

READERS GUIDE

Nancy Thayer on Heat Wave

Are there any “ordinary” women? I don’t think so.

My goal in writing has always been to capture the real lives of “ordinary” women. To do this, I draw on my own life, steal anecdotes from the lives of friends, and let it all be transformed by the alchemy of imagination.

For example: when I was in my early thirties with children three and five years old, my husband had an affair with my best friend. Suddenly I was divorced, living in a different state from my ex-husband, with no one to help with the children, not for a weekend or even an hour. I worried about so many things. How would I support myself and my children, financially and emotionally? How would we go on? Would anyone ever love me, a divorcée with two little children?

Recently, a friend of mine was widowed, and I realized that she was facing the same problems I had faced when I was divorced. In this way, Carley Winsted came to life. My divorce inspired Marina in *Beachcombers*, as well. In many of my novels, I find myself coming to grips with traumatic times in my life and working them through by writing about strong women facing change and not only surviving, but triumphing.

Another terrifying episode for me was when my daughter, at fourteen, left to attend a performance school to study ballet. She was a strong, talented, passionate girl, and when she returned for Thanksgiving, she’d lost a great deal of weight. Her fingertips were always ice-cold. Her shoulders were too wide for the classic tiny ballerina build. I was afraid she was becoming anorexic, but I also knew just how far arguing with her would get me—my children have always been champions at arguing. Fortunately, she was told her build wasn’t right for ballet, and she left that school. And I was left with a powerful memory that blossomed into a girl named Cisco.

Three years after my divorce, I met a wonderful man who lived on Nantucket, and two years later I married him, bringing my children to live on the island. My husband’s mother lived two blocks away from us. She was dignified, autocratic, reserved, and I might as well just say it: critical. I loved her and I understood that she was old-school Bostonian, but I grew up in Kansas with a family that was always hugging, kissing, arguing, laughing, talking, emoting. My mother-in-law was like a beautiful white owl peering down from the height of a tree while I, a yippy little terrier, bounced around the trunk. She has provided scenes for many books.

Throughout my life, my friends have been my sanity, my support, my saving graces. As I started writing *Heat Wave*, I wondered what would happen to Carley if suddenly, right when she needed them, her best friends became unavailable to her? So Maud and Vanessa sprang to life, becoming in their own ways, inaccessible. I’ve learned that it is possible to make a new friend who is a perfect match—just what you need—and so I had Carley meet Lexi. A true friend is not easy to find, I believe; it requires a kind of

magic, but if we're lucky, we'll always be able to make new friends.

As I've grown older, I've been fortunate to become acquainted with younger women who are starting on their lives' journeys. They face the old questions: Will I find true love? Will I marry the right man? Will I have children? Will I do work I love? They find answers in new ways that I couldn't have dreamed of when I started writing. They are more enterprising than I was, and the world has changed immeasurably from when I was first divorced. Yet the desires remain the same, as do the challenges, and the things that sustain us: family, friends, laughter, love—and chocolate.

If you're reading this, I'm guessing you're like me and books are a big part of your life. In times both good and bad, fiction sustains me. I am always in the middle of one book, grateful for another voice to take me away for a little while, perhaps to a place not so different from my own. Other authors' novels invariably inspire me to try my very best with my own. I hope that you also get a feeling of connection and companionship with the characters I write about, that you find comfort and pleasure from the stories I tell, and maybe even learn something that proves helpful on your own life's journey.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Carley and Gus didn't begin their relationship with a grand passion or love for each other, but they did like each other a great deal and valued the same things. Is that a good enough foundation for a marriage?
2. Carley always believed that she had everything she wanted and she was everything she ever wanted to be: a mother, a wife, a good friend. Did she perhaps give up too quickly in finding what she really wanted to do in life? Did she sell herself too short?
3. Gus was secretive with their money, but Carley was more than happy to relinquish the financial affairs to him. Should she have been more assertive about being in the know about their finances?
4. While Annabel and Russell's offer to have Carley and the girls live with them seemed to have been made with good intentions, how much interference from grandparents is too much?
5. Even though Gus left the house to Carley, was it disrespectful of her to change her mother-in-law's family home into a B&B? Did Annabel have a right to be angry at her for making changes to her ancestral home and opening it up to strangers?
6. Did Carley inadvertently make a choice between Maud and Vanessa when she remained silent about the affair? Could she have handled the situation better?
7. Maud was so worried about her boys needing a man around the house. How important is it for a boy to have a man in his life? Was Maud just trying to assuage her

guilt for stealing her best friend's husband?

8. Was Annabel using her grief to seduce Cisco into living with her? Should Carley have been more understanding about Annabel's grief?

9. Carley worries that it's too soon to start openly dating Wyatt. Is there ever a "right" time frame to begin to date? Does the time frame change if you have children?

10. Sarah and Sue tell Carley that "other peoples' concept of 'right' or 'wrong' doesn't matter when you're in love. What matters is the love." Do you believe this is true? What about in a situation such as Maud, Toby, and Vanessa's?