



You or Someone Like You

By Chandler Burr
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Introduction

YOU OR SOMEONE LIKE YOU
CHANDLER BURR
A NOVEL



Anne Rosenbaum leads a life of quiet Los Angeles privilege, the wife of Hollywood executive Howard Rosenbaum and mother of their seventeen-year-old son, Sam. Years ago Anne and Howard met studying literature at Columbia'she, the daughter of a British diplomat from London, he a boy from an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. Now on sleek blue California evenings, Anne attends halogen-lit movie premieres on the arm of her powerful husband. But her private life is lived in the world of her garden, reading books.

When one of Howard's friends, the head of a studio, asks Anne to make a reading list, she casually agrees'though, as a director reminds her, "no one reads in Hollywood." To her surprise, they begin calling: screenwriters; producers, from their bungalows; and agents, from their plush offices on Wilshire and Beverly. Soon Anne finds herself leading an exclusive book club for the industry elite. Emerging

gradually from her seclusion, she guides her readers into the ideas and beauties of Donne, Yeats, Auden, and Mamet, with her brilliant and increasingly bold opinions. But when a crisis of identity unexpectedly turns an anguished Howard back toward the Orthodoxy he left behind as a young man, Anne must set out to save what she values above all else: her husband's love.

At once fiercely intelligent and emotionally gripping, *You or Someone Like You* confronts the fault lines between inherited faith and personal creed, and, through the surprising transformation of one exceptional, unforgettable woman, illuminates literature's power to change our lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did the author choose *You or Someone Like You* for the title?
2. In his author's note, Chandler Burr writes about the power of observation: "What is our capacity to step back and see ourselves as we actually are?" How is this question made manifest in the story? How do each of the Rosenbaums' Anne, Howard, and Sam see themselves? How do their perceptions of themselves and each other impact their relationships with one another and with the outside world?
3. What is the significance of literature/books in Anne's life? What role do they play in Howard's? How does this couple define themselves through words? Do books ever fail them? What does literature mean to you?
4. Why do you think the author set the book in Hollywood? How might it have been different if he set it in New York?
5. What does Hollywood mean to Anne? To Howard? What does having a reading salon in the power- and celluloid-obsessed culture of Hollywood do for Anne? What does it do to her? How does it affect her marriage?
6. How did Anne's book club become the height of fashion in a town where "nobody reads"? What are your impressions of Hollywood from reading the novel? Does Chandler Burr like Hollywood? Why or why not?
7. Anne calls W. H. Auden, "the adamant universalist who saw all people as the same kind. He called the human species 'New Yorkers,' and to him they were otherwise nameless." What does this mean? Why does Anne find comfort in Auden and in being "nameless"?
8. The daughter of an American woman and a British diplomat, Anne has always been an outsider, a person without a homeland, so to speak, yet a woman at home within herself. How does her background and experiences shape her attitudes? Going back to an earlier question, does it help her see herself and others more clearly?
9. For Anne, Howard is her "one strong, anchored island" on which she stayed "safe and contented." Does her reliance on her husband make her marriage stronger? What does it mean for one individual to anchor her or himself to another? What are the benefits and the drawbacks of doing so? What were each for Anne?
10. Does Anne care about what people think, especially about her? What is your opinion of Anne? Think about her relationship with her in-laws. Was it good that she stopped going to Brooklyn to celebrate the holidays with her husband and son? Is she ultimately a good role model for Sam?
11. Anne put her faith in Auden's idea of home as the place we have chosen. "But Howard always said he saw it Frost's way. Home as the place where when you go, they have to take you in." Compare these two views and their influence on the events in the book in relation to each and both characters.
12. Talk about Howard. What do you think of his character? How did Howard's background shape his attitudes? How does he change and change again?
13. Pondering her husband's bond with their son, Sam, Anne says, "I'm fully aware that Howard thinks of Sam very much in terms of his

own flesh, because in everything Sam is and everything Sam does, Howard sees himself." What affect does this have on Howard after his son's experience in Israel? And when Sam tells his parents that he is gay?

14. Anne tells her readers that *Pygmalion* is the single most important work of literature of the twentieth century. Why? How would you compare the central premise of this novel and *Pygmalion*?

15. Anne advises her readers, "A book is like a person, and one's reaction to a person invariably has more to do with one's own personality and life experience than with the actual person herself." Do you agree with this? Do people forget that when they are scrolling through Internet sites perusing starred recommendations? Talk about this in reference to your own experiences as a member of a book club.

16. Analyzing Robert Browning, Anne tells a group, "There is truth. And we must find it. We must take what we see and we must judge it to find the truth," to which they respond, "everyone has a point of view, and all points of view are equal." Comment on both statements. Can we judge without being "judgmental"? Are all points of view truly equal?

17. Anne argues that anti-Semitism is the muse of Jewish religious truth and Jewish survival. What is she trying to convey with this statement? How might this extend to racism? Sexism? Homophobia? Can it be applied to these other forms of oppression? What might Anne say?

18. Anne splits her diverse following into groups on different days: "producers with producers, studio people with studio people. It made them at once more competitive, which was to say sharper, which I enjoyed, and more relaxed, since among their own. They mix very poorly, these people." By doing this, isn't Anne refuting the very ideals she believes in?

19. Why do you think going back to observance for Jews and members of other faiths has become so popular in recent years? What does this offer people? How can it be detrimental? Can rationality and faith coincide? What circumstances might make this so?

20. Art, culture, family, marriage, love, religion, identity, moral belief, are interwoven into the narrative. Choose one and explain its relevance in the story. Use examples from the novel.

21. At the beginning of *You or Someone Like You*, when Anne and Howard first meet, they discuss writing. Howard tells her, "Turgenev stayed the hell out of his stories, and that was the way to write literature. Present the characters *as the world sees them* and get out of the way." How might it be limiting to write fiction in this way? Is this the style Burr adopts in *You or Someone Like You*?

22. According to Anne, "the capacity to change, is indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of literature, and one of the most remarkable, perennial capacities of human beings." What was the most important thing you discovered from Anne and her creator, Chandler Burr?

23. Literature is Anne's passion. To her, it is a 365-degree mirror that offers a complete reflection of who we are: "Good literature is strong opinion, intelligently expressed . . . It has long been observed that literature, if it is not ruthless, is nothing. . . . Literature, well done, illustrates the reality of human nature. . . . Literature describes what we experience, nothing more. . . . Literature shows us who and what we really are, whether we like it or not. . . . Art is shocking because it breaks down what we would be and shows us what we know we are." Has Chandler Burr succeeded in upholding Anne's viewpoint? Has reading *You or Someone Like You* altered your perceptions of yourself, of books, of the world?

About the Author

Chandler Burr is the *New York Times* scent critic and author of *The Perfect Scent*, *The Emperor of Scent*, and *A Separate Creation*. He has written for the *Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*. He lives in New York City.