



Things You Should Know

By A. M. Homes
ISBN: 9780060520137

Introduction

Lauded as one of the most daring writers working today *Things You Should Know* fearlessly explores the uncomfortable crevices of adolescence, marriage, reality, and beyond. Homes's distinctive narratives illuminate our dreams and desires, our memories and losses, and our profound need for connection, and demonstrate how extraordinary the ordinary can be. An expert literary witness, A. M. Homes takes us places we would not go alone and brings us back -- always with uncanny emotional accuracy, wit, and empathy. She is one of the master practitioners of American fiction, and *Things You Should Know* is a landmark collection.

Discussion Questions

1. Geordie in "The Chinese Lesson," the desperate daughter in "Remedy," the death-obsessed husband in "Please Remain Calm," the narrator in "Things You Should Know," the husband in "Do Not Disturb" -- these stories feature characters who feel disconnected and have a profound sense that "something is missing," but they don't quite know just what. Discuss what you think is missing in their lives. Can these characters do anything about their situation? Or are they stuck because they don't have the emotional "tools" to change? The woman in "Georgica" has decided that what she's missing is a child. Do you agree? Will a child fix her life?
2. "Raft in Water, Floating": In a gated community, an anorectic, neglected girl floats in the pool, barely noticed by her self-absorbed family members. She passively accepts when a boy comes along and slips one hand beneath her swimsuit and the other into his pants. When he is finished, she asks, "Do you like me for who I am?" "Do you want something to eat?" he replies. Later, she watches her parents through the sliding glass door, waiting for them to notice she is there and let her in. When she finally goes inside, her father says, "It's a wonder you don't just shrivel up and disappear." Given her interactions with the boyfriend and her family, has she already disappeared? Is her anorexia a physical way of disappearing? That night, a shape shifting woman appears while she is floating in the pool again. What is the purpose of this character? Does she present any possibilities of change to the girl?
3. In "Georgica," a woman recovering from a traumatic car accident at the hands of her ex-fiancé supplies a group of summer lifeguards with condoms, stalks them with night vision glasses as they have sex on the beach, collects the discarded sperm-filled condoms, and injects herself with the semen. Do you think this woman is unbalanced, or is she practical? Before she dies, her grandmother tells the woman, "I never would have married if I could have gotten out of it." Do you think the woman takes this as permission to not get married? Or is she pursuing this unconventional method of pregnancy because she only finds "pot bellies, bad manners, stupidity" when she looks for a man? Do you think this kind of disillusionment is typical of dating when in the thirties and forties? Is it wrong for a woman not to tell a man he has fathered a child? What are the ramifications of withholding this information? Discuss the pros and cons of single motherhood. Will this woman be a good mother? What role does or will the policeman play in the woman's life?
4. "Rockets Round the Moon": A twelve-year-old boy, shunted aside by his self-absorbed divorced parents, has taught himself "to be a person whom people like to have around." What do you see in future for this boy? Does his belief that he is unlovable if he is not useful cripple or prepare him for the future? Do his "people-pleasing" qualities remind you of traditional female social conditioning? The boy clings to the seeming normalcy of his father's next-door neighbors, idealizing his precocious friend Henry and his family, until Henry's father's accidental killing of a young boy dislocates them too. Henry begins to dress like the dead boy, his father's guilt drives him to self-immolation -- the family is irrevocably changed. Is the boy or Henry better suited to deal with this tragedy, and tragedy in general? Who is most likely to recover and return to "normal?" The boy is comfortable and comforted by Henry's turmoil: "From the floor I could smell the noxiousness of its mixture [Henry's vomit], hot and rich, like some hearty soup a grandmother would serve on a winter night." When they debark from the rocket ride at the end, the ticket man says to them, "Go back where you belong. Go home." Has the tragedy in the Heffelfinger family made it possible for the boy to finally have a true "home," to belong somewhere? If so, where is that and why?

About the Author

A.M. Homes' fiction has been translated into eight languages, and she is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Her fiction and nonfiction appear in magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Artforum*, among others, and she is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, *Mirabella*, *Bomb*, *Blind Spot*, and *Story*. She teaches in the writing programs at Columbia University and The New School and lives in New York City.