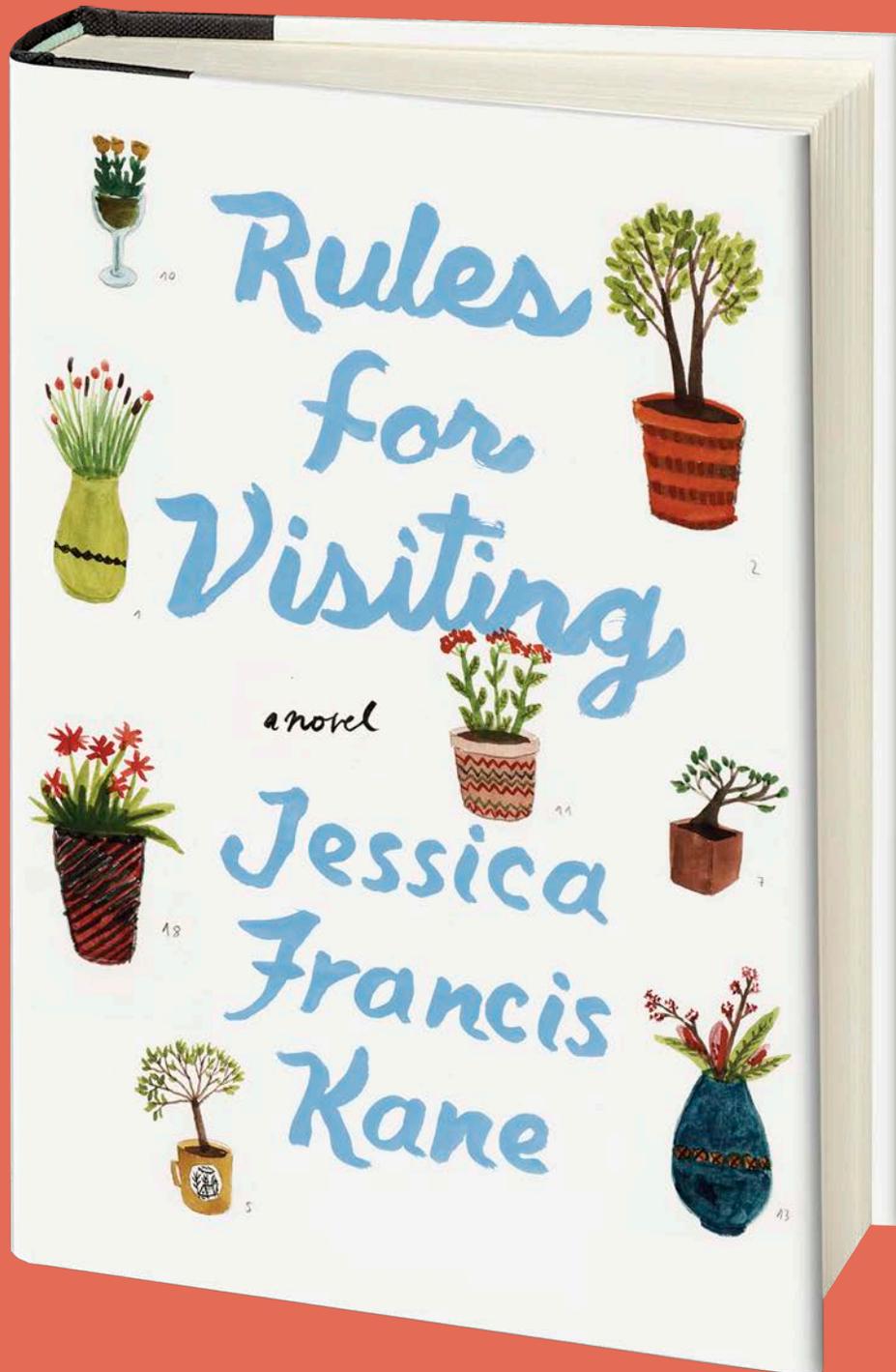


Book Club Guide



Rules for Visiting
Jessica Francis Kane
ISBN: 9780525559221



Discussion Questions for *Rules For Visiting*



1. Do you believe in the concept of a best friend? If so, why? If not, when did that notion lose its meaning for you?
2. May taps into her truest self through gardening, nurturing the care that she brings on her visits. What is the hobby or calling where you find that quality in yourself? Do we attribute enough value to the things that make us into better people?
3. Social media plays an important role in the novel—Amber’s story gives May the inspiration for her journey, Lindy filters her life through Facebook and Instagram, and #fortnightfriends goes viral. How have digital platforms had an impact on your friendships?
4. From the Virginia Woolf epigram to Emerson’s *Happy is the house that shelters a friend*, the book draws inspiration from centuries of writing on friendship and visiting. Are there aphorisms or essays dear to you on these topics?
5. Which of the novel’s characters did you most closely identify with? If you were to choose the life of May, Lindy, Vanessa, Neera, or Rose for yourself, which would you pick?
6. In her visits, we see how much May brings into the lives of her friends and how the time she spends with them invigorates her, too. With her mother, however, May must confront the limits of what one person can do for another. Have you had to face this truth in your life? How have you responded?
7. Rose describes May as “[p]rickly, but in a soft, long-needed way.” By one definition, the thrill of true friendship is having someone who sees the virtue in your unevenness. How do your friends describe you? What does it take to see past your defenses?
8. May rails against the death of just “showing up.” Yet with Leo, the absence of physical proximity makes space for a new kind of intimacy. Why do you think this is? To what extent does the novel believe that absence makes the heart grow fonder?
9. Think of someone that you want to visit. Will you do it? Why or why not?
10. May very helpfully offers her ten rules for visiting. Is there one that you would add? Any that you have quibbles with?

Q&A with Jessica Francis Kane



What was your first inspiration for *May* and her journey?

In March 2003 I learned of the tragic death of the writer Amanda Davis. I'd never met Amanda, but I'd been following the progress of her book tour with great interest. She'd done what I hoped to do: after publishing a story collection, she'd written a novel, and I'd just seen a news story about how her father, who had a small plane pilot's license, was flying her around the country to her events. Their plane crashed in the mountains of North Carolina.

McSweeney's announced that its site would serve as a forum for people who knew and loved Amanda to share stories about her. What was immediately apparent, and continued to be apparent through the weeks and months that new entries appeared, was that Amanda Davis had been a superhero of friendship. Whether a person had known her for a day or for years, whether they'd met her in childhood or as an adult, whether they were single or married, had children or not, were a woman or a man, the quality of their connection to Amanda was something powerful in their lives.

Some combination of my own loneliness at the time, worry about my work, horror for what had happened to Amanda and her family, and curiosity about how to raise a brand-new person in the world (my first child had been born two months earlier) contrived to make me addicted to the story of Amanda. I agree with something the writer Megan Mayhew Bergman said: "A writer's material arrives in the form of obsession, a need for the close and uncomfortable scrutiny of an idea." I printed out all the tributes and carried them around with me in a folder for years. I wrote another novel and a short story collection before finally figuring out what I wanted to say about friendship.

How was the process of writing this novel different from your earlier work?

In the couple of years preceding the writing of *Rules*, I had quite a dry spell. I wasn't writing very much at all. I was reading a lot of novels on the theme of friendship and noticing that mostly they follow a pattern: a group of friends gathers somewhere for an occasion (a wedding, a death) and over the course of a few days, lives are changed. I wanted to see if I could turn that paradigm around and write about a character who goes to her friends, one by one, for no particular reason other than to know them and herself better. So I had this concept, but not a voice for the character, and that was the state of affairs for a long time. Then one day the sentence that opens Part I came to me: "Midway through my fortieth year, I reached a point where the balance of the past and all it contained seemed to outweigh the future, my mind so full of things said and not said, done and undone, I no longer understood how to move forward."

It's a long sentence, but it came complete. And once I had this woman admitting stasis, even defeat, I knew I had to get her moving again. I wrote very fast after that, faster than I ever have. I had a complete first draft in less than a year.

Q&A with Jessica Francis Kane



Who are some of your favorite journeying female characters?

There aren't enough! And the ones we do have exist mostly in nonfiction. I was very inspired by Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* and there's much I love about the concept behind Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, but I could not find the kind of journeying female character that I wanted in fiction. The kind of journeys women characters often get to make in novels involve the emotional work of finding the family you need or healing the family you have. As May observes in the book, this work is just as difficult as the physical work of climbing mountains and sailing seas, but historically it has gotten less credit.

In *Rules for Visiting*, I wanted May to get to do both: find the family she needs and go on a journey. I hoped it might be a model of self-discovery that would be within reach for everyone. All you have to do is make plans to visit a friend.

Do you find that visiting is a lost art in the modern world?

I think it might be. We are so busy and mostly unwilling to inconvenience someone else because we don't want to be inconvenienced ourselves. Just look at the language around asking if you can stay with someone: "I don't want to put you out." "Please don't go to any trouble." "I'll be out of your hair soon." We even use the verb "to crash," for goodness sake, suggesting we fear a mess.

Today we travel for experiences and sights and maybe family obligation, but not many of us plan a trip for the sole purpose of visiting a friend, to see her home, to spend some time in her life. People used to do this—think of Jane Austen's novels! They are full of visiting. Our travel priorities now are very different.

Are you a gardener? A lover of the classics? To what extent do May's interests mirror your own?

I am an enthusiastic amateur gardener. I have a balcony in New York City where I have been trying different approaches to container gardening. I don't love annuals either (May and I have this in common), so I've tried ambitious plants with mixed results: a rosebush (died), a crape myrtle (died), a dwarf cypress (still alive, but struggling). My current delight is that I have some peonies coming up in a pot and I'm crossing my fingers they keep growing until they bloom.

A few years ago we bought a house in Connecticut in the town where my grandmother lived and I spent summers as a child. There I am trying to achieve a classic perennial border, but we are not at the house full-time and it is hard to garden from a distance. May would probably admire my desire to do the work myself, but be dismayed by my lack of follow-through.

As for the classics, I was an English major in college and do love them. The day I discovered *Beowulf* contains the first use of the word "friendship" was very exciting. Looking that up was a moment's inspiration, but once I knew it, a part of the puzzle of May's personality fit into place.

Q&A with Jessica Francis Kane



What do you hope readers will take from *Rules for Visiting*?

I'd like them to think of May and call their own friends more often, or plan a visit, or at the very least get off Facebook and go on a walk to see what's in bloom. May had forgotten (or perhaps never learned) how to be with a friend, or how to ask her friends for help. I hope the book will remind readers that friendship is worth making time for, even traveling for. I've already had a letter from an early reader who said she's working on her own #fortnightfriend list! That made me very happy.

What has May taught you?

At the beginning of the book, May asks herself whether it is possible to get better at friendship, and by the end, I think she's on her way. Quite simply, figuring out May's journey has made me want to be a better friend.



Recommended Reading

from Jessica Francis Kane



Maybe the best way to explain this list is to say that each book on it contains a little bit of the DNA of *Rules for Visiting*. For both of my novels I've had a list like this (each time five books, interestingly) that served as a road map. If I got lost while writing, I could pick up one of these books, reread a few pages, and remember what it was I was trying to do.

***Truth & Beauty* by Ann Patchett**

The friendship of Ann Patchett and Lucy Grealy was one for the ages. Fascinating, intense, complicated—it's hard to understand, but reminded me of how high the stakes can be.

***The Woman Upstairs* by Claire Messud**

Nora Eldridge was a revelation. An angry, first-person, female narrator? Who knew it was allowed? I loved her from the first line.

***Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout**

I like to think there's a little Olive in May Attaway. Olive's relationship to her hometown of Crosby, Maine, was a huge inspiration.

***Journal of a Solitude* by May Sarton**

While living alone, May Sarton thought long and hard about friendship and the difficulties inherent in spending time with another person. She was a curmudgeon, but there is something soothing and addictive about her journals. This one is filled with observations about the natural world, depression, and the emotional courage required for daily life.

***H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald**

Macdonald's memoir is a book made of parts: her grief following her father's death, the raising of her goshawk, and the story of T. E. Lawrence's relationship to his goshawk. I loved it and it made me want to weave information through a book in a similar way, thus the "tree sheets" in *Rules* were born.

How To Plan a Visit like May Attaway

1

The trip is for the purpose of friendship exclusively, no other reason for the trip such as a conference, business meeting, etc.

2

You must stay with the friend in her house, even if that means sleeping on the sofa.

3

You must be alive in the space of the friendship—no social media during visit.

4

There should be no special plans made (spa, fancy dinner, etc.) because the purpose is to see your friend in her life, as close as possible to just sharing an ordinary day.

