



Shelter Me

By Juliette Fay
ISBN: 9780061673399

Introduction

In the tradition of Marisa de los Santos and Anne Tyler comes a moving debut about a young mother's year of heartbreak, loss, and forgiveness...and help that arrives from unexpected sources. Four months after her husband's death, Janie LaMarche remains undone by grief and anger. Her mourning is disrupted, however, by the unexpected arrival of a builder with a contract to add a porch onto her house. Stunned, Janie realizes the porch was meant to be a surprise from her husband—now his last gift to her.

As she reluctantly allows construction to begin, Janie clings to the familiar outposts of her sorrow—mothering her two small children with fierce protectiveness, avoiding friends and family, and stewing in a rage she can't release. Yet Janie's self-imposed isolation is breached by a cast of unlikely interventionists: her chattering, ipecac-toting aunt; her bossy, over-manicured neighbor; her muffin-

bearing cousin; and even Tug, the contractor with a private grief all his own. As the porch takes shape, Janie discovers that the unknowable terrain of the future is best navigated with the help of others—even those we least expect to call on, much less learn to love.

Questions for Discussion

1. The theme of shelter, both literal and figurative, arises again and again throughout the course of the story. Who shelters whom? Are all the instances of "sheltering" helpful, or are some misguided?
2. Janie's mother, the person whom she expects can help the most, is unable or unwilling to be there for her. Meanwhile, the people who offer the greatest support are often people Janie doesn't even like at first. Are her instincts just off, or is life sometimes that surprising?
3. To varying degrees, Janie feels abandoned by a number of people in her life: her husband for dying, her mother for staying away, her neighbor Shelly for moving, and Father Jake for discontinuing their relationship. Are these real betrayals? How do they pulsate with the support she experiences from unexpected sources?
4. Janie becomes acquainted with several people who have experienced sexual abuse (Katya in the self-defense course, Father Jake, and Beryl the homeless woman). How do each of these people and their experiences affect Janie? What does Janie get from writing the letters for Malcolm to his dying sister?
5. Did Janie's mother, Noreen, do the right thing by going to Father Jake and asking him to end their relationship? If not, was her action forgivable? What would have happened if she had gone to Janie instead? Did her letter to Janie sufficiently explain her rationale or not? Does Janie ever fully forgive her mother?
6. Janie's husband Robby was the love of her life. How is it, then, that she could fall for two other men within one year of his death? Is it possible to have more than one love of your life? If Father Jake had been willing to leave the priesthood, would they have been happy together?
7. The story has several "travelers": Janie's mother, Beryl the homeless woman, and even Janie's daughter, Carly, seems to be destined for flight. Beryl claims that Janie is, too. In what ways might that be true or not?
8. How might this story have been different if Janie hadn't had children? What various meanings might Dylan's goggles represent?
9. The skills that Janie learns in the self-defense course end up coming in very handy. Besides self-defense, are there other lessons she uses throughout the story?
10. Janie spends a lot of time both asking for and granting forgiveness. How does this alter the course of her relationships? (And can cake really solve interpersonal strife? Might a massive baking effort be the answer to the world's current morass of aggression and destruction? . . .)
11. What happens next? Do Tug and Janie stay together? If so, which "shelter" do they choose to live in—his or hers?
12. If there were a movie based on this story, how would you cast it?

About the Author

Juliette Fay received a bachelor's degree from Boston College and a master's degree from Harvard University. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and four young children. *Shelter Me* is her first novel.