



Books in a Box

Reading Guide

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wcls.org

the best place to begin



whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- ◆ Kits check out for six weeks.
- ◆ Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- ◆ One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- ◆ Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- ◆ Go to www.wcls.org
- ◆ Click on “catalog”
- ◆ In the Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. When Claire first walks into Lillian’s, she reflects: “When was the last time she had been someplace where no one knew who she was?” Is the anonymity of the kitchen a lure for Lillian’s students?
2. How did you respond to the story of Lillian’s upbringing? Would Lillian have been better off with a more traditional home life, like those of her school friends? Do you agree with Abuelita’s statement that “sometimes our greatest gifts grow from what we are not given”?
3. Besides scenes from her childhood, the author discloses very little about Lillian. Why do you think she did this? How would the book be different if we knew more about Lillian’s day-to-day life?
4. As a general rule, Lillian doesn’t give her students recipes. Why do you think she does this? What are the pros and cons of this approach to cooking?
5. Did Helen do the right thing by telling Carl about her affair? How would their marriage—and Helen and Carl themselves—have evolved had he never learned the truth?
6. Each of the character’s stories centers on a dish or an ingredient that has a profound effect upon how they see themselves or the world. What connections do you see between Claire and the crabs? Between Chloe and tortillas? Tom and the pasta sauce?
7. Although we only see Charlie, Tom’s wife, in flashback, she seems to share Lillian’s love of essential ingredients. What do you make of Charlie’s statement that “We’re all just ingredients. What matters is the grace with which you cook the meal”?

8. Chloe observes that Thanksgiving at her house is “about everyone being the same, and if you’re not, eating enough so you won’t notice.” Is this something that our culture buys into in a larger sense? How does Lillian’s approach to food fly in the face of this idea?

9. Isaac says to Isabelle that he thinks “we are each a chair and a ladder for the other.” What do you think he means? Are there people in your life who are or have been that for you?

10. Lillian tells the class that “a holiday is a lot like a kitchen. What’s important is what comes out of it.” In what way do the kitchens in this book—Lillian’s childhood kitchen, the greasy spoon where Tom meets Charlie, the kitchen that Antonia saves from demolition—represent different celebrations of life? Is there a kitchen in your life that you associate with a particular celebration or emotional milestone?

11. At the end of the novel, Lillian reflects that: “She saw how connected [the students’] lives had become and would remain. Where did a teacher fit in the picture, she wondered, when there was no longer a class?” What does happen to Lillian once her class is disbanded? Do you feel that each character’s story is resolved? What do you imagine happens in these characters’ lives after the book ends?

12. What would be your essential ingredients?

(Questions provided by the publisher.)

Author Bio: Erica Bauermeister

Source: <http://www.ericabauermeister.com/about>, retrieved 6/11/12.

I was born in Pasadena, California in 1959, a time when that part of the country was both one of the loveliest and smoggiest places you could imagine. I remember the arching branches of the oak tree in our front yard, the center of the patio that formed a private entrance to our lives; I remember leaning over a water faucet to run water across my eyes after a day spent playing outside. It’s never too early to learn that there is always more than one side to life.



I have always wanted to write, but when I read Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” in college, I finally knew what I wanted to write – books that took what many considered to be unimportant bits of life and gave them beauty, shone light upon their meaning. The only other thing I knew for certain back in college, however, was that I wasn’t grown up enough yet to write them.

So I moved to Seattle, got married, and got a PhD. at the University of Washington. Frustrated by the lack of women authors in the curriculum, I co-authored *500 Great Books by Women: A Reader’s Guide* with Holly Smith and Jesse Larsen and *Let’s Hear It For the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14* with Holly Smith. In the process I read, literally, thousands of books, good and bad, which is probably one of the best educations a writer can have. I still wrote, but thankfully that material wasn’t published. I taught writing and literature. I had children.

Having children probably had the most dramatic effect upon how I write of anything in my life. As the care-taker of children, there was no time for plot lines that couldn't be interrupted a million times in the course of creation. I learned to multi-task, and when the children's demands were too many, we created something called the "mental hopper." This is where all the suggestions went — "can we have ice cream tonight?" "can we take care of the school's pet rat over the summer?" "can I have sex at 13?" The mental hopper was where things got sorted out, when I had time to think about them. What's interesting about the mental hopper is that when something goes in there, I can usually figure out a way to make it happen (except sex at 13).

And that is how I write now. All those first details and amorphous ideas for a book, the voices of the characters, the fact that one of them loves garlic and another one flips through the pages of used books looking for clues to the past owner's life, all those ideas go in the mental hopper and slowly but surely they form connections with each other. Stories start to take shape. It's a very organic process, and it suits me. So when people say being a mother is death for writers, I disagree. Yes, in a logistical sense, children can make writing difficult. In fact, I don't think it is at all coincidental that my first novel was published after both my children were in college. But I think differently, I create the work I do, because I have had children.

It's been more than thirty years since I first read Tillie Olsen. My children are now mostly grown. I've been married for almost three decades to the same man; I've lived in Italy; I've stood by friends as they faced death. I've grown up a bit, and I've returned, happily and naturally, to fiction.

The first result was *The School of Essential Ingredients*, a novel about eight cooking students and their teacher, set in the kitchen of Lillian's restaurant. It's about food and people and the relationships between them — about taking those "unimportant" bits of life and making them beautiful. The response to *School* has been a writer's dream; the book is currently being published in 21 countries and I have received letters and emails from readers around the world.

The second novel is called *Joy For Beginners* (June, 2011). It follows a year in the life of seven women who make a pact to each do one thing in the next twelve months that is new, or difficult, or scary — the twist is that they don't get to choose their own challenges...

Reviews

[Publishers Weekly](#)

★ *The School of Essential Ingredients*, Erica Bauermeister. Penguin, \$15.00 (261p)
ISBN 978-0425232095

In this remarkable debut, Bauermeister creates a captivating world where the pleasures and particulars of sophisticated food come to mean much more than simple epicurean indulgence. Respected chef and restaurateur Lillian has spent much of her 30-something years in the kitchen, looking for meaning and satisfaction in evocative, delicious combinations of ingredients. Endeavoring to instill that love and know-how in others, Lillian holds a season of Monday evening cooking classes in her restaurant. The novel takes up the story of each of her students, navigating readers through the personal dramas, memories and musings stirred up as the characters handle, slice, chop, blend, smell and taste. Each student's affecting story—painful transitions, difficult choices—is rendered in vivid prose and woven together with confidence. Delivering memorable story lines and characters while seducing the senses, Bauermeister's tale of food and hope is certain to satisfy.

“As exquisitely prepared and satisfying as the dishes Lillian prepares in her restaurant.” (**Bookreporter**)

“Food Network fans will devour this first novel about a whimsical cooking school run by a gentle chef with a fierce passion for food.” (**People magazine**)

“A delicate, meltingly lovely hymn to food and friendship. Lillian’s kitchen, full of buttery light and gorgeous smells, is a place where the world works the way it should. You’ll want to tuck yourself into one warm corner of it and stay all day.” (**Marisa de los Santos, author of *Belong To Me***)

“Exquisitely written and heartbreakingly delicious. It’s a luscious slice of life... you will enjoy every bit.” (**Sarah Addison Allen, author of *Garden Spells***)

Suggested Readalikes

Garden Spells, Sarah Addison Allen.

The Girl Who Chased The Moon, Sarah Addison Allen.

The Sugar Queen, Sarah Addison Allen.

The Little Giant of Aberdeen County, Tiffany Baker.

Joy for Beginners, Erica Bauermeister.

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie, Alan Bradley.

The Wednesday Sisters, Meg Waite Clayton.

Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet, Jamie Ford.

Chocolat, Joanne Harris.

Bread Alone, Judith Ryan Hendricks.

Comfort Food, Kate Jacobs.

Angelina’s Bachelors: A Novel with Food, Brian O’Reilly.

The Love Goddess’ Cooking School, Melissa Senate.

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, Mary Ann Shaffer.

Web Resources

Author website: <http://www.ericabauermeister.com/>

Powell’s Books Q&A with the author: <http://www.powells.com/ink/ericabauermeister.html>

Author magazine YouTube video interview: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpJ_O8Kn5Ps