

READER'S GUIDE

Things Not to Do by Jessica Westhead

INTRODUCING *Things Not to Do*

Things Not to Do is a collection of stories that seeks to examine—through humour, wit, empathy, and honesty — the dark side of ordinary people. We know them; sometimes we are them. A man attends a gathering on the coattails of his new, zealously empowering friend. A woman helps her husband build an escape room to free him from working for a hated boss. A veteran wedding DJ imparts wisdom, and more besides, to a new recruit. The father of a teen pop sensation gathers with his fans in the wake of a controversy. The actions of these characters, for good or ill — and there is light in their lives, as often as there is dark — stem from the same place, and Westhead cuts right to the heart of that place. They aren't scheming supervillains; they're folks trying to make the most of what they think they have — even if that sometimes means stepping on someone who doesn't deserve it.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Creativity

Many of the characters in *Things Not to Do* are engaged in creative pursuits: band members, aspiring poets, performers, builders. Others dream up elaborate scenarios or imagine alternative realities. Clever turns-of-phrase and quirky ramblings follow Westhead's characters as they make their way through everyday life.

Parenthood

What does it take to raise a child? A woman spends an afternoon looking after her ex's girlfriend's daughter. Lamenting her childlessness, a woman ogles a celebrity in a bar. A man contemplates his upcoming fatherhood while on lunch break. A couple finds themselves redefined as they become parents. The father of a pop star remembers his son's childhood. A pregnant woman decides to pay more attention to her child than she did to her mother. After the loss of a child, a woman begins to see the world differently. A couple's life changes as their son grows up.

Love

At the heart of each story is a question about love and what it means to love. Judy deals with the aftermath of being publicly dumped. A DJ's lessons turn personal as he reflects on his own engagement. A woman's boyfriend cheats on her with her friend. A devoted wife struggles with her self-image when her musician husband headlines for a tiny performer. A separated couple share a vacation. A socially awkward YouTube star admires his best friend.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Judy wanted to see Jasper's hideout?
2. What do the metafictional elements of "The Lesson" add to the story?
3. Do you think Darleen stands up for herself enough?
4. How does "A Little Love Story" resist romance tropes?
5. Why does Shawna fall back into her teenage-self's habit of rating the healthiness of her food?
6. Conrad is unaware of the gunman's presence in the mall. What do you think he could have done had he known?
7. What do you think of Glenn's relationship with his family?
8. Do you think Angie's frustration with the woman at the airport was justified?
9. In "He Will Speak to Us," what do the father's memories reveal about his son? Is the father lying to himself about his parenting abilities?
10. Is the YouTube star's friend taking advantage of him?
11. Do you think Dennis will make a good poet?
12. Why do you think "At Kimberly's Party" is told from a plural perspective?
13. What clues are there to Allen's real purpose in "Prize"?
14. What does the mother's dream in "Puppybird" reveal about her anxieties?
15. In what way do the flamingoes represent the couples' experience at the tourist attraction in "Flamingo"?
16. Why do you think Felicia buys Richard and the narrator in "Escape to the Island" gift certificates to couples' activities?



ABOUT JESSICA

Jessica Westhead's short stories have appeared in major literary magazines including *Hazlitt*, *Five Dials*, *Room*, *Maison-neuve*, *Matrix*, *Geist*, *The New Quarterly*, and *Indiana Review*. Her fiction has been shortlisted for the CBC Literary Awards, selected for a Journey Prize anthology, and nominated for a National Magazine Award. Her chapbook *Those Girls* was published by Greenboathouse Books in 2006. Her novel *Pulpy & Midge*, published by Coach House Books in 2007, was nominated for a ReLit Award. Her critically acclaimed short story collection *And Also Sharks*, published by Cormorant Books in 2011, was a *Globe and Mail* Top 100 Book, a nominee for the CBC Bookie Awards and a ReLit Award, one of Kobo's Best Ebooks of 2011, and a finalist for the Danuta Gleed Short Fiction Prize. CBC Books has called her one of the "10 Canadian women writers you need to read now." Jessica lives in Toronto with her husband and daughter.