



Touchstone Reading Group Guide

This Was Not the Plan

Charlie Goldwyn, a white-collar litigator at a prestigious law firm, is poised to become a partner. But at a company party held on what would have been his wife's birthday, he makes a drunken speech that leaves him out of a job and humiliated. His newfound time at home might be a blessing in disguise, though, as Charlie finally has time to connect with his five-year-old son, Caleb. As they spend the summer together, Charlie must confront his long-estranged father and reevaluate his idea of professional success as he comes to terms with the meaning of fatherhood and what matters most.

For Discussion

1. Charlie has a prepared response to justify working for a prestigious law firm that represents clients he doesn't respect, but he contradicts himself when he speaks candidly at an office party. Do you think Mira's birthday, lack of sleep, and stress are mostly to blame for his behavior, or do you think the moral dilemma is the root cause of his outburst? Do you think it is sometimes important to compromise one's principles for the sake of a job?

2. Charlie's drunken comments at the office party and a viral video of the speech cause him to lose his job. Do you think the consequences would have been less severe if the incident had not been leaked to YouTube? Do you think the firm was justified in letting

him go? How has the Internet changed the workplace and the ways in which we interact professionally?

3. Charlie and Zadie's father says he had wanted to be in their lives from the very beginning. Zadie is fairly quick to accept this story; Charlie struggles, but ultimately concedes his father must be sincere. Do you believe their father was completely honest with himself regarding the situation and his intentions toward their mother?

4. According to Charlie's father, their mother refused his money because she didn't want her children to be spoiled, saying that the money would "screw [them] up." Was she justified in her refusal to be helped? In your opinion, would wealth inevitably have spoiled Charlie and Zadie? How much of character development in childhood do you believe is influenced by socioeconomic status? By parenting?

5. Do you think Charlie and Zadie could ever have a full, healthy relationship with their father after so many years of distance? Can people fully heal and truly come together after such a long estrangement?

6. Charlie refuses Fred's offer to join his new legal firm. Is he motivated more by hurt or more by the desire to leave behind the grueling lifestyle he'd been leading? How do you define work-life balance? Is it possible to achieve that balance at a job like Charlie's?

7. According to Zadie, Charlie's dismissal from Hardwick, Mays & Kellerman is a healthy dose of failure. Do you think that being fired was truly what Charlie needed at

this point in his life, or do you think he would inevitably have left of his own accord? Do you think failure always offers a positive learning experience? Consider a time when you failed. How did it affect you?

8. Charlie spends time with his son and works out his complicated feelings for his father as they all spend time together in the Hamptons. What are the lessons Charlie learns from his son? From his father? How does he come to understand fatherhood through his experiences with both of them?

9. Do you think Elise and Charlie made the right decision when they decided not to enter into a relationship right away? Is it likely they will ultimately be together?

10. When Charlie arrives in the Hamptons, he finds his sister, her fiancé, his estranged father, a woman with whom he once had a fling, and his soon-to-be-stepmother. He is initially outraged and uncomfortable with the situation, but with time (and Zadie's encouragement) he accepts the unconventional arrangement. What do you think are the binding moments for this unusual family? Are blood ties the strongest of all? How do you define family?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Each chapter has a title. Discuss with the group which titles you think best address the thematic content of their corresponding chapter. Next, select three to five of your favorite

chapters, and try your hand at creating titles of your own. Talk with the group about why you chose those titles.

2. Following Charlie and Tom's example, exercise your entrepreneurial imagination.

Think of a business you might like to start. Create a business model and company name, and discuss it with the group.

3. Read author Cristina Alger's first novel, *The Darlings*, with your book club. How do the two stories relate to one another? What are the common themes you can identify?

What arguments does Alger make with respect to the world of finance, law, and contemporary high society?

A Conversation with Cristina Alger

Why do we meet Charlie at this point in his life?

I wrote this book shortly after becoming a parent myself. My in-box was filled with e-mails from friends and family that said things about motherhood: "You must be over the moon!" and "Enjoy every minute!" I was deeply in love with my daughter, but also totally overwhelmed by my new role as a mother. I had no idea how to balance a career and a family. I was terrified that I'd never write again, and even more terrified that I'd make a terrible parent. I wanted to write about a character who was at the same place in life as I was, and dealing with the same questions.

You previously worked as a financial analyst and a corporate lawyer before becoming a writer. How much of your personal experience inspired the story and influenced the character of Charlie Goldwyn?

A lot! I'm one of those "write what you know" people. This probably sounds narcissistic, but I like bringing my personal experiences into my writing. It's cathartic, and it's cheaper than therapy.

Charlie's departure from law comes to him as an unwelcome surprise. How did you make the transition from Wall Street and law into creative writing? What was the impetus for your decision to pursue a career as an author?

My departure from the corporate world was thankfully less traumatic than Charlie's. I started working on my first novel, *The Darlings*, while I was an associate at a law firm. It was a passion project—nothing I ever thought would turn into a career. But then I sold the book, and my editor was interested in what I was working on next. The film rights were picked up, and I started developing it into a television series. I knew that if I didn't leave my law firm at that moment and try to make a go of writing, I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

Charlie makes some harsh statements about the Wall Street clients he represents. Does his moral dilemma reflect your own feelings?

Sure, I think many people in finance are faced with moral dilemmas. But Charlie's main concerns are really universal. Parenting is a full-time job. Any time you spend at the office is time away from your kids. If you hate your job or feel unfulfilled by it (as Charlie does) it becomes really hard to justify the trade-off. I know plenty of people who find gratifying and intellectually stimulating careers in law and finance. Charlie just doesn't happen to be one of them.

Your first novel, *The Darlings*, also explores the world of Wall Street and corporate law. How has the experience of writing *This Was Not the Plan* compared to your first novel? Do you think it is more or less difficult to write a second novel? How do you feel you have developed as an author?

I don't know if I've developed as an author, but I've grown a lot as a person since writing *The Darlings*. I'm a parent now, and for me, that's changed everything. For one thing, I have a lot less time in the day to devote to writing. So I try to really enjoy it. I've heard from friends and family that this second book is funnier and warmer and more heartfelt than my first. I love hearing that. I think it reflects my state of mind.

New York City is your home, and the setting for both of your novels. How integral is New York to your identity as an author?

New York for me has always been like a highly neurotic, totally dysfunctional family member who is way too involved with my life. It drives me crazy, but I also love it and

can't imagine living without it. I think that world comes through in both of my novels. My third book—the one I'm working on now—is set in Los Angeles, and it's been a really nice change of pace for me.

Are there any particular challenges you experienced as a woman writing from a man's point of view? Why did you choose to make your principal character male?

When I gave birth to my daughter, I remember thinking how tough my husband had it. I took six months off from work; my husband was expected back in the office the next day. In those first few weeks, neither of us had any idea what we were doing, but at least I was able to breastfeed her. Jonathan's role at home was less clear—and one place we definitely needed him to be was out in the world, making money. We know a lot of dads who basically retreated to the office after their kids were born, and stayed there. In their minds, that was the right place for them to be. I think a lot of men—Charlie included—have this idea that being a “good” dad mainly involves supporting the family financially. But that kind of mentality can be really tough on dads, and I don't think there's enough discussion about it.

You have a lot in common with Charlie. Is he the character with whom you identify most? With whom do you identify least, and why?

I definitely identify with Charlie. I was something of a workaholic before my daughter was born. I probably related the least to Zadie, so I had to work the hardest at developing her character. For me, career has always been a defining part of my life. It was a challenge to write a character who has always been a bit lost professionally but at the

same time isn't lazy or unmotivated. She just hasn't found herself. The same could be said for Charlie; he's just dealt with it in a different way.

If readers had only one takeaway from your novel, what would you want that one thing to be?

Being a parent is tough. We're all just muddling through. I think it's really easy to judge other parents' choices—I'm certainly guilty of that—but at the end of the day, we're all in this together, and no one really has all the answers. We're all doing the best we can.

You are working on your third novel; can you share any details on this project?

My third novel is about a family who once starred in a hit reality television series and have since faded into obscurity. Then, for the first time in fifteen years, the family reunites for the televised wedding of the youngest daughter, and, as with any good wedding, chaos ensues. It's filled with lots of fun, totally off-the-wall characters, and all your typical family issues: sibling rivalry, bad parenting choices, and above all, a deep and abiding love for one another.