

The Language of Good-Bye

by Maribeth Fischer



About the Book

When starting a new marriage or a new life in another country how do you relinquish the past so that you may successfully begin anew without losing a sense of who you have become? What is the cost of leaving a country, a child, a marriage? What is the cost of not leaving? These are the questions Maribeth Fischer asks in *The Language of Good-bye*, an accomplished, provocative debut novel.

For Annie and Will, who have left their marriages to be together, the future is fraught with the complications of starting over. Both have left pieces of themselves behind: For Annie, it is the husband and friend she has known since childhood; for Will, it is the five-year-old daughter he adores. And for the Korean-born Sungae, one of Annie's English-as-a-second-language students, it is a search for the words that will help her resolve the sorrows of her tragic past.

As Sungae struggles with the new language and with her memories, her story begins to unravel in ways that will have consequences not only for Sungae, but for Annie and Will as well as their ex's. At its heart, this is a novel about the choices we make and the repercussions of those choices on ourselves and on others. As Sungae explains, "Duty is like an ancient tree which has survived many seasons. Love is only the blossom." In one way or another, success in their new lives depends on each character's ability to find their own balance between desire and obligation.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins at the start of Annie's school year in September and progresses through the seasons. Why is the changing of the seasons significant? What do the different seasons and holidays mean for each of the characters?
2. Loss is one of the most important themes in the novel. What has each of the characters lost? How are their losses similar? How are they different? How do those losses affect the characters' actions throughout the novel?

3. At some point, Annie, Carter, Will, and Kayla each must cope with losing his or her lover, sometimes more than once. How did each of them deal with this heartache? Was one break-up more tragic than the others, or one character's suffering more acute?
4. Which is more difficult in the novel? a lost love or a lost homeland?
5. What does the novel say about the relationships between parents and children, and the role that children play in their parents' lives?
6. What is the significance of physical exercise in the novel? Think of Kayla's running or Will's cycling.
7. In **The Language of Good-bye**, learning a new language often acts as a metaphor for learning other new things about love and life. What does each of the characters learn? How are their lessons similar to or different from what Annie's students learn in her ESL class?
8. Sungae's paintings are titled according to Annie's lesson plans. How does art function as a language in the novel? Can paintings and words express the same feeling?
9. During Sungae's art show, Fischer writes on page 300, ". . . stories travel a straight line only when complete. [Sungae's] story never would be. And yet, for all of this, it was somehow finished. . . . She understood now for the first time how it was possible for a story to end without being over. Maybe the most important stories never are. And maybe it's only in the beginning when everything is still possible that any story is ever truly complete." By the end of **The Language of Good-bye**, is the story complete or finished? Or is it both complete **and** finished?
10. In the novel, is duty stronger than love?

Author Bio

Maribeth Fischer is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, the Smartt Family Prize, and has been twice mentioned for a notable essay in Best American Essays. She has taught creative writing and English as a second language in Baltimore for nine years. Her creative essays have appeared in The Iowa Review, The Yale Review, and the Pushcart Prize XX: Best of the Small Presses.

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