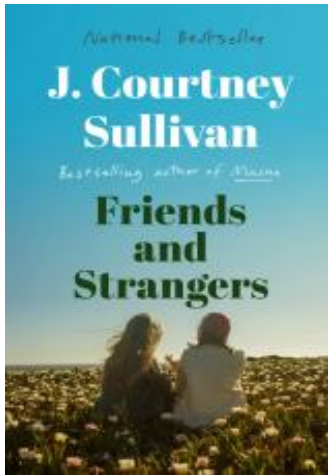


# Friends and Strangers

by J. Courtney Sullivan

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## About the Book

**An insightful, hilarious and compulsively readable novel about a complicated friendship between two women who are at two very different stages in life, from the bestselling author of MAINE and SAINTS FOR ALL OCCASIONS (named one of the *Washington Post*'s 10 Best Books of the Year and a *New York Times* Critics' Pick).**

Elisabeth, an accomplished journalist and new mother, is struggling to adjust to life in a small town after nearly 20 years in New York City. Alone in the house with her infant son all day (and awake with him much of the night), she feels uneasy, adrift. She neglects her work, losing untold hours to her Brooklyn moms' Facebook group, her "influencer" sister's Instagram feed and text messages with the best friend she never sees anymore.

Enter Sam, a senior at the local women's college, whom Elisabeth hires to babysit. Sam is struggling to decide between the path she's always planned on and a romantic entanglement that threatens her ambition. She's worried about student loan debt and what the future holds. In short order, they grow close. But when Sam finds an unlikely kindred spirit in Elisabeth's father-in-law, the true differences between the women's lives become starkly revealed and a betrayal has devastating consequences.

A masterful exploration of motherhood, power dynamics and privilege in its many forms, FRIENDS AND STRANGERS reveals how a single year can shape the course of a life.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Elisabeth's fascination with the BK Mamas Facebook group. Why does it have such a strong hold on her? Does she continue to identify as a BK Mama after she moves away, or does she feel different from the women who post in the group?

2. Examine Sam and Elisabeth's connection. What draws them to each other? How accurate is each woman's perception of the other? When and why do cracks begin to form in their friendship?
3. Explore Elisabeth and Andrew's marriage. What challenges does their relationship face over the course of the novel, and how do they confront them? How does parenthood affect their relationship? Do you feel they have a strong foundation as a couple? Why or why not?
4. Consider the role that money plays in the novel. How are the characters' relationships with each other affected by money? To what extent does money give people power over others? Can money ever strengthen a relationship, or is it always a toxic element?
5. Examine Elisabeth's opinion of the Laurels. In what ways are they different from her friends in Brooklyn? Why does she find them so irksome? What does her judgment of these women suggest about Elisabeth herself? Does her opinion of them ever soften? Consider, as you answer this question, Elisabeth's struggles with loneliness, her career and her long-distance friendship with Nomi.
6. Discuss Sam's feelings for Clive. What initially attracts her to him? What about their relationship gives her pause? How do her friends and family view their relationship? How does she react when she learns of Clive's deception, and what does his decision to lie about his first marriage suggest about his motivations for wanting to marry Sam?
7. Explore the theme of privilege in the novel. What different kinds of privilege are evident in the lives of the novel's characters? Are these characters able to recognize their privilege or are they blind to it? Is privilege something to be ashamed of? Why or why not?
8. Examine George's theory of the Hollow Tree. What are his central beliefs, and why do they resonate so deeply with Sam? Why are Andrew and Elisabeth frustrated with George's fixation on economic inequality? Why does Elisabeth eventually decide to write a book based on George's observations?
9. Compare and contrast Sam's friendship with Isabella and her friendship with Gaby. What common ground does she share with each woman? With which woman does she feel more at ease? Do you believe that both friendships are genuine? Why or why not?
10. Discuss Sam's decision to write an anonymous letter to President Washington about the working conditions of service employees at the college. What does she hope to accomplish? Why does she decide not to tell her friends in the dining hall about it? What do her friends' reactions to the letter reveal about their relationship with Sam?
11. Explore the theme of hypocrisy in the novel. Which characters act in a way that contradicts their professed sense of morality? How do these characters reconcile their behavior with their beliefs? How does their hypocrisy affect their friends and family?
12. Examine Elisabeth's relationships with her mother and father. What are her earliest memories of each of them? How

does her relationship with each parent, in addition to her understanding of their marriage, influence her approach to marriage and parenthood?

**13.** Explore Elisabeth's decision to lie to Andrew about IVF. What does it reveal about Elisabeth's character? About her marriage? Why do you think Sullivan chose not to explain how and why Elisabeth and Andrew had a second child?

**14.** Discuss Sam's experience of returning to her college town for her 10-year reunion. How has she changed since graduation? In what ways has time altered her perception of her college experience, her friendships with the women in the dining hall, her fallout with Elisabeth and her relationship with Clive?

## Author Bio

J. Courtney Sullivan is the bestselling author of the novels *COMMENCEMENT*, *MAINE*, *THE ENGAGEMENTS*, *SAINTS FOR ALL OCCASIONS*, *FRIENDS AND STRANGERS* and *THE CLIFFS*. Her work has been translated into 17 languages. Sullivan's writing has appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *Real Simple* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*, among many others. In 2017, she wrote the forewords to new editions of two of her favorite classic novels --- *ANNE OF GREEN GABLES* and *LITTLE WOMEN*. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two children.

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