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Sandwich
by Catherine Newman

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Discussion Questions

1. How do secrets work in this book? Why are there so many of them, and how do they relate to each other and/or move the story along?
2. Why do you think Maya told Rocky about her pregnancy even before Jamie?
3. This is, to some extent, a book about a long marriage. What are your thoughts about Rocky and Nick's relationship?
4. What about Rocky's relationships with her young adult kids? Her own aging parents?
5. Did you have a favorite character?
6. If you could have given a single piece of advice to one of the characters, what would it have been?
7. How important do you think the setting was to the way the story unfolded?
8. Does this book actually have a plot, and how would you describe it?
9. Did it end the way you thought it would? Was the ending delightful, satisfying, annoying, enraging or none of the above?

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/sandwich/guide>

Author Interview

A New Novel from Catherine Newman Tells the Story of the 'Sandwich' Generation

NPR's Danielle Kurtzleben talks to Catherine Newman about her novel
— about a modern family in all its messiness — called "Sandwich."

DANIELLE KURTZLEBEN, HOST: Take the word sandwich, and you get a delicious lunch, preferably toasted, a Massachusetts town on the cape and also sandwich generation for those squeezed between caring for children and aging parents. Catherine Newman embraces all of this in her new novel called "Sandwich." Welcome, Catherine.

CATHERINE NEWMAN: Thank you so much.

DK: How did the idea for this book with its very apt title take root in your mind?

CN: They were kind of twinned impulses. One is I wanted to write about my sort of lifelong love affair with Cape Cod. And then there's, like, this secret other thing, which is that I wanted to write about kind of the toll of being a woman in a reproductive body hitting mid-50s.

DN: I wonder if you could introduce us to your protagonist Rachel, or as her family calls her, Rocky. Can you read for us from the book's prologue?

CN: (Reading) In the passenger's seat of one slightly resting silver Subaru station wagon, a woman in her 50s. She is halfway in age between her young adult children and her elderly parents. She is long married to a beautiful man who understands between 20- and 65% of everything she says. Her body is a wonderland, or maybe her body is a satchel full of scars and secrets and menopause.

DN: You know, this book, on the one hand, it's very much a story about Rocky having reached this point in her life where, yes, she's going through menopause, and that's a challenge. But really, she's at this pretty happy place, and there's this passage where she thinks to herself, I'd pick this life, too. I'd even pick the way that pain has burnished me to brightness. The pain itself, though? I imagine I'd give it up if I could. Was pain necessary for Rocky to get to this joyful, relaxed part of life?

CN: You know, that's a question for my therapist - I mean, Rocky's therapist. There is something very galvanizing about loss in terms of feeling that incredible luck and feeling how precarious it is to be with the people you love, that that is the human contract, that you will lose everybody. And Rocky is the kind of person for whom an awareness of that makes life very sweet and very tender.

DN: One of the central relationships that this book is about is between Rocky and her husband, Nick. Maybe you can tell us where they're at at this stage of their life together.

CN: They've been married for decades. They're new empty nesters. And they're at this moment where on the one hand, they've been together so long that there's this just kind of worn sweetness to the way they are. And on the other hand, there's a kind of realization Rocky's having that they have not borne the brunt of their lives

as parents or as reproductive people. They have not carried this weight equally, and she's kind of angry at him about that, even though there's truly nothing he can do.

DN: You know, we've hinted at this. A big theme of this book, I think you could describe as the indignities that happened to women's bodies - or can happen - at different times of life. It sounds like you knew from the beginning that you wanted that to be a central theme.

CN: I did want that to be a central theme, and I've gotten variations of questions on, like, did you ever think about just making this be, like, a nice beach read, which - (laughter) like, of course.

DN: Great.

CN: You know, it's a question my family would ask a version of on vacation, which would be like, (laughter) could we just have a great week? Do you need to be such a pain? You know, my original elevator pitch for the book was that it was a book about reproductive mayhem. And I have since amended that to be like, It's a book about kind of everything that the body holds after decades of life as a reproductive body.

DN: Speaking of reproductive storylines in this book, there's a subplot about abortion. Now, usually I cover politics, where abortion is often treated very delicately. So I was struck by how matter-of-factly you write about it. There's one point where Rocky and her daughter have this back-and-forth about abortion, and the daughter, Willa, scolds Rocky for how she's talking, and Rocky responds, Willa, honey, I'm not running for governor. I wonder if you could talk about the tone you use in talking about abortion.

CN: I really appreciate that question. The only thing nerve-racking for me about this book being in the world is that. Abortions aren't easy on women, but they are absolutely yours to have and yours to feel however you feel about. So I wanted that really robust politics to be in the novel, but to be in the novel as just, like, everyday conversation more than it being, you know, a five-page chapter that felt like you were being scolded about something.

DN: Now, the season in this book is summer. It's at the beach. There's family drama. It felt to some degree like the setup for a Nancy Meyers film or a romantic comedy. Did you want to play with the tropes of those kinds of films and stories a bit?

CN: I don't know. I think I didn't think of it that way, but when you say it, I feel like it's kind of true. It's like the trappings of that with this kind of weird, gross, dark underbelly. And I don't know if that's gonna make people feel really off-put, where they're gonna pick it up, and it looks like a beach read, and then actually, there's a blood clot dropping out of someone's pants, and it's, like, terrifying. So we'll have to see.

DN: I thought that bit was kind of funny, to be honest, so...

CN: (Laughter)

DN: Well, it won't be off-putting to everybody. I read that you wrote an etiquette column for a decade at the magazine Real Simple. Has that influenced your fiction at all?

CN: I think it consolidated my world view, to be honest. So, yes, I think it has influenced every single aspect of my life. If you write an etiquette column for 10 years, it is really hard to deal with the fact of other people's otherness. That - every etiquette question could be reduced to that. You don't like somebody's wind chimes. Someone puts lipstick on at the table. Do you invite your gay cousin-in-law to your wedding? The thrust of every question is, people are different from me, and I can't stand it. And then the thing that you have to say to everybody is, you have to stand it. That's the human condition. You have to approach it with as much grace as is humanly possible, which is more grace than you're currently mustering. And so I feel like that is totally in the book in a weird way. Rocky's challenge is to deal with the fact of other people's otherness.

DN: Throughout the book, Rocky does actually make some killer sandwiches - they sound delicious - for her family. This is an important question. Are you known for yours?

CN: Why, yes, I am known for my sandwiches, and I'm known for trolling for compliments about them.

DN: Nice. What's your go-to sandwich?

CN: My go-to sandwich is baguette with tuna salad that has tons of pepperoncinis in it and dill.

DN: That sounds great. I will try that. Well, Catherine Newman's new novel is called "Sandwich." Catherine, thank you so much.

CN: Oh, thank you so much for having me. It was such a pleasure.

<https://www.npr.org/2024/06/29/nx-s1-4876876/a-new-novel-from-catherine-newman-tells-the-story-of-the-sandwich-generation>

Author Biography

Catherine Newman is the New York Times bestselling (!) author of the memoirs *Catastrophic Happiness* and *Waiting for Birdy*, the middle-grade novel *One Mixed-Up Night*, the kids' craft book *Stitch Camp*, the best-selling how-to books for kids *How to Be a Person* and *What Can I Say?* and the novels *We All Want Impossible Things* and *Sandwich*. She writes the Substack newsletter *Crone Sandwich* and has been a regular contributor to the New York Times, *Real Simple*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *Cup of Jo*, and many other publications. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The Rambler Version:

Hi! I should probably tell you about myself as a writer, even if you were here to find out some other kind of thing! I write (wrote?) the cooking and lifestyle blog *Ben & Birdy*. I'm not sure why I wrote "lifestyle." Maybe I mean the kind of lifestyle where you sew your hand to a maple leaf garland while drinking pinot noir. Now I write the Substack newsletter *Crone Sandwich*.

I have written the grown-up parenting memoirs *Catastrophic Happiness* (Little, Brown) and *Waiting for Birdy* (Penguin). I have also written the middle-grade novel *One Mixed-Up Night* (Random House), *Stitch Camp*, which is a kids' craft book I co-wrote with my friend Nicole, and the award-winning bestselling skill-building books for kids *How to Be a Person* and *What Can I Say?* (both from Storey). I've written 2 adult novels: *We All Want Impossible Things* and *Sandwich*.

I have also written about kids, parents, teenagers, food, cooking, love, loss, gender, eating, death, sex, politics, books, babies, snakes, foraging, relationships, crafts, holidays, travel, and fortune telling for lots of magazines, newspapers, and online publications, including the New York Times, *O the Oprah Magazine*, *The Boston Globe*, *Romper*, *Self*, *The Huffington Post*, *FamilyFun*, *Parents*, and *Full Grown People*. I am a regular contributor to the *Cup of Jo* website.

I was the etiquette columnist at *Real Simple* for ten years, even though yes, I swear a lot and don't know what an oyster fork is. I edited the James-Beard-Award-winning nonprofit kids' cooking magazine *ChopChop*.

My work has been in lots of books and anthologies, including *On Being 40*, the fabulous *Unbored* series, *The Bitch in the House*, *Oprah's Little Book of Happiness*, and the *Full Grown People* collections.

I've also done plenty of consulting, public radio commentaries, readings, talks, workshops, and TV appearances.

Two random things: I have a PhD, and I'm the Academic Department Coordinator of Creative Writing at Amherst College.

<https://www.catherinenewmanwriter.com/about-the-writer-catherine-newman.html>

Reviews

A Hot, Fraught Cape Cod Family Drama

In her new novel, “Sandwich,” Catherine Newman explores the aches and joys of midlife via one family’s summer week at the beach.

by Cathi Hanauer

Occasionally a writer comes along who seems able to turn every domestic triumph and tear, every dinner concocted, co-sleep endured and I.P.A. swallowed (or not) — in other words, the ordinary stuff of first-world life — into a narrative rife with wit, humor and soul-bearing openness.

Catherine Newman, self-described on her Substack as a “55-year-old white half-Jewish cis queer menopausal woman,” is that sort of writer. A long-married mother of two, she has written extensively — via comically self-deprecating memoirs, self-help books, blog posts and essays — about marital rage, night sweats and mindful drinking; about her children, her experience raising them and, of course, within that fertile milieu, herself. (She also wrote Real Simple’s etiquette column for 10 years, despite professing to “swear a lot” and not “know what an oyster fork is.”) In doing so, she has soothed, entertained and educated those who, as the scholar Phyllis Rose put it, “are desperate for information about how other people live because we want to know how to live ourselves.”

Her first novel for adults, the well-reviewed “We All Want Impossible Things,” centered on a middle-aged mother of two watching her best friend die of cancer (a situation Newman also lived through and wrote nonfiction about). Now comes her second mature novel, “Sandwich” — a slim, engrossing read that might be slotted into the “empty-nest” or “menopause” categories in a non-politically-correct but helpful bookstore. The gist: A long-married couple, Nick and “Rocky” (Rachel), and their two 20-something children, Jamie and Willa, plus Jamie’s girlfriend, go on their annual vacation to Cape Cod. Meals are made, sunscreen applied, food dropped onto and retrieved from the sand. Sex is had and not had, pregnancies (past and present) discovered, miscarried, aborted, mourned and celebrated. Rocky’s elderly parents visit. (The book’s title suggests Rocky’s position between generations, though she’s also constantly making sandwiches.) A female character vomits on Page 27, and, as with Chekhov’s famous gun, I thought, “You don’t put puking in an early chapter unless. ...” In fact, this was the main plot hook for some time.

Rocky, who narrates, is neurotic, sentimental and slightly unhinged at 54. Alternately enraged, apologetic and overjoyed, sometimes all on one page, she cries and laughs and worries, and talks to and feeds her family. She notices, unbearably to her, that her parents are getting frailer, older. She harbors secrets that get revealed as the book unfolds.

She also openly worships her now-adult children, constantly gushing over their ripe young bodies (so unlike her declining one) and calling them or their parts “perfect” multiple times (“a perfect human specimen,” “her perfect rosy empath cheek”). I also counted the word “beautiful” used nine times to describe characters in her family (“a beautiful man,” “my beautiful parents”). While I’m nit-picking, phrases such as “I’m the worst” and “Can you please not?” are likewise abundant, as is “like” as a qualifier (“he’s, like, 10 years old”).

But these minor tics are overcome by Newman's impassioned, crackling, vividly detailed writing ("I would pick this life too, I know," Rocky tells us. "I'd even pick the way that pain has burnished me to brightness") and utter hilarity. To wit: A friend of Rocky's daughter asks her, early in the Covid-19 outbreak, if she was "alive during the last pandemic." "The flu of 1918?" Rocky asks, astonished, and the kid nods. (I'm cackling anew even typing that.)

In a book Rocky reads about menopause, the chapter called "Moods and You!" makes her "want to actually bludgeon someone to death with a bottle of Zoloft." Her father, Mort, is also comic perfection. "I don't need my lunch festooned with figs and seeds," he tells Rocky at one point; later, as he goes for a dip, he instructs, "Please do not take photographs of me and put them on Google."

A prominent theme is the passing of time: the loss of youth; the replacement of bodily desire, function and pleasure with the security and privilege, the joy and miracle, of long-term life and love. Newman is especially thoughtful on the topic of menopausal married sex, its myriad frustrations and occasional joys. "Can we just, like, call it at some point?" a friend asks Rocky regarding sex once certain later-in-life aids are required. Enumerating those aids — pills for men, expensive suppositories for women — the friend adds, "My library book's not going to read itself!"

The offspring in this novel are educated, generous, funny, woke; husband Nick is thoughtful, mild-mannered, responsible — too good to lose, even though Rocky "want[s] something to change. But what?" Two of the four family members have anxiety disorders. "You good?" Rocky and Willa ask each other regularly.

If this story sounds privileged, well, it is; if you're looking for wars, drug cartels or Grisham-level plot, Newman is not your go-to. But if you want to laugh out loud, tear up and rush to pull out a book in the 35 seconds between subway stops, this sweet, savory, tenderhearted "Sandwich" fits the bill, and goes down like (bread and) buttah.

Cathi Hanauer is the author of three novels and has edited two essay anthologies, including "The Bitch Is Back: Older, Wiser, and (Getting) Happier."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/18/books/review/sandwich-catherine-newman.html>