



The Way Life Should Be

By Christina Baker Kline
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Introduction

Angela Russo is thirty-three years old and single, stuck in a job—and a life—she doesn't love. But one day she finds herself at a dating website, where she stumbles upon a thirty-five-year-old sailing instructor from Maine with ice-blue eyes. To her great surprise, she strikes up a dizzying correspondence with him—and when life in the real world takes a nosedive, she impulsively decides to risk it all and move to Maine.

But things don't work out quite as she expected. Far from everything familiar, and with little to return to, Angela begins to rebuild her life from the ground up. Relying on the flair for Italian cooking she inherited from her grandmother, she leads a cooking class, where she will discover the pleasures and secrets of her new small community, and connect her heritage to a future she is only beginning to envision.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the "way life should be"? How does Kline develop and expand upon this question as the story progresses? Nonna tells Angela that her father "can't see any other way. To him, this is how life is. And the way it should be" (p. 59). Later, spotting the Maine state slogan on a billboard, Angela wonders if it's simply "a marketer's vision of a land of lobsters and blueberries that never has, and never will, exist" (p. 259). How does Angela's own vision of what her life should be change over time?
2. How does Angela's identification with her grandmother, and apparent resistance to her mother's influence, shape the choices she makes? How does her thinking about these two women change as the story progresses?
3. What does Maine represent to Angela before as well as after her arrival there?
4. One of the major threads running through this book is the journey of generations of immigrants in America. Nonna clings to old customs; her son mainly wants to assimilate; her granddaughter wants to learn about her cultural traditions. How "Italian" is Angela? How has she been shaped by both the Italian and Irish sides of her heritage?
5. Nonna describes "il regalo" as the gift of instinctively knowing how to cook. How can this phrase be seen as a larger metaphor for Angela's experience in the novel?
6. The idea of "home" is very important in this book. What is Nonna's idea of home? What is Angela's? How does this novel explore the roots we retain as we move away from our families of origin?
7. What does "la famiglia" mean to Angela at the beginning of the book? At the end?
8. Angela goes to Maine in search of love, but things don't turn out as she'd planned. Do you see it as a desperate move, or a brave leap of faith? Does her decision to stick it out make sense to you?
9. What role does food play in Angela's life, and in the book?
10. By the end of the book, do you believe that Nonna feels she has led a fulfilling life, or is she, as she laments, filled with regret about the choices she made?
11. Each person in the cooking class reveals a secret – some mundane, some serious. Nonna reveals a secret, too. How do these revelations add resonance to Angela's own story?
12. Which character do you find most sympathetic? Most interesting? Most exasperating?
13. For much of the book, Angela's relationship with her brother is fractious and distant. How would you characterize their relationship at the end?
14. How does the character of Lindsay function in the story?
15. What is the metaphorical significance of the rabbit-fur coat that Nonna gives to Angela when she returns to Maine (p. 258)?
16. As the novel ends, Angela is crossing back into Maine in the middle of winter. What do you think will happen to her? Will she ever open her own restaurant?

About the Author

Christina Baker Kline is the author of the novels *Sweet Water* and *Desire Lines*. A recent recipient of a Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellowship, she is Writer in Residence at Fordham University. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey, and spends as much time as possible on the coast of Maine. She is currently working on her next novel.