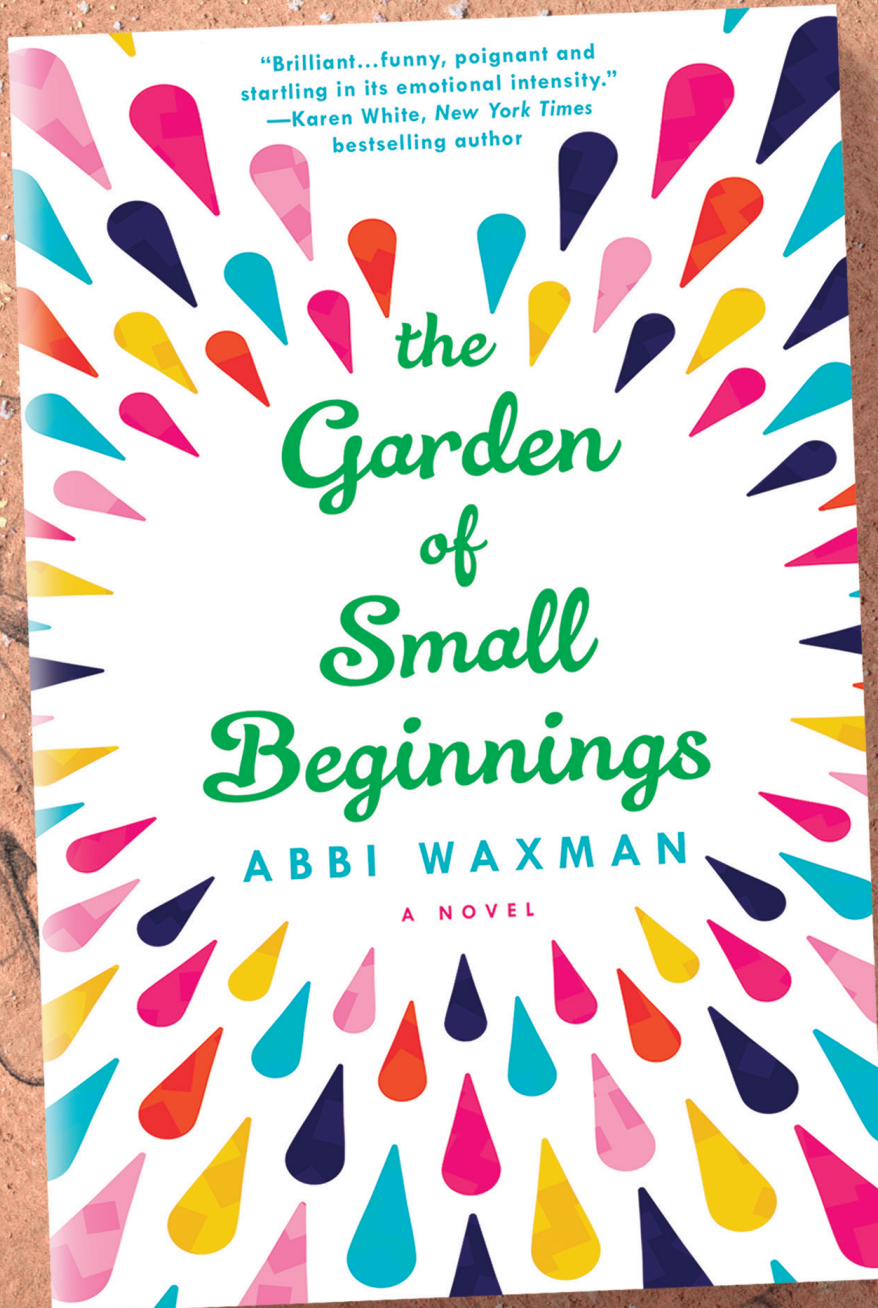


Book Club Kit



the Garden of Small Beginnings

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 The Anaïs Nin quote at the start of the book describes the challenge facing Lilian: “There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” Have you experienced a situation where staying in place was as painful as moving forward?
- 2 As the story begins, Lilian is deeply sad but comfortable in her sadness. She resists people’s encouragements to move on and is quite verbal about it. What impact does her position have on the other people in her life?
- 3 Lilian’s children experienced the loss of their father differently. How have you seen your own family or friends deal differently with grief or other losses? Is there a “right” way?
- 4 Does Lilian find her work as a textbook illustrator fulfilling? Is she as stuck in that job as she is in her personal life?
- 5 What are the similarities and differences between the way Lilian and her sister, Rachel, process emotions? How did their childhood impact their approach? Both have a tendency to use humor to diffuse stress or make light of personal struggles. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of that method?
- 6 Do Annabel and Clare differ from each other in the same way that Lilian and Rachel do? How does each pair of sisters relate to each other?
- 7 Lilian takes the gardening class because her boss asks her to, but it ends up being a transformative experience for her. Has that ever happened to you, where something that started out as a chore instead became something wonderful?
- 8 Gardening turns out to be relaxing for Lilian despite the hard physical work involved. Do you enjoy gardening? Why? Why do you think it’s so helpful for Lilian?
- 9 Lilian is often surprised by the distance between her first impressions of people and what she subsequently learns about them. Do you think that’s a common experience? Do you think the first impression you give is an accurate expression of who you really are? Is that even desirable?
- 10 A theme in the book is unexpected events and their consequences—how have unexpected events affected your life?
- 11 Do you think Edward and Lilian will end up together? Is Lilian ready for a new relationship?

a Conversation with ABBI WAXMAN

You've said the book is wish fulfillment—both about being a widow and growing tomatoes. Explain.

I started thinking about this book after I'd had one of those stupid arguments where you end up wondering how easy it might be to dispose of your partner. *Permanently*. It was probably over not putting the milk away, or something equally unimportant, but after a decade or so with someone, the smallest things can trigger irritating meta-arguments very quickly. (Possibly this is just my marriage, but I doubt we're exceptional in any way.) Anyway, as I was pondering my upcoming widowhood, I started thinking more seriously about how that would look, etc., and the story started writing itself. I put the gardening stuff in it because at the time I was still entertaining the notion of becoming a successful gardener, and maybe I thought if I wrote about someone else managing it, I might be able to, also. This self-delusional quality is one of my stand-out characteristics. I can persuade myself of almost anything.

What makes this book so special is your narrator Lili's irreverent and funny voice. Why did you choose gardening as a vehicle for her story?

Because I suck at it, which makes it interesting. I made her better looking than me, too, and her house is cuter. This is what's appealing about being a writer: mind-boggling, all-encompassing power.

How has your relationship with your sister and your children inspired the book?

Well, in several ways. Literally because I stole all their best lines, and metaphorically because my sister, Emily, is the person I write for. I'm thinking of her reading my work while I'm doing it, and if I don't think it's going to amuse her, I cut it out. She's very easy-going, so it's a pretty low bar, but still, one must have some basic standards.



Photo: Creel Studio

Your mom was a novelist, and writing is sort of a family business. Do the writers in your family take inspiration from each other? Are they competitive with each other?

Yes, it's like hemophilia or abnormally large ear lobes: it runs through the family. My mother is the only published one though, and she's very pleased for me. She always told me I was a writer, so now she can be smug about being right. She enjoys that. Being right, not being smug.

How do you feel about having your debut published?

It's horrific, a nightmare from which I pray to recover. No, it's flipping awesome, I'm stoked beyond belief, of course. I'm writing the second one now, which has some of the same characters, so it makes me a bit nervous that I won't be able to do as good a job, but what the heck, in for a penny, in for a pound, as we say in England.

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

That it wasn't overpriced. They're also welcome to tear a few pages out for shopping lists. They paid for it, after all.

Both you and your narrator have a wicked sense of humor. Has it ever gotten you in trouble like it has her?

Not that I am willing to admit in public, let alone in print. Jeez, you people expect a lot of honesty from someone who makes things up for a living.

What books and authors inspire you?

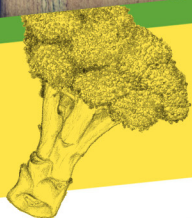
Oh, so many. I like lots and lots of different stuff. When I'm working I tend to read non-fiction, so I'm not tempted to steal other people's ideas. Non-fiction writers like Michael Lewis amaze me because they explain such complicated things with such elegance and humor. Michael Pollan. Anyone called Michael, actually. And I read a lot of crime fiction, which is what my mother wrote, because it all ends up ok in the end. And when I'm really pissed off I re-read *Pride and Prejudice*, because that's how I roll.

If you had to explain the book using only emojis, what would that sentence look like?



That's easy. A broken heart, the two weird little dancing girls, the little plant one, then a fixed heart.





How to Grow **BROCCOLI**

Plant in the fall if your climate is warm; plant mid-to-late summer in most other places.

Space your plants 12 to 24 inches apart and allow 36 inches between rows. Broccoli likes to take off its corset and spread out.

If you get too many seedlings, be ruthless when thinning. The needs of the few outweigh the needs of the many.

Try and keep the soil moist. Broccoli needs to be kept moist. However, do not get developing heads wet when watering. They will come to life and terrorize the neighborhood. That's not true, but they won't like it.



How to Grow **CARROTS**

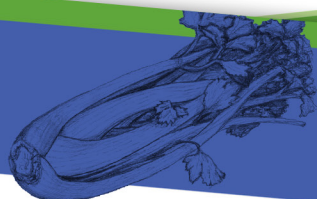
Make sure your soil is fluffy and free of stones; carrots have a hard enough time pushing through as it is.

Plant seeds 3 to 4 inches apart, in rows that are at least 1 foot apart. Side note: No need to pull out the tape measure for this stuff, just eyeball it. They're not going to get pissy and refuse to grow just because you're an inch out. Unless you plant those fancy multicolored carrots, they take that shit really seriously.

Mulching will help to keep the ground moist, speed up germination, and protect the roots from too much sun. Use wood chips, shredded rubber bits, or the tiny shoes of dolls. If you're like me, you have enough lying around the house to mulch a freaking field.

Once plants are 1 inch tall, thin so they stand 3 inches apart. Snip them with scissors, instead of pulling them out, to prevent damage to the roots of other plants.

Carrots taste much better after a couple of frosts. Following the first hard frost in the fall, cover carrot rows with an 18-inch layer of shredded leaves to preserve them for harvesting later.



How to Grow **CELERY**

Many gardeners believe celery is the trickiest vegetable to grow. To improve your chances, start the seed indoors, 8 to 10 weeks before the last frost, and make regular sacrifices to the celery gods.

Work organic fertilizer or compost into the soil prior to planting.

Harden off seedlings by keeping them outdoors for a couple hours a day and speaking to them harshly.

Transplant seedlings 10 to 12 inches apart, direct sow seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep. These will need to be thinned to 12 inches apart when they reach about 6 inches high.

Mulch and water directly after planting.

If celery does not get enough water, the stalks will be dry and small, and it will be no one's fault but your own.



How to Grow **RADISHES**

Plant radishes a month or so before the last frost, and work plenty of fertilizer into the soil first.

Sow the seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ inch to 1 inch deep and 1 inch apart.

Don't crowd them! They need sun. If they don't get enough sun, they will retaliate by focusing their energy on growing leaves, and you'll have to go buy radishes and lie about your horticultural prowess.

Plant every 2 weeks while the weather is still cool so you can have a continuous harvest.