



## The Saving Graces

By Patricia Gaffney  
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### Introduction

Isabel, Emma, Rudy and Lee are four Washington, D.C. women of different ages, from very different backgrounds, who share an unbreakable bond. They've named themselves "The Saving Graces" after Grace, a mutt they accidentally hit with their car, then rescued. For ten years the women have met weekly to eat, chat, and shore each other up in the face of anything life can dish out.

As *The Saving Graces* begins, each woman is on the cusp of a major challenge: Emma will fall into tormented love with a married man; Rudy's controlling husband will close in on her just as she's making progress overcoming her troubled past; Lee will be unable to conceive a baby; and Isabel's cancer will relapse. It's Isabel's illness that draws the four women together more tightly than ever and takes their friendship, love, and courage to the limit.

Told from four different perspectives, *The Saving Graces* is a captivating, complex story, and a heartfelt tribute to the beauty of female friendship.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Which Grace do you relate to most, and why? What do you define as "grace"? Where do you find it in your life?
2. Why do you think the author starts and ends the story from Emma's point of view? Would you consider Emma the main character?
3. When Lee is describing Isabel for the first time, she says, "Some people are born knowing things the rest of us spend our lives trying to learn." What kind of things do you think she's talking about? Do you agree with Lee? What do you think Isabel had, or knew, that the other Graces didn't?
4. The night Emma finds out that Mick Draco is married, she describes men as "speed bumps ... aggravating distractions scattered along life's otherwise pretty nice highway," and also says that good women are easier to find. Do you think she really believes this? Have you ever felt the way Emma says she does? Do you think men feel that way about women -- that, on the whole, men are the better sex -- or that this is a uniquely feminine perspective?
5. At one point, Rudy says about Curtis, "I tried not loving him -- just for a second; an experiment. To my horror, it worked." What does she mean by this? That her love for him isn't real? What do you think of Rudy and Curtis' relationship, overall? How did your feelings change about him over the course of the book? When he told Rudy he has leukemia, did you believe him? What do you think Rudy's dream means?
6. There's a remarkably small amount of jealousy and possessiveness among the Graces. Do you think this is realistic? Have you had the same experiences with your women friends?
7. When you tally it up among the four of them, the Graces experience just about every tragedy known to womankind -- cancer, infidelity, alcoholism and drug abuse, mental illness, infertility, and devastating heartbreak, to name a few. Do you think the author has woven these themes in realistically, or does it feel contrived? Would you say this group of women experiences more than their share of suffering? What about joy?
8. The only time the idea of romantic love between women comes up in the book is via Jenny, Henry's lesbian plumber mom. Why do you think the author wrote Jenny into the story? What purpose does she serve? Do you think Jenny really assumes *The Saving Graces* is founded on the same basic ideas as the women's group/commune she belonged to in the late '70s? Is it? If so, how is it the same, and how is it different?
9. Have you ever belonged to a formal group like The Saving Graces? Do you think it's difficult to form close friendships with women later in life, after school and other settings? How do you think friendships among women change as they age?
10. At one point, Emma describes Isabel as her "mentor, although neither of us would ever say that out loud, and certainly we'd never use that word." Do you think that's an accurate way to describe their relationship?
11. What about mothering -- is Isabel the mother figure in *The Saving Graces*? Or is Lee? Do you think any one member takes more than she gives, or is it all pretty equal?
12. Why do you think Lee holds out for so long trying to have her own baby? Do you think she's justified in feeling so angry and desperate, especially when she has a loving husband, a good job, a nice home -- and other people have much bigger problems, like her friend Isabel, who's dying? How do you think Lee's experience with infertility affects her reactions to what's going on with Isabel?
13. Isabel says "sometimes kindness is as excruciating as cruelty." What do you think she means by that? Do you agree with her?
14. Why do you think the author wrote in Isabel's encounter with Sheldon Herman, the old man on the bench?
15. When Isabel and Kirby sleep together for the first time, she's able to forget for a moment that she's dying -- then abruptly remembers again. Do you think that sex and death are related in any way?
16. What do you think of the scene where the Graces take on Curtis? Is it realistic? Is it everybody's fantasy, in some way, to have their best friends there for them in the hardest moments? Can you really have help with these things, or do you need to face them alone?
17. Do you think Emma and Mick will make it as a couple? Or were they brought together by the desire for something they couldn't have, and, now that they have it, their passion will be diminished?
18. Which of the Graces do you think grew the most over the course of the book, and in what ways?

### About the Author

Patricia Gaffney was born in Tampa, Florida and grew up in Bethesda, Maryland. She received her B.A. in English from Marymount College in Tarrytown, New York, and also studied at the University of London, George Washington University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

After a brief stint as a high school English teacher, Patricia worked as a freelance court reporter for fifteen years. She and her husband currently live in Pennsylvania where she writes fiction full time.