

Clutch ^{a novel}

Wise, witty, and at times harrowing, Nemens skillfully weaves the lives of five friends, memorably cemented by time."

– Jill McCorkle

BOOK CLUB GUIDE



EMILY NEMENS

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A Letter from the Author

Dear Readers,

Did you get your tickets to Palm Springs yet? Bella, Carson, Gregg, Hillary, and Reba certainly did, and these friends from college are thrilled for a weekend together, with more sun and less toddlers than their day-to-day existence back home in their respective cities. But the girls' weekend trip that kicks off *Clutch* is more than a belated reunion for a bunch of college pals, two decades into their friendship. Their time in the desert and those psychedelic chocolates serve as a starting bell for three very consequential months in these women's lives. Between their January reunion and Gregg's late March birthday (the big 4-0!), each woman will be tested, and their friendships will be too. Buckle up!

I wrote this book because I love my friends, and I love what friends—our chosen families—can contribute to a life. Friends can support us and enrich our experience of the world, but friendships are not all or only roses...friendships can be hard! There's competition, disappointment, and even, at times, loneliness. I wanted to write about all of it, the complicated work of making and keeping those bonds that aren't written in blood or legally binding. *Clutch* explores the good and the bad of holding someone close, how friendships can be tested as they stretch across years, life stages, and yes, very challenging times.

Clutch is a portrait of friendship, but it's also a picture of America in the present (okay, the very, very recent past—the book is set in early 2023). How does a generation of Americans who have only ever known reproductive freedom come to grips with a post-Dobbs world? What does it mean to be told to lean in at work even as you get a sense that your workplace culture is crooked? What exactly happened to Britney Spears, and what does that say about society? Will we send humans to Mars? The women in *Clutch* ask these questions and a hundred others as they reckon with how to make meaning in their lives. One thing is certain: friendships matter, especially when the going gets tough.

Thank you for spending some time with these beautiful, flawed, big-hearted friends. I hope you love them as much as I do. Welcome to the chat!

Emily

Group Discussion Questions

- 1) *Clutch* opens in Palm Springs, during a weekend trip where the five friends—Gregg, Reba, Bella, Hillary, and Carson—reunite. Why do you think it was important to meet these friends on vacation, rather than in one of their hometowns or at a life event such as a wedding, funeral, or birth? What does this “neutral space” of a girls’ trip allow for?
- 2) Consider the title. Why do you think the author chose “clutch”? The word has many different meanings, and can be used as a noun, adjective, or verb. Which definition(s) resonated most with you?
- 3) Do you have a group of friends that you would consider your “clutch”? How do group chats function in your own life?
- 4) *Clutch* is told from an omniscient point of view. Why do you think the author chose to write the story from this perspective rather than, say, an alternating first person?
- 5) The friend group has known each other for two decades, first meeting during their formative college years. How does their long-shared history affect their present relationships? In what ways does the depth of their bond and the passage of time both strengthen and complicate their connection?
- 6) The women are far-flung across the United States, living in New York, Texas, Illinois, and California. Discuss how locales—both where they currently reside and where the women are from—inform and/or illuminate their personalities.
- 7) “Their wildly different existences were generally an asset to the friendship” (188). Consider the five women’s jobs, personalities, and life goals—is the range an asset in this group? When does difference create conflict and when does it allow for complementary harmony?
- 8) Many of the characters in *Clutch* are in the sandwich generation (caring for both young children and elderly parents). How does this dynamic play out as the novel unfolds?
- 9) How do the women’s significant others impact the central group?
- 10) *Clutch* is a contemporary novel, engaging with technology, current events, politics, and other facets of modern life. Discuss how the novel might’ve been different had it been set ten, twenty, or fifty years ago.
- 11) Consider the ending. What do you think the author wants to convey about friendship and time?

What the women of *Clutch* are reading

Everyone is a reader in *Clutch*—in fact several women are reading books as the story unfolds! Here are reading recommendations from each of the friends, care of Emily:

CARSON *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson. Like Carson, I did a lot of reading about the American justice system in preparation for writing *Clutch*. Stevenson's work with the Equal Justice Initiative to bring dignity and justice to incarcerated individuals inspired her, and me too.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, by Carson McCullers. I didn't pull Carson's namesake out of thin air! The portrait of friendship in this story about a small town is as moving as it is devastating.

REBA *Palo Alto*, by Malcolm Harris. This big, sprawling history of the Bay Area startled Reba with its depth and indictments of capitalist culture, but even if you're not a fifth-generation San Franciscan, Harris's book is a telling, fascinating ride.

Work Won't Love You Back, by Sarah Jaffe. I thought of this as Reba's first book in her post-consulting "reeducation," but it's a compelling read for anyone who's ever invested too much in their day job.

BELLA *The Best of Everything*, by Rona Jaffe. I imagine that this ensemble novel was one of the neglected books on Bella's nightstand, which she'd love if she ever got around to it. It was a touchstone for me as I imagined how to tell the many concurrent stories of *Clutch*.

Death Valley, by Melissa Broder. Did you know there is a subgenre of books about women striking out in the desert? I didn't either until I started seeing them everywhere! I loved this surreal voyage of a woman trying to escape her life.

GREGG *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren. Gregg hardly has time to read when the senate is in session, but I'm sure that this novel, about political corruption in Louisiana, inspired her to fight the good fight.

Mercy Street, by Jennifer Haigh. This book explores several lives that come together at a women's clinic in Boston. It is a thoughtful exploration of abortion in America—made all the more resonant since the Dobbs decision.

HILLARY *Empire of Pain*, by Patrick Radden Keefe. A searing investigation of the forces behind the opioid crisis in America, this was a must-read for Hillary and does a brilliant job of breaking down how pain management became an epidemic.

The Group, by Mary McCarthy. This was another guiding light for me as I wrote *Clutch*, and I'm sure Hillary identified with Polly Andrews, whose on-hard-times father elects to move in with her, and elaborate meals ensue.