

Touchstone Reading Group Guide

Starting from Scratch

By Susan Gilbert-Collins

When her mother dies suddenly, just as she is defending her doctoral dissertation, Olivia Tschetter's world falls apart. Upon returning home she must face her father and three older siblings, who, despite all she's accomplished, continue to treat her like a child. Through her passion for cooking—a love she had shared with her mother—Olivia finally begins to confront her grief. Along the way she makes both painful and joyous discoveries that change her perspective on herself, her family, and the many lives touched by her mother. Interspersed with delicious recipes, *Starting from Scratch* is a funny, bittersweet ode to the power of family bonds and the solace of good food.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Of all of her siblings, Olivia is closest to Annie, yet they are the farthest apart in age. Do you think their closeness is because of this difference?
2. Conversely, Olivia shows frustration and irritation toward her other two siblings, Ruby and David. How does Olivia's relationship with them change throughout the story?
3. In several instances, Olivia has difficulty navigating her way around her hometown. As explained in the book, "Certain members of Olivia's family had often professed surprise that Olivia could have trouble finding anything in a town of only sixteen thousand, and the very town she had grown up in; Olivia felt that if anything, growing up there made it more difficult." What, if anything, does Olivia's inability to navigate through town reveal about her?
4. While fixing a computer problem at the Meals on Wheels office, Olivia thinks, "It was strange, after all this time, to be doing something someone needed." Why do you think she does not feel useful? By increasingly taking on her mother's role as primary caretaker, is Olivia trying to improve her position in the family somehow? How do her feelings about her role in the family change by the end of the story?
5. At times Olivia deals with a great sense of impatience, including several instances when she "stifles a sigh." Do you think this restlessness is in truth part of her grieving process? How does her grief manifest itself throughout the story?
6. Olivia does not attend church regularly because, as she explains, "the hymns set me off." The book describes several religious denominations within the community, and many of the other characters regularly attend church. What role does religion play in the lives of the characters? In their community?

7. When Olivia learns of Annie's pregnancy, she thinks, ". . . a baby— something that would eventually assert itself as a real person, no matter how you tried not to think about it . . . the thought of it was almost offensive." Later in the story, she thinks "Frankly, the whole pregnancy thing still seemed unreal to her. Unreal, and irksome. It was almost hard not to believe that if Annie would just put her mind to it, she could set the whole pregnancy aside for a while and then take it up again when everyone was better equipped to deal with it." Why do you think Olivia has such negative reactions to the pregnancy?

8. When David announces that he is bringing Janet for a family visit, Olivia worries about all the necessary arrangements. She tells him, "Mom isn't here anymore to just do everything. *I'll* have to get the house ready. *I'll* have to figure out meals—" Here Olivia seems to resent having to take over her mother's role as caretaker, but at other times in the story she seems to enjoy her new role. Why do you think Olivia feels this conflict?

9. In a conversation between Olivia and her father about his memories of Vivian, he says, "You realize there are—events you underwent with the person who's gone, shared experiences, and then once they're gone, you're it. You're the only one who has those memories. . . . If you remember inaccurately, no one will know. You won't even know yourself . . . I suppose one should write things down more." Considering this and the fact that Vivian's newsletter is, in some ways, a written record of her experiences and memories, why do you think Olivia finishes her newsletter, even though she struggles to get started?

10. Olivia delays telling her family about passing her dissertation defense until very late in the story, even though she has several openings and opportunities to do so and is chided by her family about it throughout the book. When she finally does reveal the truth, it is not in person but through an email. Why do you think she does this?

11. Olivia does not accompany Samantha and Ruby to Winnie's house. Why does she stay behind? What do you think happens during that important visit?

12. What do you think happens between Olivia and Harry after the story ends?

13. What do you think *Starting from Scratch* means to Olivia?

A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN GILBERT-COLLINS

Olivia, your main character, is the youngest sibling in the family. Did your position growing up in your own family affect the story at all?

I'm the youngest of three and wanted to explore in writing how that position in the family colors one's experience of the world. While neither Olivia nor I are "typical" youngest children (being separated by four or more years from the next sibling), I agree with Olivia that a lot of things "boil down to birth order," like it or not.

Are there any similarities between the Tschetter family and your own?

We have a lot of Mennonite relatives and we eat a lot of homemade chicken noodle soup. And my mother was very much the center of our family. But I don't think anyone looking at the Tschetters would recognize my family. That said, there is more than a glimmer of my sister in both Annie and Ruby, and like Olivia, I find myself convinced that my brother can do anything.

Do you like to cook? Do you have a favorite special recipe that you can share?

I do love to cook. Here's a favorite recipe I make year round, although especially on winter nights:

Cheddar Soup with Shredded Carrots and Potatoes

Melt 4 tablespoons butter in a large pot. Add 1/2 cup diced onion and 10 oz. shredded carrots and saute for several minutes. Sprinkle about 2 1/2 tablespoons flour over the onion and carrot and stir until blended.

Add 6 cups chicken broth, 1 pound shredded potatoes, 1/2 tsp. dried thyme, 1 bay leaf, 1/8 tsp. Tabasco (or more to taste), 1/2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce (or more to taste), 1/2 tsp. sugar, and salt and pepper to taste. Bring to a gentle boil, then simmer until veggies are tender.

Stir in 1 1/2 cups half and half (or milk). Remove pot from burner and cool for 1 minute. Add 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese and stir until melted.

- *Note: You can play with the amount of flour you add. A little more results in a thicker soup.*

What importance did food hold for your family when you were growing up? How about now?

Food was often about comfort, about being home. I remember waking on Saturday mornings to the scent of my mom's caramel rolls or a pot of beef vegetable soup simmering on the stove. Food was also to some degree about participation, as when my grandparents would come to help make noodles. As a child, I loved cranking the handle of the noodle machine my grandfather brought back from a trip to Germany.

Was it difficult to leave behind the characters you created when you finished writing *Starting from Scratch*?

Alternately difficult and a relief!

Will any of the characters from this story appear in a sequel or upcoming novel?

I have no plans to use these characters again (having new ones in my head), although I sometimes think I'd love to explore one peripheral character more: Penelope, the off-stage girlfriend of Harry's. She'd be an interesting study in extremes: painfully sincere and committed to the point of being nearly impossible to endure.

Early in the story, you explain, "in the Tschetter family, it was important to be able to tell a good story; to Olivia . . . it was all but a survival tactic." As a fiction writer, do you relate to this at all?

As a fiction writer and as a youngest child, yes. Having a story to tell that others actually want to hear is the best way to get attention, which is something both fiction writers and youngest children want.

You write about some dark subjects, including death, grief, and molestation. Did you find it difficult to strike a balance between these topics and the overall warm, humorous tone of the book?

I purposely struck that tone in an effort to sustain a whole novel about grief that might otherwise have sunk beneath the emotional weight of the topic. Grief can bury you; it nearly buries Olivia. But I couldn't afford to bury the reader.

What would you most like readers to take away from this story?

When you lose someone, do what you need to do. That might mean doing nothing for a while. Our culture does not know how to grieve and does not support people who are grieving, so you need to find a few good people who won't judge.

This is your debut novel. Did you enjoy the writing experience? Did you find anything particularly challenging about the process?

Writing by turns exhilarates and stymies you. I did love writing this novel in the way that you can love raising an infuriating yet incredibly dear toddler—who, by the way, will never thank you for the trouble.

What's next for you?

Another novel. And some short fiction, which I love. It's very satisfying to complete a fictional thought in weeks instead of years.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Make a Chocolate Puddle or Aunt Rubina's Pink Dessert for your meeting.
2. Have everyone in your club bring a family recipe—new or old—and compile them into your own newsletter. Include as many background stories, photographs, drawings, or even film suggestions as possible. You can make photocopies for each member or, if your group has a website or blog, post the information there.
3. Visit the Meals on Wheels Association of America website at <http://www.mowaa.org> to learn more about senior hunger. Volunteer time, make a donation, or just find out the latest research on this very real threat facing millions of seniors across the country.