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READER'S GUIDE

Ordinary People

50th-Anniversary Edition

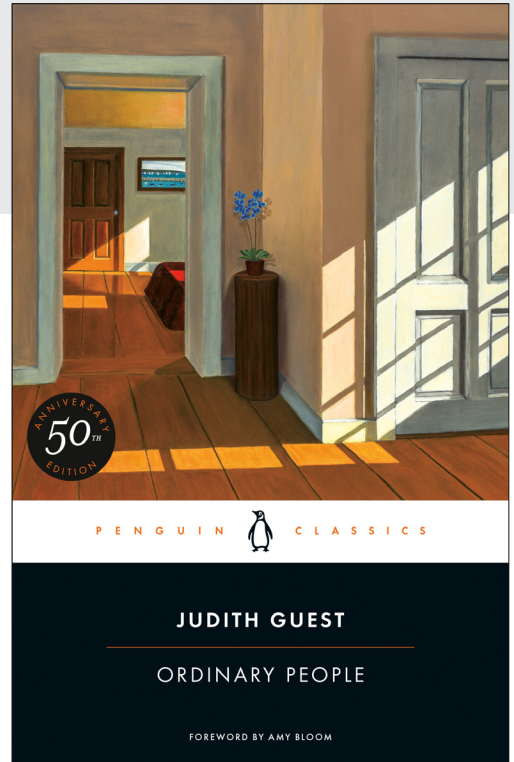
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Penguin Classics

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1. Look again at the book's epigraph, from a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay: "But what a shining animal is man, / Who knows, when pain subsides, that is not that, / For worse than that must follow—yet can write / Music, can laugh, play tennis, even plan." How do you think the Jarretts embody this quote differently? What do their reactions to Buck's death say about them as people? Is there a socially acceptable or "correct" way to grieve?
2. The Jarretts' house is almost a character itself, with its austere, cold perfection. How do the Jarretts view the house differently? Do parts of the house "belong" to certain characters? What role does the setting of upper-middle class suburbia play in the story?
3. Despite the novel being set fifty years ago, Conrad's mental health struggle still resonates today. Based on the novel's depiction, how has the stigma around psychotherapy—specifically for men—changed since then? What factors do you think have driven this change?
4. Beth looms large in the novel but in some ways seems unknowable. Why do you think Guest chose to depict the mother of the family this way? What effect does it have that she never gives us Beth's perspective?



5. You may know that in 1980, *Ordinary People* was adapted into an Oscar-winning movie directed by Robert Redford and starring Mary Tyler Moore, Donald Sutherland, and Timothy Hutton. If you've seen the movie, how do you think they adapted the characters' internal drama in the book to the screen? Do any of the portrayals depart in some way from how you imagined the characters in the novel, or maybe in your opinion the adaptation feels faithful?
6. Amy Bloom, the author of the foreword, is not only a bestselling novelist, but also a psychotherapist and author of a bestselling memoir about her husband's death. How does her perspective illuminate the text? Do you agree with her claim that *Ordinary People* was ahead of its time in its depiction of mental health and therapy scenes?
7. What does the novel suggest about the difference between fault and responsibility in a tragic event? How does Dr. Berger explore this with Conrad and Calvin?
8. How do the Jarretts' relationships with people outside their immediate family change throughout the novel? What purpose do characters like Joe Lazenby, Jeannine, and Karen serve?
9. How does Conrad's guilt about what happened to Buck seep into other aspects of his life? What actions, or non-actions, of his would you attribute to his grief?
10. How does Beth's approach to grief differ from Calvin's? And how does Conrad react to Beth's and Calvin's different parenting styles? In what ways does he reflect his mother and father?
11. Does the end of the book feel realistic to you? Why does Beth choose to leave, and was it inevitable that the family would break up?
12. What do you think the title means? What makes the Jarretts "ordinary"?

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