

The Interestings by Meg Wolitzer

Reviewed by Jonnie Sandy Ferrainola – 3/11/2014

Quickly clarify the title as a camp nickname for a clique of rich kids from Manhattan and you can make a few assumptions about the next 460 pages by New Yorker Meg Wolitzer. I've found various articles in the New York Times and book reviews by Ms. Wolitzer insightful, but one thing that piqued my interest to read this novel is the hard cover version's rainbow of ink-bled pastel colors on the book jacket. Designed into a fabric it would be a welcome addition to my own jacket wardrobe. Aside from those mildly sardonic observations I'll admit many attributes of Ms. Wolitzer's characters' lives and their odyssey through 40 years of mostly generational correctness will interest many of her fans and newcomers alike. However, the majority of fans will probably be in the under 30 age group who will find solace and comparisons to their own coming of age and what to look forward to, or not.

The artsy cover relates to the story by staging the journey we embark on with a group of teens spending the next three summers in the late 70's at the elite Spirit-in-the-Woods creative camp in woods of the presumed Berkshires in fictional Belknap, Massachusetts. The campers delve eagerly into pursuits of creativity, destined, at least their parents hope, to be transformed into artistic talents; i.e. dancers, actors, writers, glass blowers, or some form thereof. I almost felt I was entering Baby's lengthy family vacation in the Catskill's in Dirty Dancing, except the adults were present. Seen through a pin hole-viewer related specifically to the class status of the resort's staff in the movie and Baby's enviable upper class background, social issues were also at the forefront. It seems there's an ongoing emphasis on class and status in this area of the country.

The cast of characters is a cross-section of Manhattan's upper echelon and one, Julie Jacobson, who lives on the side of the tracks where town is called Underhill—what New Yorkers label suburbia. Julie and her campmates mature through teen years, college, marriages and eventually the death of one of their “most interesting,” with a writer's technique of fast forward and rewind helping to pace the story. Although the premise has an initial spark of intrigue, much of the plot seems trivial and trite by repeatedly referencing pop culture and historically referenced events. It reads like a spoilt Jewish family's summer vacation journal—leaving the reader to mostly feel sorry these characters had not realized that life is hard and full of disappointments even though many had already experienced various traumas. Plot is secondary. The players drive this story, which is a good thing.

MAIN CAST OF CHARACTERS

Julie Jacobson..... Suburban nonentity newcomer to camp. Longs to be interesting or extraordinary despite hair's poodle bigness and patchy pink complexion.

Ethan Figman..... Talented animator destined for fame. Conscious of his own ugliness which will never go away.

- Ash Wolf.....Wafish beauty with starlit qualities. Directs theater supported by wealthy, famous husband.
- Goodman Wolf Ash’s six foot tall hyper masculine brother. Aspiring architect with leadership qualities. Most likely to take an alarming trajectory.
- Jonah BayGood looking, blue-black haired guitar player. Son of famous touring folk singer. Traumatized early and often. Explores his gayness.
- Cathy KiplingerBig blond dancer impeded by voluptuous breasts. Must choose between truth and lies to defend her honor after a friend’s betrayal.
- Gudrun SigurdsdottirBohemian from Reykjarik, Iceland employed at camp as weaving teacher and lifeguard.
- Gil & Betsy WolfGoodman and Ash’s youthful and vigorous parents. Own apartment on Central Park West & 91st referred to as “The Labyrinth” with doorman named Cerberus.
- Dennis Boyd.....Regular looking recovering depressive meets Jules in 1982 through neighbor and becomes her ordinary husband. Doesn’t believe being extraordinary or possessing a special talent can revolutionize one’s lot in life.

Fifteen year old Julie arrives at camp gratis a “scholarship” for the underprivileged. Hopeful to fit in with a cast she already deems destined for creative successes, she relies on language smarts and wit to gain their attention. As an overlooked outcast from Underhill this self-doubting odd girl out would have considered herself a moron if she had turned down the group starlit, Ash Wolf’s invitation to join them in her tepee neighborhood’s Boy’s Teepee 3 where six campers will form an enduring bond for life. They christen Julie with the trendier Jules and name their group, The Interestings in short order. Ethan Figman proclaims this label fits because they, “are just so fucking *compelling*, our brains swollen with intellectual thoughts....”

Almost immediately pursued for a kiss by Ethan, Jules gets a sense of fitting in via the ageless male pursuit of mating. He's a professed genius in character animation and studies under the tutelage of a retired prodigy of Walt Disney studios, Old Mo Templeton. Ethan becomes part of Jules supporting cast as he refers to her new name when she compliments him on his cartoon creations. He responds in a reassuring way saying, "What do you know," then proceeds with, "You love it. *Jules Jacobson loves it.*" This now defines her as, "already it had become a far more comfortable name for her than dumb old Julie Jacobson," which quickly convinces her to pursue a life as part of their cultured tribe. Hoping to ascend from her merely middle class upbringing Jules aspires to emulate her new friends while hiding a quiet envy.

The complex, deep friendship, without intimate consummation, that spans decades between Jules and Ethan carries a pertinent message for young and old alike; developing close human intimacy throughout life provides emotional growth. Ms. Wolitzer covers this subject in a very insightful way through her characters, while trying to debunk the advantages of wealth and fame this group originally felt solidified successful social relationships. Essentially concluding; celebrity-ism is overrated.

Since I hadn't the pleasure of reading Ms. Wolitzer's previous well-received thirty years of fiction, this story led to a bit of research to find out what I've been missing from an author whose chronicling, as Entertainment Weekly puts it, "secures Wolitzer's place among the best novelists of her generation.... This isn't women's fiction. It's everyone's." I determined this best selling author's previous writings focus on the cultural shift from woman as obedient wife to a position as an object of sexless marital commitment with a roster that includes, but is incomplete; *This is Your Life* (1988), *Friends for Life* (1994), *The Ten-Year Nap* (2008), and *The Uncoupling* (2011); many which have been made into movies.

Reviewer, Liesl Schillinger quoted on the book's jacket says this story, "is warm, all-American." Yet, I find it quite the opposite. Every American does not live or desire such lives. Whether or not mainstream New York readers demand more from their fiction also remains a question as this title's unusually brief presence on the New York Times Book Review's best seller's list after its release in April 2013, may reflect that readers close to the image of privileged lifestyles don't want to be mirrored in print.

As she strives to produce serious literature with wisdom imparted to men as well as women Meg should keep writing from her talented pool of life experiences, since a volume that will reside on the upper shelf is still within her.

If you'd like to comment on this review or discuss contact me at jonnieandy@zoominternet.net or by voice call: 724-766-0674