

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. Whose story were you most affected by, Bea's or Tessa's? And who did you most identify with?
2. Throughout the novel we constantly alternate between Bea and Tessa's points of view. In what ways does the dual narrative enhance the story?
3. 'I know girls are tricky and complex, conniving and multi-faceted, but hey, I wouldn't have it any other way. It's why we are the interesting, contradicting creatures that we are.' In what way does *The Stepmother* explore this theme?
4. How did you think the children in the story were affected by Bea, James and Tessa's situation? Do you think the adults always acted with the children's best interests at heart?
5. James: utterly hopeless or merely easy-going? Were you ultimately irritated by, or sympathetic towards him?
6. How, if at all, has reading this book changed your perspective on the break-down of long-term relationships and the break-up of family units?
7. Were you surprised by how the book ends? Was the story tied up in a satisfying way?

Further Reading

The Godmother by Carrie Adams

My Fabulous Divorce by Clare Dowling

The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy by Polly Williams

An Offer You Can't Refuse by Jill Mansell

About the Book

Two women are vying for position in one man's life. Their greatest fear is each other. But there's no point taking sides because, as they are about to find out, there are just too many.

The Ex.

She managed to keep her divorce amicable by burying past hurts. It cost her dear, but it's worth it to see her three daughters so happy. Now everything is going to change. Jimmy

The Reading Guide

wants to remarry. Bea worries about how the girls are going to feel having to share their father. But it's not the children's reaction that shocks her - it's hers.

The Girlfriend.

The only thing she's done wrong is fall in love with a man she can't call her own. His daughters come first. No matter what. Try as she might, she can't seem to get them to like her. She doesn't understand. The divorce wasn't her fault. Jimmy swears it was no ones fault, some relationships just break down. But if that's the case, how secure is hers?

An Interview with the Author

1. If we start at the beginning, have you always enjoyed writing, or is it something that you've started recently?

I wrote four crime novels under another name but it wasn't until I wrote *The Godmother* that I feel I found my voice.

2. Your first book, THE GODMOTHER, has been labelled 'Chick Noir'. Can you tell us a little about what that means, and what makes this book different to 'chick lit'?

A chick is a baby bird, I write for women, perhaps the publisher should have labelled it Hen Pen... Then again, maybe it's a good thing that I don't work in marketing.

3. Where did the character of Tessa come from..., is she based on you, or someone that you know?

She is a little part of almost every woman I know, we all have strengths and weaknesses, areas we excel and others where we fail. She is me and she is the complete opposite of me... jeez women are complex!

4. How about the other characters... do you tend to draw on people you know, or do they come from your imagination?

One character is taken completely from real life, the rest are made up, but I'm not telling you which one.

5. Tessa's story continues in THE STEPMOTHER... did you plan this from the beginning, or did it become obvious at the end of THE GODMOTHER that she had more to tell?

The Reading Guide

Actually, Tessa only made it into *The Stepmother* by the skin of her teeth. Maybe she shouldn't have. What was really important to me was that the reader sympathises with both women, the ex-wife (Bea) and the 'new' woman (Tessa), this is a story about what happens when your enemy could make the best alibi if only you'd let them.

6. You tackle a lot of varying issues in your books, how do you 'research' these...do you draw on the experiences of friends, or find other people to talk to you?

For this book I needed the wisdom of hindsight, but hindsight can only be earned, so I talked to a lot of women who'd earned it. The idea came a long time ago from a vicar I know who told me women burying elderly parents often 'confessed' that their inconsolable grief was really reserved for a secret loss many years previously – that may sound weird but I don't want to give too much away.

7. I could imagine your books as films... who would you like to see playing Tessa and Bea?

Helen McCory would be a good Bea, but she'd have to eat some buns. I'd like an unknown for Tessa, I went to some lengths to keep her physical details to a minimum so that the reader could transpose themselves on to her if they like.

8. How long, on average, does each book take to write, starting from the initial idea?

Interesting question. The publisher is always clambering for a book a year, but I think characters take more than that to solidify. I throw out many ideas before the one that comes along so that I can see from end to end in an instant.

9. Can you tell us a little about what you're working on next? Are you carrying on the stories of any of these characters, or moving on to something different?

I'll let you know when I know.

10. Do you enjoy reading for relaxation? If so, which books and authors do you enjoy?

Reading combines my two other favourite things – bath oil and good wine, I get irritable if I don't have a book on the go. As for favourites, that is always such a hard question. If I had to take a collection to a desert island Pat Conroy springs to mind, or John Irving, then again can't go wrong with Jilly Cooper, then again I love *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *To Kill A Mockingbird* is a must... oh I don't know, ask me one on sport.

The Reading Guide

Reader Reviews

'After reading the inside of the book jacket, I was expecting a rather predictable 'chick lit' offering. I was wrong.

The most interesting thing was that these two women were given equal attention. Despite the title of the book, it actually starts with Bea, the ex-wife, and neither are portrayed as the central character. It then switches between the two women, but unlike most other books, this isn't done by switching after every chapter, something I often find frustrating. Instead, each woman has a few chapters, allowing a particular piece of the story to unfold fully.

The writing reflects the story, showing each woman to be equally important, which is what you would expect in a situation like this.

Carrie Adams also manages to balance some very amusing moments (look out for the pink heart!), with the more serious and insightful. All are handled well.

As the story progresses, it's obvious that Jimmy has to make a decision about all their futures. His final choice did seem a little predictable, but it also seemed right. For once, I enjoyed a happy (yet realistic) outcome!

Michelle Moore

'I really enjoyed reading this book. It is well written and interesting, with plenty of twists and turns to keep you turning the pages. I was completely divided as to whom I thought James should end up with. Bea or Tessa? The suspense continues right to the end. Recommended for all those who are considering taking on the role of stepmother!'

Paula McGerr