

VERY COLD PEOPLE

Sarah Manguso

Discussion Guide

1. Ruth's mother cuts wedding announcements out of the local paper and puts them on the family's refrigerator, despite not knowing any of the people concerned personally. She also carefully irons an old catalog that looks like something a rich person would have and carefully places it on her coffee table. What insights do these details give into her character, and into Ruthie's family life?
2. Discuss the relationship of the weather to daily existence in Waitsfield, particularly for Ruthie and her family. In what way does the severe weather inform their lives?
3. Ruth's parents, especially her mother, behave inappropriately in front of their daughter in so many ways—from sexually explicit acts to asking her about curse words. How do these behaviors affect Ruth?
4. Charlie's little sister tells Ruth she shouldn't have "contradicted" their mother. "I hadn't known that rule," Ruth says to herself. "There must have been others I'd been breaking all the time. I felt sick." What do you think Ruthie means by this, and how does her contact with other friends at school inform the way she regards her own situation?
5. Discuss the tone of the book and Ruth's narration. How does it confront or contradict the experiences she describes, which often contain allusions to abuse?
6. When Ruthie learns more about her extended family, she begins to understand more about her mother's own childhood. What conclusions does she come to?
7. How do the themes of social class, sexism, and power play out across the novel?
8. Why does Ruthie fixate on Winifred Lowell's life? Does this obsession help her in any way?
9. "I barely spoke, but my power was building up in me," Ruth says. "I stockpiled it in silence." What do you feel Ruth's "power" might be here? And how might this power be wielded?
10. What do you consider the novel's turning point? Why?
11. "I took the shame and packed it into my body along with all the shame that had come before," Ruth says. "It was my birthright." Explain what she means by this. How does shame travel down through generations?
12. Discuss the town of Waitsfield and how its girls have been treated. How can so much trauma exist in one town? Why do you think it's so difficult to break the cycle?
13. Why do you think Sarah Manguso chose to call the novel *Very Cold People*? Consider not just the direct quotation it comes from, but the deeper themes throughout the book.



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