



Best Friends by Martha Moody

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Summary

"You'll definitely see elements of yourself and your girlfriends in this terrific novel," is how *Redbook* described **Best Friends** --- which may explain why this first novel from an unknown author has been quietly building to a surprising hardcover success. It's the kind of book that is shared among friends, an instantly familiar and emotionally immediate story of two women who become college roommates, confidantes, and friends for life.

Clare, from a working-class Protestant family, has never met anyone like Sally: wealthy, pretty, and Jewish, barely emancipated from her close-knit Los Angeles family. Over the decades, Clare is drawn deeper into the circle of Sally's family --- until she uncovers the kind of secret that no one wants to tell a best friend.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

First novels that track a pair of friends from college days through their subsequent lives aren't exactly uncommon, but Moody's is so freshly observed and gifted with such a palpable sense of the ravages of time that it feels utterly new. Clare, the narrator, is a prematurely cynical Ohio girl, daughter of a left-wing schoolteacher, who says up-front that all she wanted out of college when she went to Oberlin in 1973 was "unrest and demonstrations."

Sally Rose is her roommate, an apparently naive, sheltered kid from a wealthy Los Angeles family whose occasional sly wit and perfect word choices appeal to Clare. The girls grow close, and soon Clare is making regular visits to the big house off Mulholland Drive where Sid, Sally's indulgent, wise-guy father, seems to cast a spell over a happy household. Sally never questions the source of the family wealth, but inquisitive Clare does and that is the first of many shocks that unfold as the shadows begin to gather around the Roses. Sally's bright, perky younger brother, Ben, turns into a haunted druggie; their mother, ace cook Esther, becomes increasingly remote; Sid begins a long decline into Alzheimer's. Yet despite their geographical distance, the two girls, Sally going into law of a peculiarly California kind, Clare becoming a hardheaded doctor with a specialty in AIDS, never lose their deep attachment, which somehow sustains them through a darkening landscape. They both suffer their share of unhappy relationships and here Moody's skills at character drawing, already

clear in her portraits of Sid and Ben, take full rein and both come to rueful realization of their limitations, and those of life itself. Even in its dying fall, however, the book never loses its edge, at once compassionate and humorous, nor its moving conviction that a strong friendship between women can be one of life's most powerful relationships.

Library Journal Review

Moody's first novel examines the dynamics of friendship between two very different women, Clare Ann Mann, a small-town Ohio girl, and Sally Rose, who hails from Los Angeles. Meeting as college roommates, the girls are surprised to learn that, paradoxically, Clare Ann is the worldlier of the two. Despite their many differences, the two form a bond that will last a lifetime or at least until the end of the book. Pared to one-third its length, this might have been a valid study of friendship. However, the drama disaster, disappointment, revealed lies, childbirth, drug abuse, AIDS, and so on continues ad infinitum and strains credibility. Expecting some form of closure at the end, the reader is left wondering where the next page is. It is as if Moody simply did not know how to escape the web. Having been a finalist for a Best American Short Stories anthology, Moody might find more success in that more succinct genre.

Kirkus Reviews

An energetic, if not always persuasive, attempt to detail why a friendship made in college between two women endures despite family scandals, different lifestyles, and the men they marry and divorce.

Narrator Clare Man meets Sally Rose in 1973 at Oberlin College, where the two freshmen are assigned to share a room. Wealthy, Jewish Sally comes from California. Protestant, middle-class Clare is a native of Ohio. Sally is devoted to her family, especially father Sid, a publisher, who calls every day. Clare is impatient with her family, especially with her mother, a teacher. Though Clare is a free spirit, Sally more reserved and cautious, the two soon become close friends. Clare's summer visit to the Rose home further cements the attachment; soon Sid, mother Esther, and younger brother Ben become as much her family as Sally's. But there are no perfect families, not even in exciting, warm California. As Clare becomes a doctor, marries and divorces twice, gives birth to a daughter, and works with AIDS patients, the Rose family falls apart.

Sally, now a lawyer, marries handsome Flavio, only to find him seducing Ben one day in the pool house. Ben then becomes a heroin addict; Esther commits suicide; and Sally tries to help her brother by buying drugs for him. Eventually, when Clare learns that Sid publishes brutally graphic pornography and may also be implicated in Ben's recent death, she nearly stops seeing Sally. But true friendship survives all kinds of blows (there are more to come, too), and the women enter middle age as close as ever. Newcomer Moody, a Ohio-based physician, is at her best evoking the period, from the last days of college protests to the onset of AIDS. She is less successful in showing just why Sally was so important to Clare.



Biography

Author website <http://www.marthamoody.net>

Martha Moody was born and raised in Ohio. She graduated from Oberlin College and received her MD from the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, where she also completed her residency training in internal medicine. She has been married since 1985 to Dr. Martin Jacobs; they have four teenage sons and live in Dayton, Ohio. Moody was a private practice internist for 15 years. Currently she is retired from private practice and volunteers as medical director at a clinic for the working poor.

Her short story, "Like the Arrival of Angels," was a finalist for the Best American Short Stories of 1985. **Best Friends** is her first novel.

Bibliography

"Like the Arrival of Angels" Short Story 1985

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Interview with the Author

Martha Moody's *Best Friends* By Rebecca Lomax **City Beat** (June 6, 2002)

Oberlin College, 1973. Clare is a Midwesterner, Ohio born and bred, from middle-class parents. Her college roommate Sally is a rich L.A. girl.

Clare can't wait for the unrest and demonstrations she'll certainly find on campus, and she's sure her Californian roommate is excited too. Unfortunately, it's the '70s and no one wants to demonstrate anymore. And when Clare meets Sally, she's surprised to find that description "apple-cheeked" come to mind.

As a first effort from Dayton author Martha Moody, *Best Friends* is impressive in size and scope. Through the eyes of Clare, the novel follows the relationship of these two women for 20-plus years as they realize they're not as different as they first thought and build a friendship that rivals kinship.

Moody confirms that her characters are more similar than different.

"They both have lots of foibles and blind spots, and I think that that's very human," she says. "I think they're both in different ways socially awkward, which makes them kind of endearing and kind of makes them need each other in a way."

After college, Sally heads back to California for law school. She settles into her own practice specializing in women's issues. Clare decides on a medical program in Akron and ends up specializing in AIDS issues.

The women remain close through frequent phone calls, and Clare often finds herself on the red eye to L.A. Moody is able to squeeze so many years into the story by telling it through snippets of conversations from the calls and visits. The reader catches up on the characters' lives as they catch up with each other.

The set-up of the story is straight from Moody's own life. She and her best friend Jill met as college roommates and have remained close even though Jill now lives in Arizona.

"We really are very close and we go for periods longer than Sally and Clare where we don't talk to each other," Moody says.

She admits to writing in a little bit more flexibility by making Clare single and giving her enough income to flip back and forth between California and Ohio.

Moody's writing starts out simple when the women themselves are much simpler. As the story builds, Moody begins chopping her scenes in to small bits that fluidly move between past and present. As a result, the book becomes more comfortable and engaging the farther into it you get.

"Hopefully, if any book works, the reader kind of makes it more complex in their mind with the memories of what's gone on before," Moody adds.

The novel's male characters play important and often unsavory roles. Clare and Sally repeatedly find themselves enamored with the wrong man, often allowing him to temporarily take the place of their best friend. They always come running back.

Both fathers in the story go to extreme lengths to give their daughters a comfortable life. Eventually Clare discovers some unpleasant things about her otherwise doting father that she has to deal with. When he dies, Clare finds herself spending so much time in California that Sally's father becomes like a substitute until she finds out some even worse things about him. Clare is strongly affected by the information and has to decide how and if to tell Sally.

"After I finished it, I did think that they (the fathers) both were sort of guilty in certain ways for things they did, not for wholly bad motives," she says. "It's interesting to me how people can go astray for not necessarily bad motives, but something happens and they end up rationalizing things to themselves and doing things they really shouldn't."

Moody introduces Sally's father's faults only after letting the reader get a good sense of who he is and how many good things he's done for his family. We see him when Sally is at college asking her to buy duplicates of all her books so he can follow along in her classes. He'd never gotten a college degree.

"One of the things I was interested in, I wanted to get a character in that hopefully the readers would sympathize with but would 'go bad,' " Moody says.

She's been writing since college, where she focused on poetry.

"They didn't have any fiction at our school really," she says. "The teachers were poets at that point. I did well in it, but I never really understood poetry."

She traveled to South America with her Spanish teacher to interview and translate for Latin American female poets. What struck her when she was down there wasn't a love for poetry.

"There was just a lot of very evident poor health, so I came back thinking I'd go to nursing school instead of writing school," Moody says, adding that she's been a physician in private practice for 15 years now.

But she hadn't given up writing all together.

"I started reading fiction and I realized I understood fiction, and I started writing that," she says.

Moody somehow found time to work full-time, care for her four sons and write this almost 500-page novel.

"When I was writing the book it was tough," she says. "I was writing two paragraphs a day."

She's since quit her practice and spends her days with her kids, and of course she writes. "I've got two (books) in the cooker now."

The hectic pace of her previous schedule seems to have crept its way into *Best Friends*. Sally is a real baby machine and ends up with five kids by the end of the book. In an amusing scene, she's trying to start her day and everything's going wrong and she can't even remember which side she parts her hair on. She eventually gets out her driver's license as reference.

"That's kind of the way it is for a lot of women," Moody says. "And I think they have in many ways lives that are pretty typical. A woman these days is trying to balance children and work."

Moody doesn't mind being a writer based in sleepy Dayton, Ohio.

"It's fine," she says with a laugh. "I've always written very much by myself, and until I left my medical practice there was hardly anybody who even knew I wrote."

Her built-in audience of ex-patients, however, is perhaps a little on the conservative side.

"A lot of my patients are 60 or older and a lot of them have read the book, which is very sweet," she says. "Even people who are shocked by the book are polite about it."

Moody thinks there are perhaps a few things about her writing that surprise people who know her: "I think because of the sex in it and it's got kind of a liberal tilt that people probably didn't realize I had."

As the story winds its paths and the two friends find their way both together and apart in their lives, Moody leaves them at a point of upheaval.

"I knew that I wanted them to reach some kind of resolution, just in terms of some sort of realization of what their friendship was like," she says.

Discussion Questions (from ReadingGroupGuide.com)

- 1.** Discuss Clare's first impression of Sally. How accurate is it? Based on Clare's comparisons of herself to her new roommate, what is your first impression of Clare? Despite their rocky beginning, Clare and Sally become great friends in college. What do you think they find appealing in one another?
- 2.** Even though they are best friends, Sally and Clare keep certain secrets from one another. Discuss some of the secrets each keeps and why. Are they only trying to protect one another, or do they have selfish motives at heart? How does this affect their friendship, in the long run?
- 3.** How would you explain Sally's intense desire to be part of a "unit"? Does either Sally or Clare ever become a unit in a romantic relationship? What do you make of Clare's telling Sally (page 436), "We're the unit." Do you agree? Why do you think Sally reacts as she does?
- 4.** Sally and Clare choose demanding careers. How do their professions, law and medicine, validate and/or challenge their images of each other? How does each change in her own estimation?
- 5.** How did Sally and Clare's friendship change throughout the novel? Do you think they became closer over time, or less so? Why do you think they were able to remain friends, even as their lives and perceptions of one another changed?
- 6.** When Sally first finds out how her father made his fortune, she is at pains to justify it to herself and to Clare. She mentions her college boyfriend, Timbo, as an example of someone who was "a victim of sex" and says that "maybe adult magazines, by bringing things out into the open, make people less likely to be victims" (page 167). Do you agree? Can you think of some other characters in the book whom Sally might characterize as victims of sex?
- 7.** Discuss the impact Sid Rose's business has on his family. What role does it play in Sally's formation? In Ben's demise? In Sid's marriage? What do you make of Sid's targeting the gay pornography market, in light of his prejudice against gay people? Do you believe his assertion that it is only about increasing his profits?
- 8.** Both Clare and Sally are very close to their fathers. When Clare shares her suspicion that her father embezzled money from the medical practice he managed, Sally defends him: "Oh, Clare. If he did it, he did it for you" (page 66). Sid Rose makes a similar argument to

defend his business to his daughter. How does Clare's father's moral lapse compare to Sid Rose's? Does his relative poverty make his crime less blameworthy, in your opinion? Is there a connection between Clare's disgust with Sid Rose and her forgiveness of her own father? Does Sally ever forgive her father?

9. Sally and Clare both long for children. Does having children help them heal their distant relationships with their own mothers? How does motherhood affect their friendship? What do you make of Clare's "obvious disappointment" at Sally's third pregnancy (page 305)? How does Sally feel about Clare's choices?

10. Were you surprised at the lengths Sally went to, after Esther's death, to keep Ben in "happy families"? Were her actions justifiable? In the end, is Sally as complicit in Ben's death as their father? Why do you think Clare goes with Sally on her mission, even though she is initially disgusted by the idea? In your opinion, does Esther also share some measure of responsibility?

11. The Roses had wilted...They'd become like anybody else, any sad and bickering little family. My magical L.A. nights with them were gone" (page 121). Discuss Clare's initial, glowing attraction to the Rose family and its eventual tarnish. How does it compare to her relationship with her own family?

12. What do you make of the fraught relationship between Clare and Sid Rose? Why do you think Sid chooses to make his "confession" to Clare? How does this affect Clare and Sally's friendship?

13. Do you think that Sid Rose killed his son? Why or why not?

Suggestions for Further Reading

How to Be Lost: A Novel by Amanda Eyre Ward

Blood Orange by Drusilla Campbell

The Book of Bright Ideas by Sandra Kring

The Saving Graces: A Novel by Patricia Gaffney

Blue Water by A. Manette Ansay

Summer Sisters by Judy Blume

All He Ever Wanted: A Novel by Anita Shreve

The Myth of You & Me: A Novel by Leah Stewart

The Town that Started the Civil War by Nat Brandt

Poor Cow by Nell Dunn