

reading group notes

the tricky art of forgiveness



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by meredith jaffé

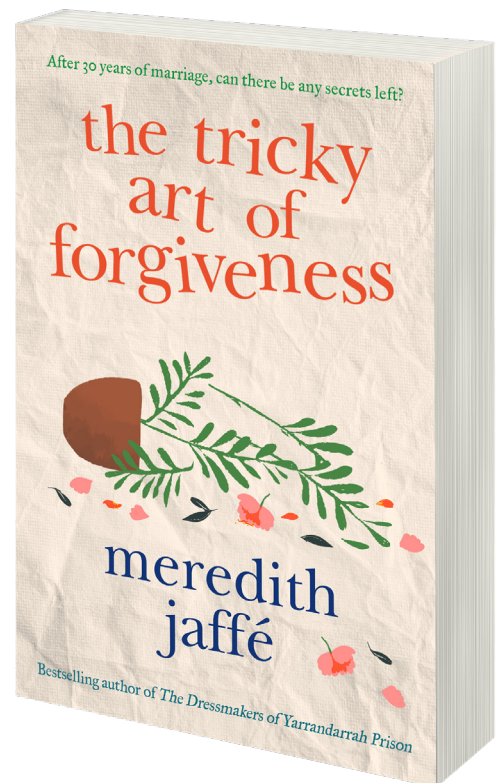
After thirty years of marriage, can there be any secrets left? The charming new novel from the author of *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarrah Prison*

Diana Forsyth is in the midst of planning the Big Party, a combined celebration of her husband Will's 60th and their 30th wedding anniversary. The whole family is flying in and unbeknownst to Will, Diana is planning a Big Surprise.

But then she finds a torn scrap of paper hidden inside the folds of one of his cashmere sweaters, with the words, *I forgive you*. And all of a sudden, Diana realises she's not the only one keeping Big Secrets.

As empty nesters who have just downsized from the family home, she and Will are supposed to be embracing a new promise of glorious freedom - not revisiting a past that Diana has worked very hard to leave behind.

A witty, poignant and insightful exploration of marriage: the choices we make - or don't make, the resentments we hold, the lies we tell and what forgiveness really means.



about the author



Meredith Jaffé is the Festival Director of StoryFest, held on the NSW South Coast, and regularly facilitates at other writers' festivals and author events. Previously, she wrote the weekly literary column for the online women's magazine The Hoopla. Her feature articles, reviews, and opinion pieces have also appeared in *The Guardian* Australia, *The Huffington Post*, and Mamamia. Her most recent novel, *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarrah Prison*, was published in 2021 to wide acclaim.

Praise for *The Dressmakers of Yarrandarra Prison*

‘A heart-warming tale of friendship, forgiveness and redemption, written with a warmth and intimacy that is immediately engaging’ *The Australian*

‘Funny and moving’ *Sun-Herald*

‘Overflowing with humour and heart’ Natasha Lester

‘A warm, deft and funny story where unlikely people show us what’s important’ Rosalie Ham

‘This deliciously original, immersive and darkly funny novel is full of hope and heart. A refreshing take on the theme of redemption and second chances from an assured writer.’ Joanna Nell

the tricky art of forgiveness playlist

‘Hallelujah I Love Him So’ — Peggy Lee (1959)

‘I Heard It Through the Grapevine’ — Marvin Gaye (1968)

‘Peter Gunn Theme’ — Henry Mancini (1958)

‘Son of a Preacher Man’ — Dusty Springfield (1968)

‘The Happening’ — The Supremes (1967)

‘Do You Know the Way to San Jose?’ — Dionne Warwick (1968)

‘I Say a Little Prayer’ — Aretha Franklin (1968)

‘Love Child’ — The Supremes (1968)

‘River Deep, Mountain High’ — Ike and Tina Turner (1966)

‘Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours’ — Stevie Wonder (1970)

‘Is That All There Is?’ — Peggy Lee (1969)

‘(They Long to Be) Close to You’ — The Carpenters (1970)

‘Take 5’ — The Dave Brubeck Quartet (1959)

‘Smooth Operator’ — Sade (1984)

‘Mockingbird’ — Dusty Springfield (1965)

‘Fire and Rain’ — James Taylor (1970)

‘Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F Major’ — Johann Sebastian Bach (1721)

‘These Boots are Made for Walking’ — Nancy Sinatra (1966)

“A” You’re Adorable’ — Perry Como with The Fontane Sisters (1949)

‘Mañana (Is Soon Enough for Me)’ — Peggy Lee (1947)

‘I Am Woman’ — Helen Reddy (1972)

‘Afternoon Delight’ — Starland Vocal Band (1976)

‘The Look of Love’ — Dusty Springfield (1967)

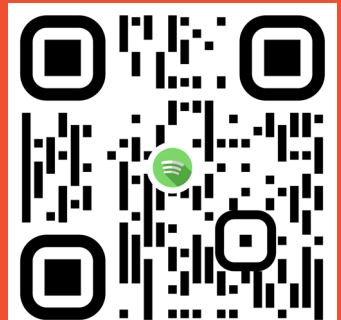
‘Air on the G String’ — Johann Sebastian Bach (1731)

‘For Once in My Life’ — Stevie Wonder (1968)

‘I Know a Place’ — Petula Clarke (1965)

‘Until You Come Back to Me (That’s What I’m Gonna Do)’ — Aretha Franklin (1974)

listen here





reading group questions

1. *'Marriages traverse such complex and treacherous landscapes'* (page 39). Diana often refers to her marriage using geographical terms like this. What do these metaphors say about long-term relationships?
2. *'But old hurts don't improve with fresh airings'* (page 166). Why do you think Diana chooses to not bring up the note when she is confronted with the photos? Is Diana right to be furious with Will in this moment, rather than defensive? What would you do if you found such a note among your husband's belongings?
3. *'Her life is her story to write, no one else's, not even Will's'* (page 173). How does this speak to Diana's feelings that her life has been subsumed by being a mother and a wife rather than a woman in her own right?
4. When Diana reveals her affair to Lydia, her sister says, *'Please tell me you didn't tell Will'* (page 275). And later, when Diana and Will tell Aiden and Persephone about Nicholas, she reflects on how much the children need to know about the past and says, *'By this age and stage of life, they both know that honesty is overrated'* (page 309). Do you think Diana is right about honesty? Why do you think she feels this way?
5. *'Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answer to, that's always been her motto'* (page 183). What are your thoughts on Diana's motto? Is this a sound strategy?
6. *'It's like the fine print in those investment brochures — past performance is no indicator of future performance. They should print that on marriage contracts'* (page 182). Diana has a very dry sense of humour. Do you think that she uses humour to deflect her true feelings? Does this make her a dishonest narrator?
7. *'It's ridiculous to split up now. Did you know, women over fifty is the largest growing group of homeless people? Not enough super, no financial wherewithal'* (page 208). The novel touches on the serious issues around women's financial security in later years, particularly after a divorce. It also questions the choice to stay together for the sake of economic security over the potentially riskier strategy of starting over. Why do you think these issues are so prevalent at this point in life?



reading group questions

8. A central theme of the novel is the long-term impact of unresolved grief. This is an intrinsic part of Diana's story, and is also partly told through Audrey's story and her decision to sell up, buy a motor home and travel the country. What clues are given as to Diana's and Audrey's true emotional states throughout the novel?

9. Diana's friend Fi embraces being an empty nester, Ruth's boys still live at home, and Diana struggles to find a renewed sense of purpose now that her children live overseas and she no longer needs to keep the family running smoothly. How do these characters typify the issues surrounding those post-child rearing years in a woman's life?

10. *'Ruth says the most important thing about forgiving someone is to remember that you're not doing it for them. You're doing it for yourself'* (page 319). The novel explores the question of forgiveness from many angles — infidelity, hurting those you love, and self-love. Do you think Ruth's viewpoint is true? Does forgiveness depend on the extent of the damage done?

11. Diana tells Persephone, *'I can't imagine the kind of person I would have been without children. It changes the shape of you'* (page 263). Yet many of the female characters in the novel do not have children — Persephone, Lydia, Rebecca. In what way does the novel explore the issue of female identity, in particular societal norms around motherhood?

12. *'... if sixty really is the new forty. Diana hasn't seen much evidence this is as true for men as it is for women'* (page 282). How true do you think this statement is? In what ways does the novel look at aging, particularly when it comes to men and women?