

The Perfect Son

by Barbara Claypole White

Reader and Discussion Questions

1. No one in the novel is quite as he or she seems at first. Ella, for example, appears to be the perfect mother, but is filled with hidden doubts and insecurities; Felix appears to be a rigid control freak, and yet every decision he makes for the family pushes him beyond his comfort zone. As the story unfolds, did any of the other characters surprise you, and if so, in what ways? Do you agree that we are often too quick to pigeonhole a person based on one aspect of his or her personality?
2. Felix is a dark, unlikely hero. Even as Katherine warms to him, she calls him an antihero. How do you feel about Felix, and did those feelings change while you were reading the novel? Is Felix his own worst critic?
3. Were you shocked by Felix's flashback scene? Do you think we ever truly know what goes on in a family?
4. Harry does not have coprolalia—the involuntary and repetitive use of obscene language. Coprolalia is, however, the most common popular image of Tourette's, even though it affects only a small percentage of people with Tourette syndrome. Do you agree that fictional characters struggling with neurological or mental disorders are often depicted using stereotypes? Do any of your family members battle an invisible disability, and if so, what have you found to be the most challenging part of explaining quirky behavior to the outside world?
5. When parenting a high-maintenance child, do the lines blur between being a helicopter parent and being a child advocate? Does Ella's health crisis speed up the natural process of separation and boundary setting that she and Harry must experience?
6. How do Harry's relationships with both his parents change during the novel?
7. How did you react to Ella's attempts to distance herself from Harry while she was in the hospital? What would you have done in her situation?
8. Harry and Max have a unique bond. What did you like most about their relationship? Do you think they will be BFFs forever, despite taking such different life paths?
9. What do you think is the emotional core of Ella and Felix's marriage? Are they well matched or an unlikely couple? Do you agree with Felix that the two months following the heart attack are a gift—a second chance for them?
10. In chapter one, Ella refers to the stranger sitting next to her as the good father, and throughout the novel, both she and Felix question what it means to be a good parent. What do you think it means? Do you agree with them that the hardest lesson of parenthood is learning to let go?

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Reader and Discussion Questions ... continued

11. Do you have a favorite secondary character? If so, who and why?
12. One of the novel's themes is that a person can find clarity and empathy in a moment of unbearable darkness. Does the Fitzwilliam family crisis bring out the best in all the characters, including the secondary ones?
13. Ella's journey is a solitary one, whereas Felix is drawn increasingly into a community of support, something he's never experienced before. What do you think about that?
14. Why doesn't Ella die on the plane? Do you think she ever believed she would get better?
15. We see various settings in historic Durham, North Carolina, from Felix's perspective. What did you learn about Felix through the different settings—especially the scenes at Duke Gardens and the Nasher Museum of Art? Why do you think Felix, a Londoner who loves the afternoon sun, was drawn to a house hidden in shade at the edge of Duke Forest? Do you think Felix will stay in the house?
16. How did you react to the ending?