



Use Me

By Elissa Schappell
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Introduction

A girl's coming of age--whether it is in Margaret Mead's Samoa or Jane Austen's England--has always included an initiation into sexuality and a loss of innocence in exchange for experience. Along with these timeless elements, where and when a woman grows up profoundly influences how she makes the passage. Elissa Schappell's wickedly funny, erotic, and emotionally astute *Use Me* takes a fresh look at coming of age in the preppy suburbs of Delaware during the final decades of the 20th century. Her protagonist is Evie Wakefield, evolving into womanhood as she falls in love, has a child, loses a father, and feels the betrayal of a friend. While Schappell spills the secrets of sexual experimentation and alcohol abuse, she also conveys a sadder truth: coming of age today is more a private than a societal rite, and is perhaps a more painful and confusing time of life than ever before. Despite Evie's lack of social support, she does have passionate relationships: a deep connection to her father, who has beaten cancer for years; the friendship of sophisticated and reckless New Yorker, Mary Beth McEvoy; her marriage to Billy, a sexy, irresponsible musician; and her mothering of Charlie, the son she holds perhaps too tightly. In exploring these ties, Schappell raises some provocative issues. Does a girl's

father foreshadow her choice of lovers and husbands? What aspects of our lives do we choose, which are our fates, and how can we know the difference? How do we face the death of a parent, and how does it change us? And what about our friends? Does Mary Beth mirror a darker side of Evie, one that she is afraid to express? From its enigmatic title to its haunting final line, Evie's story resonates with truth about the journey from birth to death as we search for meaning...as we hunger for comfort and love.

Questions for Discussion

1. The first story in the book, "Eau-de-Vie," sets up Evie's loss of innocence and sexual initiation. How would you describe Evie's relationship to her father? For example, what is going on when he puts his younger daughter on his shoulders and doesn't touch Evie? What do you make of the symbolism of the title, "Eau-de-Vie," and of the pear in the bottle?
2. "Novice Bitch" introduces Mary Beth McEvoy. How do you think Mary Beth's home life has influenced her sexual behavior? Do you like Mary Beth despite her behavior, or do you like her because of it? Why does Evie like her?
3. In "Sisters of the Sound," Evie goes on a retreat to a convent. What is her motivation for going? Why is she so upset by the priest's quotation of Sartre, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted"?
4. Elisabeth K'bler Ross, in her famous 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, said a person passes through different emotional stages when facing death. What are the stages that Evie goes through in dealing with her father's illness and death?
5. The title story "Use Me" is one of the most sexually provocative in the book. What motivates Evie's behavior? What happens when Evie "confesses" to Michael about her sexual proficiency? Do you think she is telling the truth?
6. Sex is frankly described in *Use Me*. Why do you think Elissa Schappell included these scenes so frequently? Do you think high school students should read this book? Why or why not?

About the Author: Elissa Schappell writes the "Hot Type" column for *Vanity Fair* and is a founding editor of the new literary magazine *Tin House*. She received her MFA from the Creative Writing Program at New York University. She has been a senior editor at *The Paris Review* and has contributed to numerous magazines, including *GQ*, *Vogue*, *Bomb*, *Bookforum*, and *Spin*. She lives in Brooklyn.