falls to Ruth to establish peace at home while creating a viable career for herself. Melody A. Moxley in *Library Journal*

described *Eat Cake* as a "funny, witty, and delicious novel ... comforting, entertaining, and enjoyable." An online reviewer for *Minnesota Public Radio* concluded that the work is "a delightful and amusing concoction that comes with its own delicious icing."

Although she has made a considerable sum of money with her fiction, Ray continues to work as a nurse one day a week at a clinic in Nashville, Tennessee. In an online interview with *Southern Scribe*, she said: "In my dreams, I'm still a nurse. It sometimes takes a long time for the little pieces of ourselves to catch up with us." She added, however, that she is thrilled with her second career, because "it gives me the opportunity to demonstrate to others the importance of embracing change, trying something new, digging deep into themselves and looking for a talent they'd enjoy sharing. It allows me to give people hope about themselves by telling them what happened to me."

## FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

### PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 15, 2000, Danise Hoover, review of *Julie and Romeo*, p. 1525; April 15, 2003, Danise Hoover, review of *Eat Cake*, p. 1451.
- *Good Housekeeping*, July, 2003, Jennifer Allen, "Like Daughter, Like Mother," p. 110.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2001, Melody A. Moxley, review of *Julie and Romeo*, p. 152; March 1, 2002, review of *Step-Ball-Change*, p. 285.
- *Library Journal*, May 1, 2000, Jo Manning, review of *Julie and Romeo*, p. 155; April 1, 2002, Rebecca Kelm, review of *Step-Ball-Change*, p. 142; April 15, 2003, Tamara Butler, review of *Eat Cake*, p. 126; April 1, 2004, Melody A. Moxley, review of *Eat Cake*, p. 136.
- *New York Times Book Review*, July 16, 2000, Barbara Quick, review of *Julie and Romeo*, p. 21.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 2, 1999, John F. Baker, "Never Too Old," p. 13; May 22, 2000, review of *Julie and Romeo*, p. 72; August 28, 2000, "A Sleeper First Fiction," p. 21; May 19, 2003, review of *Eat Cake*, p. 54.

### ONLINE

- *Absolute Write*, <http://www.absolutewrite.com/> (April 21, 2004), RoseEtta Stone, "Interview with Jeanne Ray."
- *All about Romance*, <http://www.likesbooks.com/> (June 6, 2002), Rachel Potter, review of *Julie and Romeo*.
- *Book Page*, [http://www.bookpage.com/0205bp/jeanne\\_ray.html/](http://www.bookpage.com/0205bp/jeanne_ray.html/) (June 6, 2002), Stephanie Swilley, "For Jeanne Ray, Writing Is All in the Family."
- *Minnesota Public Radio*, [http://minnesota.publicradio.org/books/titles/ray\\_eatcake.shtml](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/books/titles/ray_eatcake.shtml) (April 21, 2004), review of *Eat Cake*.
- *Romance Reader*, <http://www.theromancereader.com/> (June 6, 2002), Cathy Sova, review of *Julie and Romeo*.

- *Southern Scribe*, <http://www.southernscribe.com/zine/> (April 21, 2004), Pam Kingsbury, "A Prescription for Good Reading."
- *Western Michigan University Libraries*, <http://www.wmich.edu/library/bookreviews/2000/> (June 6, 2002), David Isaacson, review of *Julie and Romeo*. \*

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

**Source Database:** Contemporary Authors Online

**Publishers Weekly Review:** Ruth, a Minneapolis wife and mother, bakes to relax the way others do yoga. And it's a good thing she does, because a house full of cantankerous family members seriously challenges her ability to remain serene in this fluffy, enjoyable third novel by Ray (*Julie and Romeo; Step-Ball-Change*). Cake is Ruth's version of Zen, allowing her to lose herself in the ritual of familiar smells and precise measurements. She's dealing well with her moody teen daughter, Camille; college student son, Wyatt; and sometimes cantankerous live-in mother, Hollis. She's even handling husband Sam's recent unemployment. But when Guy, Ruth's oft-estranged father and Hollis's ex-husband, is left physically helpless after an injury and must join the chaotic household, just how much cake will she have to bake to save her sanity? The answer is predictably uplifting. Ruth falls right in line with Ray's past harried heroines: she is a cheerful and good-natured caretaker who doesn't neglect herself, but whose happiness and identity is utterly intertwined with her family's. Ray's dialogue is ripe with practical wisdom ("Oh, there's order in the world all right. It just might not be the order you want"), and her style is warm and lightly funny ("My mother looked at me as if I had told her I was going to move to Memphis and join an Elvis cult"). Ray has a proven talent for everyday dramas of family life, and her latest is as toothsome as its predecessors. *7-city author tour.* (May)

— Staff (Reviewed May 19, 2003) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 250, issue 20, p54)

**Library Journal Review: /\* Starred Review \*/** "This is a story of how my life was saved by cake," says Ruth, who loves to bake. She thinks cake has gotten a bad rap and that people who refuse a slice have "completely lost touch with joy." When Ruth's husband loses his job, her estranged father needs a place to recover from broken wrists, her teenage daughter has serious growing pains, and life is spinning out of control, Ruth simply pictures herself safe inside the ring of a warm Bundt cake. She does not know how her family will cope with the upheaval in their lives until cake comes to the rescue in a marvelous way. In her third novel (after *Julie and Romeo* and *Step-Ball-Change*) Ray does for cake what Joanne Harris (*Chocolat*) did for chocolate. She reminds us that life is full of change and that when one door closes, another can open. To top it off, she includes recipes for many of the cakes baked in the story, and, believe me, after reading this scrumptious novel, you will want a slice. Highly recommended for public libraries. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 2/15/03.]—*Tamara Butler, Olean P.L., NY* (Reviewed April 15, 2003) (*Library Journal*, vol 128, issue 7, p126)

**Kirkus Reviews** Imagine you're inside a cake. . . .

That's what beleaguered housewife Ruth Nash does whenever life gets to be too much for her. She can even catch a glimpse of the outside world from the open center of her favorite hideaway: a moist, rich Bundt cake. And these days, she's quite the baker (recipes included) now that her son Wyatt has left her with every pair of sneakers he ever owned and is off to college. His younger sister Camille, meanwhile, sighs a lot and makes snotty remarks. A crisis looms: their dad, Sam, just lost his job as a hospital administrator and has few prospects of getting another, though he's not going to let that get him down. He's a family man who puts up with a mother-in-law in permanent residence and goes so far as to drive to Iowa to pick up Ruth's ne'er-do-well father, an itinerant pianist who just smashed both wrists. Ruth's parents divorced many years before and still can't stop bickering: her mother, Hollis, is outraged that Ruth actually cuts her father's revolting yellow toenails when Guy can't do it himself and that Sam must help the old man pee (a task Hollis takes on, explaining grimly that she has seen that particular organ before). Now that he's unemployed, will Sam realize his cherished dream of becoming a boat-builder? Guy points out that it may be Sam's turn at last, and Ruth gets a brilliant idea: make money by selling her wonderful cakes. And so she does, with a little help from Camille, who has a flair for marketing, and a friend of Sam's who designs gorgeous gift boxes.

And that's all, folks. A pleasant trifle but nothing more: the third from the author of Step-Ball-Change (2002) and Julie and Romeo (2000).  
(*Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 2003)