



Reading Group Guide and Author Q&A for
***The Girls From Ames* by Jeffrey Zaslow**
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“The Ames girls haven’t tracked all the scientific studies about friendships, the ones showing that having a close group of friends helps people sleep better, improve their immune systems, boost their self-esteem, stave off dementia, and actually live longer. The Ames girls just feel the benefits in their guts.” (p. 98-99)

An Introduction to *The Girls from Ames: A Story of Women and a Forty-Year Friendship*
by Jeffrey Zaslow

Imagine life without your best friends. Almost certainly, each and every day would be immeasurably poorer. As human beings we have an indomitable urge to share the good, the bad, and the utterly mundane moments of our lives with people who know and care about us. And the longer those bonds have endured, the deeper and more meaningful these exchanges become. For the girls from Ames, what began with giggled intimacies over “farts, burps and boobs” (p. 129) became the kind of friendship that graces the lives of many women.

Now in their mid-forties, Karla, Kelly, Marilyn, Jane, Jenny, Karen, Cathy, Angela, Sally, Diana, and Sheila first met as young children in school, in church, or through one another. Their individual friendships coalesced until Angela, the “newest” Ames Girl, completed the group’s final lineup in ninth grade. They all came to be in Ames by different routes, some more tumultuous than others, but it was there that they learned to drink, kiss boys, and eventually grow into young women.

In high school, some viewed them as too cliquish, or found fault with their flirtatiousness with boys. Others envied their closeness. When a few of the girls were nicknamed “the Shit Sisters” after dating athletes from rival, Marshalltown High, they all stuck together and wound up adopting the mean-spirited moniker as a badge of pride. As adults they became different people—Democrats and Republicans, deeply religious and agnostic, career women and stay-at-home moms—but when they get together they set aside their differences and join “a party where everyone knows each other and everyone is having fun” (p. 253).

It wasn’t always easy. “When women are between the ages of twenty-five and forty, their friendships are most at risk, because those are the years when women are often consumed with

marrying, raising children and establishing careers,” (p. x) and the Ames girls were no exception. Immediately after graduating high school, they all left their hometown for good. Not long afterwards, Sheila, the eleventh Ames Girl, died under mysterious circumstances, and the others were confronted by their first real tragedy. Although some of them could not afford the airfare to return home for the funeral, they grieved together and remembered Sheila with joy.

They’ve scattered across the United States, with eleven marriages and twenty-one children between them. But, over the years, they’ve helped one another weather divorce, the loss of parents, and even the tragic and untimely death of Karla’s oldest daughter, Christie, who succumbed to cancer just after her fourteen birthday. A fierce determination to remain in touch keeps the chain of emails and phone calls flowing, and they recharge their connection in person with frequent reunions—“just another step on a journey of friendship that should take them until the end of their lives” (p. 298).

Jeffrey Zaslow, a popular columnist and bestselling author—as well as a husband and the father of three teenage daughters—found himself with “an almost urgent need to understand women” (p. xii). Interweaving the girls’ moving history with compelling sociological findings, Zaslow illuminates the lives of women whose experiences might be called ordinary, but whose extraordinary bond with one another touches upon the best of what it means to be human.

Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. Zaslow was deeply conscious of the fact that he was a man trying to tell a story about women. He writes, “I admit that I sometimes asked the Ames girls questions that were silly, obvious, or naïve... And yet I also think that being a man gave me a wider canvas.... I made no assumptions. I asked. I rephrased. I tried to comprehend” (p. xv). How well do you think he succeeded? Do you agree that a woman writing about the Ames girls might have been distracted by her own beliefs and experiences? Or might she have considered aspects of their story that Zaslow missed?
2. Did the story of a particular Ames girl resonate more with you than the others? If so, which one and why?
3. After her high school graduation, Jenny’s insurance executive father predicted, “in fifteen years, one of you girls will be estranged from the group. Two of you will be divorced. One of you will still be single. One of you may be dead. You have to expect that. Because that’s just how life works” (p. 22). In some ways he was amazingly prescient, but he was way off in terms of how close the girls would remain. How might his predictions have been worded if they had been made by one of the girls’ mothers instead?
4. Despite the religious beliefs of some of the other Ames girls, Kelly “does not hide the fact that she had an abortion when she was twenty years old” (p. 86). Has an issue like abortion ever threatened one of your friendships? In retrospect, are you satisfied with the way in which you and your friend(s) resolved the issue?
5. Zaslow talks about how Ames, with its Big Sister/ Little Sister program, “was actually a town that,

early on, formally recognized the value of friendship, especially among girls” (p. 106). Discuss how fostering female friendships ultimately benefits a community.

6. After being singled out for criticism by the other Ames girls in high school, Sally told her mother what had happened. She supported and advised Sally, but did not try to interfere. Sally remembers, “this was a great lesson in parenting for me. It is not our job, as parents, to go to coaches, teachers and other parents and try to make everything run smoothly for our kids.... Our job is to help our kids function in the [imperfect] world” (p. 122). Do you agree with her assessment? Overall, have parenting styles changed for the better or worse over the past few decades?
7. Zaslow writes, “researchers worry about this current generation of girls.... A 2008 study titled ‘A National Report on the State of Self-Esteem’ labeled girls’ low self-esteem ‘a national crisis’” (p. 116). What are some steps that parents and communities should take to stem this crisis?
8. “Few of [the Ames girls’] husbands have long-standing groups of close friends, with decades of history together, whom they confide in and turn to week after week” (p. 101). Yet, just about every year they take over care of their houses and children so the girls can attend a reunion. Do most men appreciate women’s friendships even if they don’t enjoy those kinds of bonds themselves?
9. “Bottom line: Women talk. Men do things together” (p. 102). How does this statement bear out in your own experience? Do you have any close friends of the opposite sex? In what ways, if any, are those friendships different than those with people of the same sex?
10. “For middle-aged women, trying to figure out who they are, one path to self-reflection comes from getting in touch with who they were” (p. 103). Have you taken advantage of social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace to reconnect with people who knew you at an earlier point in your life? Share some of your experiences.
11. From Rod Stewart to Hall and Oates and *Grease* to *Love American Style*, the Ames girls’ shared experience of 70’s and 80’s popular culture bolsters their connection to one another. Why is it that the music and media of our youth is often more meaningful than what we enjoy in our later years?
12. It took Justin, Jane’s husband, to convince her that taking time out to go running would ultimately benefit her two daughters by allowing them to “witness a woman trying to stay fit—and taking time to do something for herself” (p. 216). Did Jane’s “aha” moment offer any insights into your own life or that of your own mother?
13. The Ames girls abide by some unspoken ground rules: “They don’t brag about their husbands’ jobs or incomes. They talk about their children’s achievements, but not in a gloating way.... They make every effort to be with each other for key events in their lives... If they have things that need to be hashed out, it all remains in the group” (p. 288). If you have a long-standing group of friends, what are the “ground rules” that have kept you close?
14. If you are a woman, is *The Girls from Ames* a book you would recommend to a man? If you are a man, what drew you to read this book? In what ways is *Girls* a story that transcends gender?

A Discussion with Jeffrey Zaslow, author of THE GIRLS FROM AMES

How did the idea for THE GIRLS FROM AMES come about?

I write a column for The Wall Street Journal about life transitions – those moments when life takes a turn. Back in 2003, I wrote a story on the transitions in women’s friendships, and received hundreds of emails from women eager to tell me about their longtime friends. As I read all their comments, it got me thinking about my own three daughters, and the friends they’d need to carry them through life. Eventually, I decided to find one group of women and immerse myself as a reporter in the “biography” of their friendship. I called a bunch of the women who’d written to me, including Jenny Litchman. She told me about the 10 girls she grew up with in Ames, Iowa.

How did you decide that of all the emails you received, you would focus on this particular group of girls?

I found the Ames girls’ story to be very moving. In some ways, their experiences are universal, and so I thought a book about them would resonate with any woman who has ever had a friend. In other ways, their story is completely one-of-a-kind – haunting and touching and exhilarating. Born at the end of the baby boom, their memories are evocative of their times. Born in the middle of the country, they now live everywhere else, but carry Ames with them.

Some of the Ames girls were hesitant at first about sharing themselves so publicly in a book. But in time, they realized that a look at their friendship might offer insights for other women.

They spoke vividly about what it was like to be girls in the sixties and seventies, young women in the eighties, and new mothers in the nineties. They showed me how close friendships can shape every aspect of women’s lives.

What is it like being a man writing about female friendships and living with your wife and daughters at home?

Come live with me, you’ll see! I have a wife and three teenaged daughters and I often can’t figure out their needs or emotions. I’m an outsider, living inside this sometimes secret world. So I’m on a constant quest to understand girls and women. On the friendship front: I’ve seen how friends can buoy the spirits of my daughters, and I’ve also seen the downside, when their friends are cruel or let them down. So I know the power of friendship, and the emptiness girls can feel when friends don’t come through.

I live in suburban Detroit, and I pay attention to my youngest daughter as she interacts with her friends. I’ll carpool them and listen as they chatter away in the backseat. I’m always thinking of the Ames girls, recalling insights they gave me about their own childhoods together. I’ve also learned that friendships can survive their down periods. So I’m able to tell my girls, “You and your friends will get over this. The Ames girls have been muscling through their issues for 40 years!”

My daughters roll their eyes sometimes when I bring up the Ames girls, but I think they are

listening now when I try to offer insights. They figure I've done a lot of research into friendship. Maybe I've learned something.

Do you have any new insight about women from spending so much time with them?

Well, I've learned so much about how a close group of friends can keep women healthy and happier. The research, which I delve into in the book, is just astounding. And the Ames girls fit so many of the common patterns.

I learned that female friendships are completely different from male friendships. Men's friendships are based more on activities – sports, work.

Women are connected through their emotions. They talk about their lives. Because men relate by doing things together, their friendships are considered “side by side.” Women are “face to face.” (In fact, studies show women are better than men at maintaining eye contact.)

You took a break from writing *The Girls From Ames* to write *The Last Lecture* with Randy Pausch. How did coming back to the Girls after spending time with Randy change your perspective?

Randy's death really did make a difference in how I felt about so many things when I returned to writing *The Girls From Ames*. Randy always told me that our relationships with other people are more important than anything else in our lives.

The Ames girls already understood this. And so I saw a lot of connections between *The Girls From Ames* and *The Last Lecture*. Randy talked of putting himself in a bottle that would one day wash up on shore for his three young kids. He wanted to offer them all the life lessons and advice he wished he could tell them in the years to come.

The Ames girls are floating through their lives in a bottle together, sharing advice and love all along the way.

How do you want this book to inspire others? What do you hope readers will gain from *The Girls from Ames*?

I know women will see themselves and their friends in this book. They'll be reminded of how they're not alone in the world, and I'm betting that the stories here will be comforting, bringing back their own memories.

I'm sure some women reading the book will think of friends they have lost touch with, and maybe it will encourage them to reconnect.

I also assume some women, who feel they never won the friend lottery, will feel a bit envious of what the Ames girls have. I hope these women will be inspired by what they read, and perhaps they will find meaningful friendships up the road.

What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

There was no road map when the Ames girls and I began this project. I hadn't ever heard about a man trying to immerse himself inside the friendship of 11 women. And the girls weren't used to having a journalist asking intrusive questions.

I have to be honest. There were tense moments and the girls were not always happy with me. Feelings were hurt. Uncomfortable issues were raised. Several of them gave me their diaries or letters, and so I'd learn details about the others that they hadn't intended to share. There were debates within the group when this happened.

But I was always impressed by the way the girls hashed things out, issue by issue, and then they'd rally into a united front. This book project tested their friendship. But their loyalty to each other really moved me.

I think their friendship emerged as strong as ever. I am very grateful to the girls for everything they did, individually and collectively, to see this through to a finished book. I hope others find their story as inspiring as I did.

What has your research into male and female friendship shown you?

For starters, men and women view friendship very differently. Researchers say that women's friendships are face to face. They're sharing their lives and emotions. They're talking to each other. Men's friendships are side by side. We're doing things together – golf, tennis, poker. I've played in a card game with the same six guys for almost twenty years, and we talk only about the cards. We almost never mention our families, our jobs, anything.

After *The Girls from Ames* came out, I found myself telling book clubs that my poker buddies didn't even know my children's names. But then I wondered if I was exaggerating this. So one night recently, I finally turned to my left at the poker table and casually asked my friend Lance:

“Hey, Lance, could you name my children?”

He shrugged, paused to think and then smiled sheepishly. “I could *rename* them,” he said.

This fits with the research. Women's often friendships run deeper, while men seek pals to do activities together.

How have the Ames girls reacted to strangers, friends and co-workers now knowing the details of their childhoods?

From the start, the girls were most concerned about how the book would be received by their old friends and relatives in Ames. They're relieved and grateful that their stories have been well-received there.

The girls have slowly gotten used to the fact that thousands of strangers now know details of their personal lives and embarrassing moments from their early years. But people have been so gracious and supportive that the attention rarely feels intrusive.

And they've enjoyed talking about their lives when book clubs call them. “I feel as though I take

away positive, helpful information from every encounter with a book club,” Kelly has told me. “I’ve had some good laughs with all these women. They’ve helped make me a more enlightened person.” Almost every week, people tell her that they are the “Kelly” in their group of friends. “I’m not exactly sure what that means,” Kelly says, “but it makes me smile and feel less alone in the world.”

What part of the book have you and the Girls received the most reader response to?

It’s been great fun to hear from book clubs that have played “the pebble game” (described in chapter 19) or who have made Maxi-pad slippers, just like the slippers the Ames girls glued together. We’ve even had book clubs bake brown-blobbed S-sisters cakes!

Most moving, at the end of the book readers learn that two of the Ames girls have breast cancer. We’ve heard from many readers asking for updates on the Ames girls’ health and treatment – and all the girls feel buoyed by the warm feelings and the prayers sent their way.