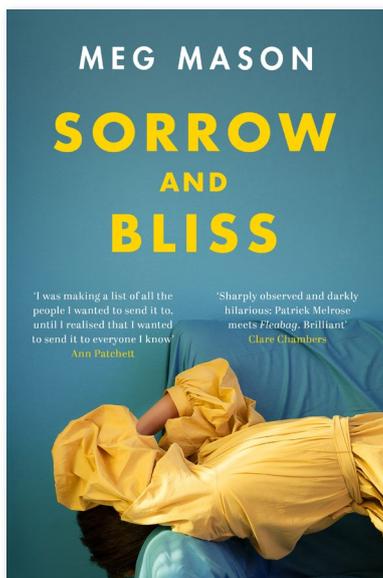


Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



2022 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

SORROW AND BLISS BY MEG MASON



PLOT SUMMARY

Everyone tells Martha Friel she is clever and beautiful, a brilliant writer who has been loved every day of her adult life by one man: her husband, Patrick. A gift, her mother once said, not everybody gets. So why is everything broken? Why is Martha – on the edge of 40 – friendless, practically jobless and so often sad? And why did Patrick decide to leave?

Maybe she is just too sensitive, someone who finds it harder to be alive than most people. Or maybe – as she has long believed – there is something wrong with her. Something that broke when a little bomb went off in her brain at 17 and left her changed in a way that no doctor or therapist has ever been able to explain.

Forced to return to her childhood home to live with her dysfunctional, bohemian parents (but without the help of her devoted, foul-mouthed sister Ingrid), Martha has one last chance to find out whether a life is ever too broken to fix – or whether, maybe, by starting over, she will get to write a better ending for herself.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The theme of motherhood and what makes a good mother is a key thread running throughout *Sorrow and Bliss*. Though Martha's mother Celia seems to dislike her sister Winsome, Winsome is the main mother figure in the family, having brought up Celia and acting as a responsible aunt to Ingrid and Martha, as well as mother to Oliver and Nicholas, and welcoming Patrick into their home. Compared to life in Celia and Fergus' house, Winsome and Rowland's luxurious home is always where the family celebrate Christmas and is a source of security for everyone.

Celia, a celebrated sculptor, seems uninterested in motherhood, and goes through periods where we learn she is struggling with her own mental health. It seems that neither Celia or Fergus, Martha and Ingrid's father, are capable of providing a stable home for their daughters. Winsome is the one who buys their house for them, as they are respectively an unsuccessful poet and sculptor and apparently not interested in finding more stable jobs. They separate roughly once or twice a year and often hold adult parties at the house, with the children left unsupervised. Yet, when Martha gets her diagnosis, Celia is the one she phones every day, rather than Winsome, and she is the one who can relate to what she's going through.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their parents' influence, Ingrid gets married quickly and becomes a mother four times over, providing a foil to Martha, who agonises over whether she wants children at all and whether she would be a good mother herself. Ingrid also acts as a kind of mother figure to Martha: Ingrid is always the one who has answers, and who seems grounded and knows what to do.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Meg Mason began her journalism career at the *Financial Times* and *The Times*. Her work has since appeared in *Vogue*, *Grazia*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. She has written humour for the *New Yorker*, been a monthly columnist for *GQ*, a regular contributor to *Vogue* and *Marie Claire* and a contributing editor at *Elle*. She now lives in Sydney with her husband and two daughters.



A compassionate look at long-term mental illness and the ramifications on a marriage and an entire family. It's brilliantly spiky and hilariously written.'

Pandora Sykes, 2022 Judge

DISCUSSION POINTS

Sorrow and Bliss considers the impact of mental health issues on a family and within a marriage, including Patrick's 'private school PTSD' as well as what turns out to be Martha and her mother's diagnosis of an inherited condition. It also examines the sadly all-too-familiar experience of Martha's years of mis-diagnoses, ineffective therapy and wrong medication.

It's notable in *Sorrow and Bliss* that Martha's particular diagnosis is never given, and referred to instead as '___'. One could say that by refusing to name a particular diagnosis for Martha, Mason colludes in the way society refuses to talk about women's health, including mental health. In this way, we could argue that Mason sidesteps a

real opportunity to depict the sufferer of a particular health issue and perpetuates the idea that women's bodies and minds are mysterious and unknowable.

On the other hand, it could be said that by not naming Martha's illness, Mason refuses to expose Martha to the scrutiny that women often experience, being pushed to explain to the world their illnesses, bodies and the cruelties they experience. It could also be said that *Sorrow and Bliss* is a novel and not a medical handbook or a non-fiction book about mental illness.

Discuss Meg Mason's representation of mental illness in *Sorrow and Bliss*. Was it honest, sad, realistic, helpful, human?

Did you relate to Martha's experience? Consider why you might have had the reactions you did.

QUESTIONS

Martha's mother says to her that '*no marriage makes sense. Especially not to the outside world. A marriage is its own world.*' Would you agree or disagree? How does Ingrid and Hamish's marriage compare to Martha and Patrick's?

What did you feel about Martha's father? How does he compare with Peregrine as a father figure in Martha's life?

Do you think that Martha is a privileged character? How might Martha's mental health experience compare with that of a woman of colour, or a woman from a lower socio-economic background, for instance?

NEXT STEPS

If you have ever been in the situation of being misdiagnosed or misunderstood, it may be cathartic to write about the experience. You could use a diary or journal to record your experiences and then your thoughts and feelings about what happened.

Alternatively, if there is a health issue that you're passionate about sharing information on, or sharing your experience of living with a certain health condition, you could consider writing a blog or a magazine article, or creating a dedicated social media account for it. Sharing personal experiences can be difficult, but it can also really help and validate others.



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

***You Be Mother* by Meg Mason** is the author's debut novel in which Abi moves to Australia and forges unexpected familial bonds.

***Again, Rachel* by Marian Keyes** is about an ex-addict who is now an addiction counsellor. But is her life really as sorted as she thinks? Keyes writes relatable, hilarious women dealing with real problems in the modern world.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?