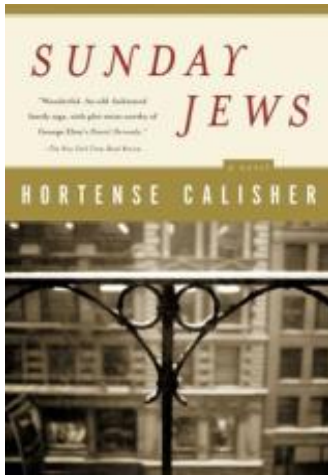


Sunday Jews

by Hortense Calisher



About the Book

Hortense Calisher has been hailed as "stand[ing] vividly with Cather and Fitzgerald" (Cynthia Ozick). In this, her latest and most lauded novel, she explores a family united in blood yet divided by ideas. Son Charles hopes to be a Supreme Court justice; family beauty Nell has children by different lovers; art expert Erika has a nose job; and artist Zach has two wives. Their mother, infamous in Israel, born of a well-to-do Boston background but no longer rich, is bound to a past that never quite dies. The buried history of this extraordinary--and very American--family comes to light unexpectedly when grandson Bert brings home as a wife the woman who, years ago, joined the family circle, then mysteriously disappeared.

Told with wit and deep acuity, **Sunday Jews** is a tour de force from a writer whose fiction has justly been compared with that of Eudora Welty and Henry James, and whose ability to delineate our lives is unparalleled.

Discussion Guide

1. What distinctions do Zipporah's children make between their father's Catholicism and their mother's Judaism? In what ways do their maternal and paternal relatives differ?
2. Hortense Calisher made several subtle choices when creating the novel's cast of characters, including the mention of a child who succumbed to cancer at a young age. How does Mickey's absence affect the plot?
3. Does each Duffy child reflect an aspect of Zipporah's persona? Are any of the children antithetical to her?

4. Discuss the significance of Zipporah's decision to change her name to Zoe, along with the fateful events of her "naming party" hosted at the beginning of the novel. Why do you suppose Mrs. Calisher varies the names she uses for this character?
5. Does the murder of diamond broker Lev Cohen—a man of integrity as well as wealth—bring about a cultural shift in Zipporah's life, or does it instead enhance her immutable identity?
6. In what way does Zipporah's opinion of Zionism echo her work as an anthropologist? What does her friendship with Debra reveal to her about Israel?
7. Besides her practical assistance as a nurse, what does Debra provide Peter and Zipporah that their children could not?
8. What makes Italy such an appropriate backdrop for Peter and Zipporah's final days together?
9. The book's title is discussed on page 135. In light of the definition given there, is Zipporah indeed a Sunday Jew?
10. Page 135 also includes the following sentence: "And the children, riding in buses with guards on them, seeing lush foreign movies in the meantime, could scarcely be blamed for assuming that among those Sunday Jews there must be a lot of Americans. In what ways is Zipporah distinctly American? In what ways is she an atypical American?"
11. Explore the author's style for writing dialogue. What techniques does she use to evoke distinct voices for her characters?
12. Examine the profusion of symbolic elements that accompany Peter's dying words on page 221—the Ark of the Covenant, the spirit of Lev, the synagogue itself, the wristwatch designed by Zach. Do you agree with the assertion that he has been a guest in his own life?
13. Does the inheritance from Norman create an entirely new chapter of Zipporah's life? What is the significance of money and death in **Sunday Jews**?
14. How would you have responded to Katrina's plea that Zipporah marry Foxy?
15. The Duffys honor a fascinating range of immigrant orthodoxies and new-world philosophies. What is the expatriate folklore of your family?
16. What makes Bart a better match for Debra than any of his brothers?
17. Zipporah dies surrounded by many generations of relatives, including an infant descendant. What can be expected from these future generations? What do you imagine her legacy will be?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Summons a genuinely affecting lyrical elegiac voice, celebrating lives and ways of life as they pass into something else."

Sunday Jews

by Hortense Calisher

Publication Date: March 1, 2003

Paperback: 712 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books

ISBN-10: 0156027453

ISBN-13: 9780156027458