

The Usual Rules

by Joyce Maynard



About the Book

It's a Tuesday morning in Brooklyn—a perfect September day. Wendy is heading to school, eager to make plans with her best friend, worried about how she looks, mad at her mother for not letting her visit her father in California, impatient with her little brother and with the almost too-loving concern of her jazz musician stepfather. She's out the door to catch the bus. An hour later comes the news: A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center. Her mother's building.

Through the eyes of thirteen-year-old Wendy, we gain entrance to the world rarely shown by those who documented the events of that one terrible day: a family's slow and terrible realization that Wendy's mother has died, and their struggle to go on with their lives in the face of crushing loss.

Absent for years, Wendy's real father shows up without warning. He takes her back with him to California, where she re-invents a life that comes to include a teenage mother, living on her own in a one-room apartment with a TV set and not much else; her father's cactus-grower girlfriend, newly reconnected with the son she gave up for adoption twenty years before; a sad and tender bookstore owner who introduces her to the voice of Anne Frank and to his autistic son; and a homeless skateboarder, on a mission to find his long-lost brother.

Over the winter and spring that follow, Wendy moves between the alternately painful and reassuring memories of her mother and the revelations that come with growing to know her real father for the first time. Pulled between her old life in Brooklyn and a new one three thousands miles away, Wendy is faced with a world where the usual rules no longer apply but eventually discovers a strength and capacity for compassion and survival that she never knew she possessed.

At the core of the story is Wendy's deep connection with her little brother, back in New York, who is grieving the loss of their mother without her. This a story about the ties of siblings, about children who lose their parents, parents who lose their children, and the unexpected ways they sometimes find one another again. Set against the backdrop of global and personal tragedy, and written in a style alternately wry and heartbreaking, **The Usual Rules** is an unexpectedly hopeful

story of healing and forgiveness that will offer readers, young and old alike, a picture of how, out of the rubble, a family rebuilds its life.

Discussion Guide

1. Following the death of her mother, would you expect a young girl in Wendy's situation to be more emotional and less in control than she appeared? Is it believable that she behaved as she did?
2. If you have lost a parent?at whatever age the loss occurred?talk about how the experience changed you.
3. What was your initial impression of Garrett? How did your feelings about the man change over the course of the novel?
4. What did you feel about Wendy's decision to go to California? Should Josh have prohibited her leaving?
5. Did you anticipate the source of Louie's dismay on his birthday? Do you think the author wanted you to do so?
6. How do you feel about Josh becoming involved with Kate?
7. What do you consider to be the function of Violet? Of Tim? Of Carolyn's son? Of Todd? Do they serve a function in the story or distract you from the main action surrounding Wendy and her family?
8. What do you think about Garrett's decision to let Wendy skip school after finding out that she was not attending ninth grade in Davis?
9. What is the significance of the title, **The Usual Rules**?
10. What do you envision will be the issues that arise in Wendy's future? Are you hopeful that she can go on to live a happy and healthy life after this kind of trauma and loss?

Author Bio

Joyce Maynard is the author of 14 novels and five books of nonfiction, as well as the syndicated column "Domestic Affairs." Her bestselling memoir, *AT HOME IN THE WORLD*, has been translated into 16 languages. Her novels *TO DIE FOR* and *LABOR DAY* were both adapted for film. Maynard divides her time between homes in California, New Hampshire and Lake Atitlan in Guatemala.

Critical Praise

"While the first fifty-odd pages of Maynard's new novel are emotionally harrowing, perseverance is rewarded. Set both in Brooklyn and the small town of Davis, California, following the events of September 11, the book tells the coming-of-

age story of a girl whose mother goes to work one morning and doesn't come back . . . The intense subject matter and well-crafted flashbacks make for a worthy read . . . Readers will find the novel an honest and touching story of personal loss, explored with sensitivity and tact. Maynard brings national tragedy to a personal level, and while the loss and heartache of her characters are certainly fictional, the emotions her story provokes are very real."

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