



# Truly madly guilty

By Liane Moriarty

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## Genre & subject

Friendship

Guilt

Married people

Domestic fiction

## Synopsis

Clementine is haunted by regret. It was just a barbeque. They did not even know their hosts that well, they were friends of friends. They could so easily have said no. But she and her husband Sam said yes, and now they can never change what they did and did not do that Sunday afternoon. Six responsible adults. Three cute kids. One playful dog. It is an ordinary weekend in the suburbs. What could possibly go wrong? Marriage, sex, parenthood and friendship: The author takes these elements of our lives and shows us how guilt can expose the fault lines in any relationship, and it is not until we appreciate the fragility of life that we can truly value what we have.

## Author biography

Liane Moriarty (born 1966) is an Australian author. She has written eight novels, including the *New York Times* best seller *Big Little Lies*, which was adapted into a television series for HBO

After leaving school, Moriarty worked in advertising and marketing at a legal publishing company. She then ran her own company for a while before taking work as a freelance advertising copywriter. In 2004, after obtaining a master's degree at Macquarie University in Sydney her first novel *Three Wishes*, written as part of the degree, was published. She has published seven further novels.

Moriarty lives in Sydney with her husband, Adam, a former farmer from Tasmania who worked in agricultural marketing, and two children, George and Anna. She is the older sister of authors Jaclyn Moriarty and Nicola Moriarty.

## Discussion starters

1. Discuss the novel's title. Why do all the characters feel so guilty? Should they? How do they deal with their guilt?
2. The epigraph is a Claude Debussy quote: "Music is the silence between the notes." What does that mean to you? How significant are silences and the unsaid in this novel?
3. What does Clementine mean when she thinks back on the "extraordinary ordinariness" of her life before the barbecue? How is the ordinary treated in this novel? Do you think it's inevitable that we don't appreciate the ordinary? Do we need a life event as jarring as what happened to Sam and Clementine in order to fully appreciate our lives?
4. Were you surprised that Erika and Oliver have a healthier sex life than Clementine and Sam? Discuss Clementine's bleak view of marriage: "sometimes she felt a sense of loss, of actual grief over the loss of their sex life, and other times she wondered if it was all in her head, if she was being typically melodramatic about something natural and inevitable. It happened to everyone, it was

called getting ‘stale,’ it was called marriage.” Do you agree? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the three marriages in this novel?

5. Discuss Clementine and Erika’s complicated friendship: “It was strange, because Clementine always felt that she hid herself from Erika, that she was more ‘herself’ with her ‘true’ friends, where the friendship flowed in an ordinary, uncomplicated, grown-up fashion (emails, phone calls, drinks, dinners, banter and jokes that everyone got), but right now it felt like none of those friends knew her the raw, ugly, childish, basic way that Erika did.” Are the truest friendships the most difficult ones? Or would you say that Erika and Clementine are more like sisters, as Tiffany observes? What did you make of Oliver’s statement: “I’m your best friend, Erika...Don’t you know that?” Do you think best friends of the same gender can be closer than spouses? Why or why not?

6. What did you make of Erika’s request that Clementine donate her eggs? Were you surprised by Clementine’s response? Erika tells Oliver: “We did save Ruby’s life. That’s a fact. Why shouldn’t they repay us by doing something in return? And what does it matter what her motivations are?” Do you agree that in this case “the ends justify the means”?

7. In this novel, parenting is not always easy and wonderful: “No one warned you that having children reduced you right down to some smaller, rudimentary, primitive version of yourself, where your talents and your education and your achievements meant nothing.” What do you think? How do the various mothers and fathers balance family and career?

8. Sylvia’s hoarding is a major source of embarrassment and sorrow for Erika. She reflects: “Her mother loved things so much that she had nothing.” What do you make of that line?

9. Near the end of the novel, Clementine wonders “what sort of person Erika could have been, would have been, should have been, if she’d been given the privilege of an ordinary home. You could jump so much higher when you had somewhere safe to fall.” Do you agree? How are the various characters helped and hindered by their respective childhoods?

10. Discuss Clementine’s revelation about Sam: “Her focus had always been on how his actions affected her feelings, as if his role was to do things for her, to her, and all that mattered was her emotional response to him, as if a ‘man’ were a product or a service, and she’d finally chosen the right brand to get the right response. Was it possible she’d never seen or truly loved him the way he deserved to be seen and loved? As a person? An ordinary, flawed, feeling person?” Does that resonate with you at all?

11. Sam and Clementine can’t understand why they are so affected by the barbecue: “They weren’t fighting over money or sex or housework. There were no knotty issues to untangle. Everything was the same as before the barbecue. It was just that nothing felt the same.” What do they mean by that? How does life change for the three families after the barbecue? Do you think they are ultimately strengthened by what they went through?

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