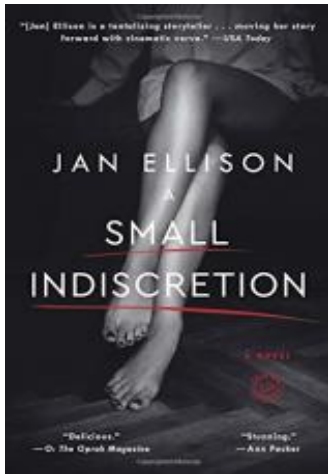


A Small Indiscretion

by Jan Ellison



About the Book

For readers of Amy Bloom, Meg Wolitzer, and Lorrie Moore, **A SMALL INDISCRETION** is a gripping and ultimately redemptive novel of love and its dangers, marriage and its secrets, youth and its treacherous mistakes.

A SMALL INDISCRETION fixes an unflinching eye on the power of desire and the danger of obsession as it unfolds the story of one woman's reckoning with a youthful mistake.

At 19, Annie Black trades a bleak future in her washed-out hometown for a London winter of drinking to oblivion and yearning for deliverance. Some two decades later, she is married to a good man and settled in San Francisco, with a son and two daughters and a successful career designing artistic interior lights. One June morning, a photograph arrives in her mailbox, igniting an old longing and setting off a chain of events that rock the foundations of her marriage and threaten to overturn her family's hard-won happiness.

The novel moves back and forth across time between San Francisco in the present and that distant winter in Europe. The two worlds converge and explode when the adult Annie returns to London seeking answers, her indiscretions come to light, and the phone rings with shocking news about her son. Now Annie must fight to save her family by piecing together the mystery of her past --- the fateful collision of liberation and abandon and sexual desire that drew an invisible map of her future.

A SMALL INDISCRETION is a riveting debut novel about a woman's search for understanding and forgiveness, a taut exploration of a modern marriage, and of love --- the kind that destroys, and the kind that redeems.

Discussion Guide

- 1.** In the beginning of the novel, Annie writes: "Between those bookends was a family whose happiness might still be intact if only I'd been able to see the threats to it more clearly." Is Annie responsible for Robbie's accident, and for her family's unraveling? Is it in her power to protect them?
- 2.** There is more than one indiscretion in the novel. Which do you think the title refers to, or might it refer to more than one?
- 3.** On page 302, Annie writes that it is "easier to blame the impulsiveness of youth than the wanton self-indulgence of a grown woman." How can this statement be assessed in the context of Annie's story? Why does Annie confess to Jonathan upon her return from London?
- 4.** After Jonathan moves out, Clara and Polly are passed between their parents "like a restaurant dessert." Is Jonathan's decision to move out defensible? How are the girls' childhoods altered by the events of the summer? How might they look back on this period in their lives?
- 5.** The novel takes the form of a confessional letter from Annie to Robbie. It also moves back and forth across two decades and spans three continents. How did this structure affect your reading experience? Does the structure remind you of any other novels?
- 6.** Annie's youthful relationship with Patrick is tortured and unfulfilling, yet she continues to yearn for him for more than 20 years. What causes this obsession? And why does it fade once Annie finally meets Patrick in London as an adult?
- 7.** On page 250, Patrick defines art as "whatever stands in the world with no other purpose than to move us." Annie in turn suggests that art should at least be beautiful. Do you agree with either of these definitions? What other scenes and situations in the novel speak to the themes of art and beauty?
- 8.** Early in the novel, Annie writes: "The heart is large, and there is more than one material in the bucket we call love." How does the novel address the theme of the nature of love? How do notions or definitions of love evolve as the novel progresses, and Annie matures?
- 9.** Alcoholism runs in Annie's family, yet when she finds herself abroad at nineteen, she begins to drink heavily. How might Annie's upbringing have influenced this behavior? What leads to Annie's "bargain" with herself in the clinic in San Francisco, as described on page 209?
- 10.** The letter Annie receives from Emme's uncle contains a major revelation. Did this revelation come as a surprise? What previous scenes hint at this revelation? Is Emme justified in holding Annie responsible for the shaping of her own history?
- 11.** Annie posits that a memory is "by its nature a revision" shaped by the waves of time, and by the history that has rushed against it since? How does the novel interrogate the nature of memory? Is Annie a reliable narrator? How would the story be different if it were told from Jonathan's point of view? Or Robbie's? Or Emme's?
- 12.** On page 273, Annie realizes that if she expects to be forgiven, she must "forgive indiscriminately" from now on. Which characters, besides Annie, seek forgiveness? Which characters are ultimately redeemed, and which, if any, are

not?

13. The novel concludes without describing what happens when Annie flies to Paris to reveal to Robbie the truth about his paternity and about Emme's motivations. How do you imagine events unfolding between Annie and Robbie, and ultimately, between Robbie and Emme?

Author Bio

Jan Ellison is an O. Henry Prize winner and a graduate of Stanford University. She left college for a year at 19 to travel and work in Europe, taking notes that two decades later became the germ of *A SMALL INDISCRETION*. Ellison lives in California with her husband of 20 years and their four children.

Critical Praise

"An engrossing, believable, gracefully written family drama that reveals our past's bare-knuckle grip on our present."

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