

Sorrow and Bliss

Harper Perennial

By Meg Mason

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Introduction

Winner of the Book of the Year (Fiction) at the British Book Awards

Shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction

"Brilliantly faceted and extremely funny. . . . While I was reading it, I was making a list of all the people I wanted to send it to, until I realized that I wanted to send it to everyone I know." — Ann Patchett

The internationally bestselling, compulsively readable novel—spiky, sharp, intriguingly dark, and tender—that combines the psychological insight of Sally Rooney with the sharp humor of Nina Stibbe and the emotional resonance of *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine*.

Martha Friel just turned forty. She used to work at *Vogue* and was going to write a novel. Now, she creates internet content for no one. She used to live in Paris. Now, she lives in a gated community in Oxford that she hates and can't bear to leave. But she must now that her loving husband Patrick has just left.

Because there's something wrong with Martha. There has been since a little bomb went off in her brain, at seventeen, leaving her changed in a way no doctor or drug could fix then and no one, even now, can explain—why can she say she is so often sad, cruel to everyone she loves, why she finds it harder to be alive than other people.

With Patrick gone, the only place Martha has left to go is her childhood home, to live with her chaotic parents, to survive without Ingrid, the sister who made their growing-up bearable, who said she would never give up on Martha, and who finally has.

It feels like the end but maybe, by going back, Martha will get to start again. Maybe there is a different story to be written, if Martha can work out where to begin.



Questions for Discussion

1. In the opening scene, Martha thinks about “explaining the drawbacks of being married to somebody who everybody thinks is nice” to a woman she meets at a wedding. Although Patrick is presented as a loving and patient husband, does he bear any responsibility for his wife’s suffering or the failure of their marriage?
2. Did you have a favorite character? How does Mason distinguish and humanize some of the more minor characters in the book?
3. Because of the decisions she makes and the way she treats those around her, Martha is not always “likeable.” How did your sympathy towards her change over the course of the narrative?
4. Although Martha finally receives a diagnosis, the name of her condition isn’t revealed in the text. Why do you think the author chose to present it with a dash? How did it impact your experience as a reader?
5. How do Martha’s homes throughout the novel—including her childhood home, the apartment she shares with Jonathan, her place in Paris, and the Executive House—affect and mirror her psychological states? Which of these living situations appeals to you the most? The least?
6. Martha’s parents both experience some later-in-life artistic success. What might have allowed them to achieve this after so many years of creative struggles?
7. Would you describe *Sorrow and Bliss* as having a “happy ending?” Why or why not?
8. What do you think might come next for Martha? What about the other characters?