

# **BOOK CLUB TO GO!**

## **Songs Without Words**

### **By Ann Packer**

#### **Introduction**

Ann Packer's new novel centers around two childhood friends, Liz and Sarabeth, as they navigate the challenges of their lives as adults, confront loneliness and near tragedy, and test both the limits and the redemptive power of their friendship.

*Songs Without Words* is a novel about friendship and about family, but it is also very much about suicide. Sarabeth remarks that *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, which she is reading at a retirement home, are not so much about adultery as about suicide. Adultery is an issue, too, in *Songs Without Words*, as Sarabeth struggles to climb out of the wreckage of one adulterous affair and to avoid falling into another. But suicide is the mother lode in this novel, just as it is in Flaubert's and Tolstoy's. When Sarabeth's mother took her own life, which for Sarabeth was a "devastating relief," it deepened the bond between her and Liz. But decades later, when Liz's daughter tries to kill herself, it threatens to destroy their friendship. Sarabeth is overcome by her own pain, unable to rise above it enough to comfort Liz, and Liz is outraged by her friend's failure. A gulf opens between them that seems unbridgeable. And for Liz and her husband Brody, consumed by solitary guilt and anger at each other, their daughter's suicide attempt has deeply shaken the ground beneath their feet—why hadn't they seen it coming? Why couldn't they stop it?—unsettling their marriage and dramatically altering their view of themselves and the solidity of life they'd created together.

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#### **About the Author**

Ann Packer was born in Stanford, California, in 1959, and grew up near Stanford University, where her parents were professors. She attended Yale University and then, after five years working at a publishing company in New York, she went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, selling her first short story to *The New Yorker* a few weeks before receiving her degree. A fellowship at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing followed, and she spent two years living in Madison, Wisconsin, which would later become the setting of her first novel, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*.

While living in Wisconsin she published short stories in literary magazines and had a story chosen for inclusion in the annual O. Henry Awards prize stories anthology. With support from the Michener-Copernicus Society of America, she completed her first book, *Mendocino and Other Stories*. The National Endowment for the Arts provided a

fellowship, and she spent much of the next decade working on *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*. A critical success that became a national bestseller and was translated into ten languages, *Dive* received a Great Lakes Book Award, an American Library Association Award, and the Kate Chopin Literary Award. Ann's second novel, *Songs Without Words*, is now available.

Ann returned to her native Bay Area in 1995. She lives with her family in San Carlos.

([annpacker.com](http://annpacker.com))

### **Author Interview by Reading Group Guides**

**Q:** The main characters in *Songs Without Words*—Liz and Sarabeth—lead different lives: Liz is a suburban mom who goes to yoga class and makes dinner for her kids while Sarabeth lives alone and routinely forgets chores like washing the dishes. Do you think the bonds we forge in childhood outlive our differences as grown-ups?

**A. Packer:** Yes, I think that's the case a lot of the time. We have friends in order to be known—that's one of the reasons, anyway. And we have the idea about our oldest friends that they know us better than others do because they've known us longer. Also, I think enjoying the same activities or living the same kinds of lives as your friends becomes less important as you grow older—especially for women.

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**Q:** *Songs Without Words* looks at the impact of a teenage girl's attempted suicide on her life, and the life and relationships of her family. It also gives us a portrait of a woman, Sarabeth, whose mother committed suicide decades before the main action of the book. Do you think tragic events such as this redefine the way people look at the world?

**A. Packer:** I think events like this can have an enormous influence. What I find especially interesting is the way the influence can be occult: not something you could easily observe or identify, and yet fundamental to the way people look at or live in the world.

([readinggroupguides.com](http://readinggroupguides.com))

## Reviews

“Welcome back to Packer country, a richly psychological terrain where finding the balance between responsibility to others and obligation to oneself is never obvious or easy . . . . Engrossing, forgiving and quietly wise, *Songs* never makes a false step as Packer keeps both the pages and her readers’ minds turning until the very end.”—*People*

“A richly nuanced meditation on the place of friendship in women’s lives. . . . Packer gets deep into the perspectives of Liz, Sarabeth and Lauren, and follows out their conflicts with an unsentimental sympathy.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Packer writes about adult female friendship with a nuanced understanding of its emotional intensity. . . . One of Packer’s strengths as a writer is her ability to subtly shift tone and voice to bring us into the interior of very different characters. The narrative moves with ease.”—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

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## Further Reading

*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

*A Heart of Stone* by Renate Dorrestein

*Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert

*A Long Way Down* by Nick Hornby

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers

*Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy

*The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton

*Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. Ann Packer has been praised for the lifelike quality of her fiction. Do you feel that the friendship depicted here seems especially true to life? Do you find yourself choosing sides with either Liz or Sarabeth?
2. Why does Lauren attempt to kill herself? What are the immediate and the more suppressed causes? How does Lauren herself explain it?
3. Liz tells Brody that she feels completely guilty for Lauren's suicide attempt. "I know, it sounds crazy," she says, "but the point is: if it was your fault, then you weren't powerless—you weren't at the mercy of stuff just happening." To which Brody replies: "You're always going to be at the mercy of stuff just happening, no matter what" [p. 335]. What different ways of looking at life do these two positions represent? To what extent are they "at the mercy of stuff just happening"?
4. After Lauren has returned from the hospital, Liz admits to Lauren that she and Sarabeth are "having some problems." After that, Lauren occasionally asks her mother about her relationship with Sarabeth. Do you think Lauren is intentionally pressuring Liz to talk to her? Do you think it's Lauren's place to pressure her mother about Sarabeth?
5. Liz and Sarabeth have a long history together. Do you think that, without Lauren's attempted suicide, Liz and Sarabeth would have ended up in the same place anyway?
6. Why does Liz tell Sarabeth, "I'm not your mother" [p. 257]? Is she justified in saying this? How does it affect Sarabeth, immediately and ultimately?
7. What is the effect of tragedy—the suicide of Sarabeth's mother and Lauren's attempted suicide—occurring in such seemingly ordinary, and in Lauren's case loving, families?
8. Near the end of the novel, after Joe has won at poker, he thinks: "The cards didn't really matter. What mattered was how you played. What mattered was your face" [p. 314]. In what ways might this apply to the lives of the characters in the novel?

9. *Songs Without Words*, though much of it is concerned with suffering, depression, and suicide, ends happily, with the restoration of Liz and Sarabeth's friendship and Lauren choosing to embrace rather than hide from life. Why does this ending feel right? How does Packer keep the novel from achieving too easy a closure?
10. What does *Songs Without Words* reveal about both the strength and fragility of human relationships?

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