

READER'S GUIDE



Distantly Related to Freud by Ann Charney

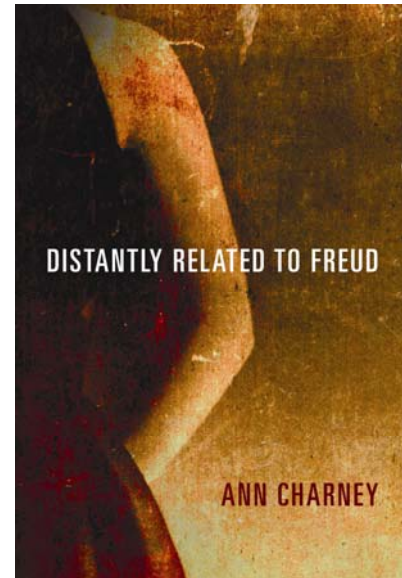
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INTRODUCING *Distantly Related to Freud*

Ellen is an 8-year-old girl struggling to find truth in her past, her family, and the shadowy world around her. The only clue linking her to these unknowns is the portrait of Sigmund Freud that hangs in her house.

Also sharing this house of secrets are the confusing refugees that her mother has taken in: at times, they behave in the most subdued manner, at other times they are full of rage. Before Ellen is able to decipher this unusual behavior, they move out. Into the house moves Ellen's Aunt Celia, whose level of anxiety suffocates the entire family, pushing them even further apart.

Outside the home, Ellen befriends Lydia, another girl struggling to fit in. Feeding on each other's curiosity, they explore the notion of what it is to be a woman, with Magda, Lydia's hypersexual mother, as their guide. With this newfound knowledge Ellen travels to New York City where a horrific accident leads to the beginning of her writing career.



QUESTIONS FOR ANN CHARNEY

Who are some of the authors that have influenced your own writing?

Reading *Anne of Green Gables* had a great effect on me when I was a child. Here was a girl my own age who shared my ambition to become a writer! Suddenly, what had seemed like a vague fantasy became a real goal to strive for. A few years later, when I discovered Jane Austen, I studied her books to see how she managed to tell her captivating stories with such simplicity, clarity and humour.

How autobiographical is this novel for you, and did you gain any type of release or closure after writing it?

Any work of fiction contains autobiographical elements, which serve as foundation for the fictional structure. Inevitably, as the story progresses, they are transformed into something new and quite distinct from the original inspiration. *Distantly Related to Freud* is no exception. When I finished writing it, its fictional world was so real to me that I was reluctant to leave it.

Why did you choose to leave the refugees' background and Ellen's heritage implicit rather than explicit?

It was a deliberate choice. I felt that given the number of books written about the Holocaust, including my own first novel, *Dobryd*, the reader could easily fill in what I left implicit. And I was far more interested in following Ellen's development as she tries to distance herself from her family's complicated past, as well as her attempts to master the "native" code and transform herself into a teenage femme fatale.

Ellen’s brief sexual episode while hitchhiking awakens a sense of power in her, but this epiphany seems to stall as the book continues. Do you view Ellen as a sexually enlightened woman, or a young girl still disconnected from her body?

The moment when Ellen realizes that she has unwittingly awakened the desire of a stranger — a middle-aged man who’s given her a ride to school — stays in her memory for years. It serves as important proof of Magda’s teachings: that women have great sexual power over men and they can use this power to their advantage. Thanks to Magda and the stranger in the car, Ellen learns at an early age to appreciate the potential power of her own, still unexplored, sexuality.

Why does Lydia distance herself from Ellen after she is abducted?

Lydia senses that her abduction has driven a wedge between the two friends that cannot be easily bridged. Not only does it separate them physically as Lydia is quickly sent away to a school in France, but it also sets their lives on different paths. The similarities that once drew them to each other will soon be replaced by differences that time and distance will accentuate. Lydia’s brusqueness in parting from Ellen makes it easier for her not to regret what they are about to lose.

Does Ellen’s path to becoming a writer mirror the way you began to write?

Yes, I also began and abandoned many pieces of writing, frustrated by my inability to translate my feelings into words. I also worked for a student newspaper, interned for a summer at a city newspaper, and had my first work published in a weekend supplement.

As the story developed, were you surprised with the direction it took, or did you know the ending when you began?

I basically discovered the story as I wrote it, the way a reader discovers it when reading the book. I usually have some sort of outline when I start, but this is more to give me the illusion that I know where I’m going, rather than a foolproof plan. After the first few weeks, as the story begins to reveal itself to me, it usually takes off in all sort of unforeseen directions. It’s these surprises that bring you back to the computer every day.

What do you hope readers will take from your book?

A sense of pleasure, a feeling of satisfaction, and a few insights about family life, the nature of friendship, first love, early ambitions, and an understanding of how these forces forge our sense of identity and turn us into the people we are.



ABOUT ANN

Ann Charney is the author of two previous novels, *Dobryd* and *Rousseau’s Garden*. She has won two National Magazine Awards, the *Chatelaine* Fiction Prize, and the Canadian Author’s Association Prize. She was recently named an officer of the French Order of Arts and Letters. She has contributed articles and reviews to *Saturday Night*, *Maclean’s*, and several newspapers. Her collection of essays, *Defiance in Their Eyes: True Stories from the Margins*, was a finalist for the Quebec Society for the Promotion of English Language Literature (QSPELL). Ann was born in Poland and raised in Montreal. She currently lives in Montreal with her husband.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Secrecy

Hidden knowledge permeates the book from start to finish. We never hear Ellen's mother speak about the past she left behind, or the death of her husband. In addition, we never learn the true reasons behind the death of Kathryn Willard or the strange behavior of Peter at the end of the novel. Secrecy acts as an obstacle for Ellen when attempting to relate to her family, but it also shapes her into a generally inquisitive character, thus aiding in her quest to becoming a good writer.

Writing

Ellen uses writing as way of sorting out her thoughts. As she continues to research Kathryn's death, she discovers the characters from her imagination begin to resemble the people she knows in real life. It also serves as an avenue to making friends when she begins studying at McGill. Ellen's development and growth as person is mirrored in her writing; as her writing matures, so does Ellen.

Femininity

Ellen has many female role models in her life. Throughout the novel, these female figures present her with differing depictions of femininity. From her meddling Aunt Celia, to her mother's relationships with Henryk and Monsieur Gélinas, to Magda and Cousin Laura, Ellen must attempt to make sense of what type of woman she will become from the examples surrounding her. While her aunt and mother represent more traditional female roles, her Cousin Laura in New York embodies a more liberated, modern woman to her young niece. Magda's femme fatale persona also conflicts with the womanly ideal that Ellen has been brought up to recognize, but at the same time deeply intrigues her.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the significance of Monsieur Gélinas for Ellen's mother? What does he represent to her?
2. What does the picture of Sigmund Freud represent for Ellen? Does it mean something different for her mother, if anything at all?
3. Where does Aunt Celia's anxiety come from?
4. Ellen's opinion of Dr. Henryk Steiner is constantly changing. Why is this? Is he a likeable character?
5. The book focuses on the trials of growing up as a young woman in the late fifties and early sixties. Could this same book take place in a different time period, with the same issues arising for Ellen?
6. Do you think Ellen's mother's decision to withhold her painful history from Ellen has a positive or negative effect?
7. Crescent Bay seems to bring out the awkwardness of Ellen as she ages, but she also makes important self-realizations while she is there – how is this location significant to her growth as a writer?
8. What are Magda's redeeming qualities, if any?
9. Did you find the ending a satisfactory conclusion to the novel?