



The Best of Friends

By Sara James
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Introduction

Transplanting southern roots to southern Africa, Ginger Mauney has earned the acceptance of a troop of baboons, unraveled mysteries of life and death in an elephant herd, and raised her young son in the wilds of Namibia—but has often felt the pull of the country she once called home. As a local television anchor, Sara James paid her own way to cover the war in Nicaragua, a gamble that later propelled her to NBC. At the network, James exposed slavery in Sudan and plunged to the gravesite of the *Titanic*, but struggled to balance her demanding career with marriage and motherhood.

Though the two lead seemingly opposite lives, there is much they share: a hometown in Richmond, Virginia, an attraction to life on the razor's edge, a weakness for men with foreign passports and accents, and a past. Now, in their heartfelt memoir, Mauney and James alternately narrate the story of how, they, two women separated by thousands of miles, have found themselves bound together

through temperament, circumstance, and serendipity. *The Best of Friends* uses the example of their lives to explore such universal questions as: When your heart is broken, how do you heal? How do you realize your dreams without compromising yourself? How do you tame ambition to make room for love and family? And what does it mean as an adult to be a "best" friend?

The Best of Friends is James and Mauney's story, but it is also the story of so many women in their twenties, thirties, and forties who, with the help of friends, dared to reinvent their lives just when it seemed that everything was falling apart.

Questions for Discussion

1. Sara and Ginger trace the beginnings of their friendship back to a slumber party when Ginger shared a deeply personal secret with Sara. Why do you think Ginger felt she could share her secret with Sara? In your experience, how do secrets bind friendships, or have you had an experience where a secret destroyed a friendship?
2. In the first several chapters, Sara and Ginger are leading completely different lives and from the outside looking in, they perceive each other's lives very differently from the reality. Why do you think they were drawn together again? Have you ever picked up the phone and contacted a long-lost friend? If so, what was the call like? Did it reestablish your friendship or reinforce the reasons why you had drifted apart in the first place?
3. Do you agree with Sara's statement: "...friends were a collection of spices, with this person or that adding just the right flavor to any occasion"? Is your friendship cupboard full of the basics or do you have more exotic friendship mixtures? What qualities do you consider essential in a friend?
4. In recent studies friendship has been identified as a factor contributing to better health. Laughter, strong physiological medicine, was described by Ginger as one of the keys in hers and Sara's friendship. How do you think friendship contributes to the quality of your life?
5. Given Ginger's heartache and search for reinvention, do you think she was running away from reality or running towards a new life when she returned to Africa on her own? Have you experienced the need to reinvent your life, and if so when? Do you think this comes with age, or only after particularly trying times?
6. When her first marriage ends and later when she longs to have children, Sara reflects on the cost of ambition, wondering if her career objectives may have come at the cost of her personal dreams. How do you balance the desire for a fulfilling personal and professional life? Do you think women today want too much, an exciting career, a great marriage and wonderful children? Can we have it all?
7. One reader described the book as having two different parts—one before children and one after. Do you agree? How does this describe the choices that women make before and then after they have children?
8. In her final chapter, Ginger writes "Along the way, the image in the mirror of two women gazing at each other seemed to fuse, until sometimes it seems we each reflect what is best in the other." Do you think we choose friends whose qualities reflect the best in us, or friends whose qualities we would most like to reflect? Do you see versions of yourself reflected in your friends? And, if so, how?
9. Throughout their friendship, both Sara and Ginger acknowledge the fact that as old friends there was so much they understood about each other that could remain unspoken. Knowing each other as kids, they were keenly aware of the path and challenges it took to achieve what they had as adults. In describing the depth and longevity of her friendship with Ginger, Sara writes "And in the end, while she lived on one continent and I lived on another, we'd wound up in the same place." Do you think this feeling is unique to old friends—to having a similar grounding and background? And, if old friends bring unspoken understanding, what do new friends offer us? Do you think it is important to have both? Why or why not?
10. What is it like as an adult to be or have a "best" friend? How is it different from your childhood version of a "best" friend?

About the Authors

Sara James is an Emmy Award-winning correspondent and anchor who has reported for *Dateline*, the *Today* show, and *NBC Nightly News*. She lives in New York City with her husband and their two daughters.

Filmmaker Ginger Mauney has lived and worked in Namibia for sixteen years. Her films have aired on *National Geographic Explorer*, PBS, Channel 4 (UK), and in more than fifty countries worldwide. She lives in Namibia with her husband and their son.