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Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with a friendly disagreement when Frieda suggests that Kitty’s newly painted yellow bedroom has “too much sunniness.” What might this suggest about each of them? How might such an idea be relevant as the novel proceeds?

2. Of what significance is it that the novel is set in the 1960s? That Kitty lives in the city, and Katharyn in a suburban neighborhood?

3. Examine what the society of the time expects from, allows, or forbids women. In what ways do various characters push against such definition? What empowers them to do so?

4. Compare and contrast Kitty and Frieda. What makes them such good friends? In what significant ways are they different?

5. Consider the many literary works mentioned throughout the novel. Which is most interesting to you? What does it add to the novel? What’s the particular significance of Ray Bradbury’s SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES? Or Katherine Anne Porter’s SHIP OF FOOLS?

6. At one point Kitty changes her name to Katharyn. How does each name suit her? What power or influence does one’s name have?

7. Think about the many sources of information Swanson employs in the telling of the story: old letters, postcards, books, newspaper articles, microfilm. What are the benefits or challenges of telling a story in such a way?

8. What does the character of Kitty’s mother bring to the novel? Of what particular importance are the postcards she sends?

9. What role does music --- especially that of Patsy Cline --- play in the novel?

10. At one point in Katharyn’s struggle to understand her predicament she says her mind is playing tricks on her, is “using [her] body as a clever prop.” How do the mind and body work with or against each other in times of distress?

11. Why do we dream? What might be the value of dreaming while asleep? What do powerful dreams have in common with reality?

12. Kitty makes impassioned and creative efforts to teach her young neighbor Greg Hansen to read. What are the various reasons this is so important to her?

13. What does Alma bring to the novel?

14. Of Lars’s many good qualities, which are most helpful to Katharyn?

15. What complexities are introduced with Michael, Katharyn and Lars’s third child? What effects do the 1960s medical theories about the nature and causes of autism have on Katharyn?
16. In a time of great frustration Kitty concedes that, “there is no such thing as a perfect life.” Why is this? How close can we get? What’s most important in our attempt?

17. Kitty’s initial interaction with Lars suggests that very different lives might result for a person simply because of timing, even a matter of seconds. To what extent and in what ways has timing played a role in your life?

18. Frieda offers to Katharyn the simple and profound idea that, in life, “you can’t have it all, sister.” What choices do each of the two friends make that determine their relationship? What kinds of mutually exclusive things must one choose between in life?

19. Of what value is the imagination, that “remarkably clever and hardworking creature”? In what ways might an active imagination become problematic or even unhealthy?

20. What many and varied elements help Katharyn recover from her “heartbreaking triumvirate”?

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/the-bookseller/guide
An Interview with Cynthia Swanson

Posted on Thu, Jul 23 2015 9:00 am by Clair Dunlap

Cynthia Swanson’s debut novel *The Bookseller* has only been out from HarperCollins since the beginning of March, but already she is seeing great success: the novel is being translated into 11 foreign languages and its hardcover version is already in its second print run! Set in 1960s Denver, Colorado, *The Bookseller* tells the story of a woman caught between fact and fiction when she begins to have vivid dreams of a life completely unlike the path she has chosen. A mid-century designer herself, Cynthia has woven a compelling, fast-paced story with a beautifully intricate backdrop. I had the chance to ask Cynthia a few questions about her debut novel and the process of writing, researching, and publishing in anticipation of her reading at Magers & Quinn on July 27.

**What was your writing process like for *The Bookseller***? Where did the idea come from and did you have to do a lot of research? What was your favorite, or what was the most rewarding, part of this process?

I started writing *The Bookseller* after taking a hiatus from writing fiction—a time when I was juggling a new marriage and young kids, as well as some design work and freelance technical writing on the side. I’d written a lot of fiction before that, and published a number of short stories. But when my husband and I had three kids in four years, my creativity went right out the window. The idea for *The Bookseller* came to me quite suddenly one day, when I considered a story about a character caught between two lives, who begins to question her own sanity as she had trouble determining what’s real and what’s made up.

With its 1960s setting, I had to do a lot of research for *The Bookseller*—but I only did that once I had written my first draft. I love research, but it bogs me down if I start too early. So in a first draft, I go with my gut and take a lot of notes. I fill in those holes in subsequent drafts. First drafts are tough for me; I use research and work on subsequent drafts as the carrot on the stick to get me through writing that first draft. Once I have something rough to work with, I feel more productive, and the writing gets easier.

*The Bookseller* centers on a certain dichotomy of working woman vs. mother. What made you want to explore this topic? Why explore this through the lens of dreams vs. reality?

It’s a timeless conflict that women still grapple with today. As I’m writing this, I’m listening to my family have breakfast in the other room without me. That’s the struggle many women face, no matter what type of work they’re doing; you want to be in two places at once, and both are equally rewarding. In *The Bookseller*, I wanted to go back to earlier days of that struggle—when women were first trying to find their place in the workforce and realizing it wasn’t going to be
easy to “have it all.” The dream setting is a metaphor, really; because this is such a quandary, I think a lot of us would like to simply wake up one day and have it decided for us, once and for all.

**What was it like to find a publisher?** This is, I think, one of the more mysterious steps for beginning writers, and *The Bookseller* is out from HarperCollins so you must have had a good strategy!

It was combination of perseverance, luck, and taking myself seriously as an author for the first time in my life. I wrote numerous drafts. Several book clubs read the manuscript, and I received input from writer friends and a few agents. After all that, I hired a freelance editor (whom I met through Lighthouse Writers, a writing community in Denver that’s similar to the Loft) to give the manuscript a high-level review. This was a leap for me; I’d never before invested to this extent in my fiction writing career. But it paid off. The editor loved the manuscript, gave me excellent advice for improvements, and suggested several agents she knew who might be interested. Through that personal connection, I found my agent, Susanna Einstein, who also loved the story right from the start. Susanna pitched the manuscript to 19 editors at the Big Five, and HarperCollins bought it on a pre-empt.

**What has been the most surprising aspect of having your debut novel published and out in the world? Have there been any challenges?**

Although I knew this going in, I continue to be shocked by how much marketing and PR an author needs to do. I have a great publicity team at Harper, and they got me wonderful media attention around *The Bookseller’s* pub date. I also hired an outside publicist who specializes in book bloggers and online publicity; she got fantastic placements while we were working together. But for a debut novelist, unless a book is a runaway bestseller—and/or if one can afford to keep an outside publicist on retainer—over time, it falls primarily to the author to keep the book in the public eye. The PR teams at the big publishing houses do a great job, but at some point they need to move on to next season’s list. I, of course, am not moving on! These days, about half of my workday is spent in marketing/PR efforts for *The Bookseller*, and the other half in writing a second novel (also set in the 1960s, but with very different characters and locales).

**What have you been reading lately? What books inspire and inform your own writing?**

I enjoy novels that are similar to my own, in that they hit that sweet spot between beach read and high literature. I like a page-turning plot, but I also need well-developed characters, believable dialogue, and passages that are so insightful they stay with me long after I read them. That’s a tall order, but I think certain authors do a great job with it. I just finished Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies*; I love everything she’s written. Although dark, I find Gillian Flynn’s
novels instructive. I also love books that transform me to other places and times. I’m looking forward to reading Sara Gruen’s new book, *At The Water’s Edge*. Other favorite authors include Kent Haruf, Jennifer Egan, Amy Tan, and Ann Patchett. When picking up my next read, I look for a good story that both educates and entertains.

**Cynthia Swanson** is a writer and mid-century modern designer. She has published short fiction in *13th Moon*, *Kalliope*, *Sojourner*, and other periodicals; her story in *13th Moon* was a Pushcart Prize nominee. She lives in Denver, Colorado, with her husband and three children. *The Bookseller* is her first novel. You can learn more about her writing and design [here](https://writersblock.loft.org/2015/07/23/4319/an_interview_with_cynthia_swanson).
Are Book Clubs Good for Your Health?

March 25, 2016
Written by Cynthia Swanson, author of The Bookseller

Perhaps you saw the article last month – the one that claimed groups such as book clubs are good for one’s health, especially after retirement. In a study of UK retirees, researchers found that participants who belonged to two or more social groups had very low death rates six years after retirement. For those who dropped one of their groups, the rate went up. For those involved in no social groups, the death rate was significantly higher.

Many people – of any age and demographic – would attest to this. Human are social creatures. While some of us (raising my hand here) are introverts generally, we also thrive on at least some social interaction. The levels can vary from among individuals – but most people find fulfillment among like-minded others.

All well and good. So why not just join a chess club or church choir instead?

Well, you might, if that’s where your interests lie. But I’ll take it one step further and say that not just any social group, but a group that revolves around books, is beneficial to one’s health and well-being.
I have no concrete data for this. I only go on the following observations, based on the fifteen years I’ve been in a book club, as well as my experiences meeting with the dozens of book clubs since *The Bookseller* came out last year.

- **Book people are contemplative.** Yes, engaging conversation is possible within any group. But there’s something about reading a “book club book” – knowing that after you’ve turned the last page, you’ll be expected to share thoughts about what you read – that makes the reading process more careful and deliberate. In our chaotic, fast-paced world, this slow-down benefits us both short- and long-term.

- **Books take us outside our own worlds.** I love this quote from Katherine Paterson: “Reading can be a road to freedom or a key to a secret garden, which, if tended, will transform all of life.” Taking it one step further, book clubs expose us to books – and consequentially worlds – we might not have otherwise known about. For me, one of the most gratifying aspects of being in a book club is reading books I didn’t select. As an author, when I read for “pleasure,” I often read books in the same genre I write in. I take notes. I think about why the narrative is effective (or not). In contrast, the books chosen by others in my book club take me outside of myself and my work. I’m free to luxuriate in the simple experience of reading.

- **One book leads to another.** I’ve discovered many a favorite new author because of book club reads. My social circle (both literal and figurative) expands. Whether I reach out to authors personally, or simply follow them on social media and add their other books to my To-Be-Read list on Goodreads, I feel I’ve made a new friend.

My book group has significantly increased my well-being. Time and again, I see this in book groups I meet with, too. We talk about favorite authors. We compare notes about what we love to read. The groups laugh together; they listen with genuine love and concern to all that’s shared.

I’ve met with book groups that formed last month, and groups that have been together for twenty years. Either way, they know they’re among friends. And they’re feeling fit as a fiddle about that.

Cynthia Swanson is an author and a designer. She has published short fiction in numerous journals and has been a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her debut novel, *The Bookseller* (HarperCollins), was published in March 2015, releases in paperback on March 22, 2016, and is being translated into 11 languages. *The Bookseller* was an Indie Next selection, a 2015 Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Historical Fiction, and is a nominee for the MPIBA Reading the West 2015 Award. Learn more about Cynthia and *The Bookseller* at www.integritymodern.com.

http://www.thebookwheelblog.com/are-book-clubs-good-for-your-health/