

## *A Friend of the Family* by Lauren Grodstein

### QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS

1. Discuss whether you think Pete Dizinoff is a reliable narrator – that is, whether you believe his account of the events in the story from beginning to end. Since so much of the novel is composed of Pete’s memories, how do we know whether we can trust what he says? Are there such things as reliable memories?
2. Pete acknowledges his long-ago attraction to Iris Stern, who is now his best friend’s wife. How does that attraction manifest itself in his relationship to Iris’s daughter Laura?
3. Is Pete a bad person, or is he guilty of anything more than honesty? He claims that everything he’s done in his life – from moving to the suburbs to building his medical practice to ruining his friendship with the Sterns - has been for his son, Alec. To what extent do you believe him?
4. How do you think Elaine’s struggle with breast cancer affects her perspective on Alec’s future? Do you think her illness is what shapes her attitude?
5. Discuss Pete's responsibility for the death of Roseanne Craig.
6. Pete is mystified at Laura’s pregnancy, since when he was in high school, “nobody had sex with the Laura Sterns.” How is teenage sexuality presented in this novel? Is it a refuge? A crime? A normal part of adolescence?
7. Pete says throughout the book that he’s a lucky man, although, when we meet him, he’s living in the studio above his garage, his medical practice is in tatters, and he might be heading for a divorce. Why is Pete convinced he’s so lucky? What is his definition of luck?
8. As a culture, we seem to expect life-altering friendships between women, not men. How does this book explore male friendship? How does this friendship differ from the friendships between the women in this book?
9. Elaine accuses Pete of only seeing things in “black and white;” Pete counters that “right is right and wrong is wrong.” As far as he’s concerned, what Laura Stern did to her newborn in the bathroom of the Round Hill Public Library is fundamentally indefensible. Elaine suggests that there are other ways to consider the event. Who do you agree with? Can there be rational explanations for what Laura did, or are some acts inherently and inarguably evil?

10. Alec wants to travel around Europe for a few years, see the great museums, and sell his paintings on the street to support himself. Pete thinks this idea is about as preposterous as any he's ever heard. How do you think Pete would have treated Alec and his goals if he were not the only child? How did Elaine's fertility problems fuel the action of this novel?
11. What is the relationship like between Joe and his father in this book? What is the relationship like between Joe and his older son, Neal? How does Pete assess these relationships when considering his own with his father and his son?
12. Iris tells Pete, "you learn to forgive your children." Has she really forgiven Laura for what she's done? How have Laura's actions affected Iris's marriage?
13. How are the families in this novel twinned? In what respect is Joe's parenting of Laura a mirror of Pete's parenting of Alec?
14. There are five deaths mentioned in this book: those of Joe's father, Pete's father, Laura Stern's baby, Roseanne Craig, and Louis Sherman, the patient who died of septicemia. All physicians encounter death, of course, but how do these particular deaths shape the person Pete is? The doctor Pete is?
15. Of all the relationships in this novel, the most important might be Pete's relationship to the reader. What does Pete want from his reader? What does Pete need his reader to believe, and why?
16. During her confrontation with Pete at her apartment, Laura Stern refuses to change out of her flimsy pajamas. Why won't she change her clothing? Why does Pete smoke her cigarettes?
17. How important is Pete's Jewish heritage to the story of this novel? How important are his beginnings in Yonkers?
18. Why do you think Elaine stays with Pete at the end of the book?