

The Nearly Happy Family by Catherine McKinnon

About the book

'My point is: who needs enemies when you have a family?'

Claire Delaney, a fiery fifteen-year-old, and her mother, Jackie, are both out of control. They've had a lot to deal with after the tragic death of Claire's father - and they're driving each other crazy.

When Jackie, a forty-something comedian, announces she's going to marry a younger man she's only just met, Claire is outraged. In retaliation she apprentices herself to a volatile Italian chef, who teaches her the secrets of his kitchen. In time, both Jackie and Claire discover that life - like the best recipes - is at once mysterious and mysteriously simple.

A wonderfully original story that celebrates the triumphs and disasters of family life.

About the author

Catherine McKinnon has a background in film and theatre, and has written, directed and helped develop many new Australian plays. Originally from Adelaide, where she worked for the Red Shed Theatre Company and the State Theatre Company of South Australia, Catherine moved to Sydney to complete a Masters in Creative Writing at UTS. While completing her first novel, she worked as a director and tutor at the University of Wollongong and at Flinders University, South Australia. In 2006 she won the Penguin/Australian Women's Weekly prize for short-story writing for *Haley and the Sea*.

Questions

- 1) Do you enjoy the story being told from both Jackie and Claire's points of view? Or does it put you off? Did your opinion change as you kept reading? How might you choose to tell the story?
- 2) Jackie occasionally says or infers that she is a failed mother. Do you agree with her? What are some of her strengths, and weaknesses, as mother and person?
- 3) Claire has to deal with some pretty difficult situations. How do you respond to her character? Do you think she gives Jackie a run for her money?
- 4) People have described this book as a mother/daughter love story. Is this how you experienced it? Can you relate to what it says about mothers and daughters, and about family in general?

- 5) At least three generations of characters, all reflecting differing social values, are developed in the story. How well do you think these different perspectives are handled?
- 6) Preparing food, eating food, is a big part of this novel. How do you feel the food descriptions add to the story?
- 7) The story is set in Adelaide and at Salty Bay, a fictitious place on the south coast of South Australia. What different atmospheres/moods do these locations help to create?
- 8) There are descriptions of several different houses in the story. Do these descriptions add anything to your understanding of the characters?
- 9) Much as he loves her, T.J. has great difficulty accepting the fact that his daughter, Sophie, is gay. Do you think this is still a common occurrence within families? Is sexual difference accepted in Australian society generally?
- 10) How do you feel the different romantic relationships were handled in the story?
- 11) The last scene of the novel gives a lovely sense of family stability but without any guarantees that it will last. Does that assessment of the fragility of happiness strike a chord with you?