



BOOK CLUB KIT

A NOTE FROM MATTHEW NORMAN

Dear Book Clubbers:

Thanks so much for picking *Last Couple Standing*. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. The thought of you all gathered together—drinking whatever you might be drinking—and talking about Jessica and Mitch Butler warms my heart.

I thought I'd take this opportunity to share a bit about what inspired me to write the book.

Like Jessica and Mitch, my wife and I are part of a close-knit group of married couples. This real-life group is much larger than the Core Four—and we don't have a cool nickname—but there are definitely some similarities, like woodsy suburban living and complex relationships with IKEA furniture.

A few years ago, I was out with some of “the husbands.” We were at a restaurant bar in Baltimore waiting to be seated, and—for some reason—the subject of divorce came up. At the time, no one from the group had been divorced yet, so it was still mysterious and abstract.

“What do you think would happen if one of us got divorced?” my friend Mike asked.

Over the course of several drinks and a pile of Old Bay wings, we created a fictional doomsday scenario in which marital dominoes start tumbling. One divorce leads to another, and another, and another. Because, if one couple in a group is unhappy, maybe they all are.

When I got home that night, the novelist part of my brain was still hard at work. This conversation had occurred at the perfect time. I'd just finished my second novel, *We're All Damaged*, and I was trying to figure out what to write next. Later, as I brushed my teeth, the idea hit me, fully formed and ready to go. An outbreak of divorces seemed interesting. But what seemed really interesting were the survivors of that outbreak. The (clears throat) *last couple standing*, if you will. This is their story, and I hope you enjoy discussing it.

Thanks again.
MN



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe Jessica and Mitch's marriage? What do you think is the basis for their connection?
2. Why do you think Jessica and Mitch are so profoundly affected by their friends' divorces?
3. Jessica and Mitch worry that they'll get divorced because their friends have gotten divorced. Have your relationships ever been affected by the successes and failures of other peoples' relationships?
4. Would you ever try an open marriage or relationship? What are some potential benefits and downsides?
5. How have Jessica and Mitch each grown and changed by the end of the story? How do these changes affect their relationship?
6. The dating landscape has changed dramatically since the Butlers first met. Do you think apps like Tinder and Hinge ultimately help or hurt matchmaking in the 21st century?
7. What do you think Scarlett and Luke add to the dynamics of the story? How did you interpret their relationships with Jessica and Mitch?
8. Why do you think Mitch hides the truth about his "date" with Ellen from Jessica? Do you consider this a kind thing to do? Is lying to your significant other ever the "right" thing to do?
9. The author describes Mitch's speech near the end of the book about loving Jessica as being "like the last scene in a thousand movies." But then he points out that movies "always seem to end right when the real work is about to begin." How does *Last Couple Standing* play into classic romantic comedy tropes, and how does it subvert them?
10. Like the Butlers, Matthew Norman lives in Baltimore, and many of the locales mentioned in the novel actually exist. Did the book's setting affect your reading experience, or could it have been set anywhere?
11. "How much easier would life be if, the moment you get married, you take a pill, and everyone else turns plain and boring?" To what extent is marriage defined by its hardships? What traits make a marriage successful? Is endurance key?
12. Best guess: Will Jessica and Mitch still be married in ten years?





FOOD AND DRINK IDEAS FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB EVENT

Let's be honest, the characters in *Last Couple Standing* eat and drink a *lot*. My thought on this: why fight it? That's why we've included some drink and snack suggestions directly from and inspired by the book, along with a few Baltimore favorites.

Enjoy! Also . . . maybe take an Uber home.

CLASSIC MARYLAND CRAB CAKES

Serves: 4



Ingredients

1 lb. jumbo lump or backfin lump crabmeat, fresh or pasteurized
1 large egg
¼ cup mayonnaise
1½ tsp. Dijon mustard
1½ tsp. Old Bay seasoning
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
½ tsp. Worcestershire sauce
Kosher salt
¼ cups fresh breadcrumbs (from soft white sandwich bread, such as Pepperidge Farm)
1 tbs. chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
2 tbs. unsalted butter
1 tbs. olive oil
Lemon wedges for serving

Instructions

1. Drain the crabmeat, if necessary, and pick through it for shells (jumbo lump will not have shells). Put the crab in a medium mixing bowl and set aside.
2. In a small bowl, whisk the egg, mayonnaise, mustard, Old Bay seasoning, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, and ¼ tsp. salt. Scrape the mixture over the crab and mix gently until well combined. Gently break up the lumps with your fingers but do not overmix.
3. Sprinkle the breadcrumbs and the parsley over the mixture, and mix them in thoroughly but gently; try not to turn the mixture into a mash—it should still be somewhat loose. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 1 to 3 hours.
4. Shape the crab mixture into 8 cakes about 1-inch thick. In a 12-inch nonstick skillet, heat the butter with the olive oil over medium heat. When the butter is frothy, add the cakes to the pan (8 should fit comfortably). Cook until dark golden brown on the underside, about 4 minutes. Flip the cakes, reduce the heat to medium low, and continue cooking until the other side is well browned, 4 to 5 minutes. Serve with lemon wedges on the side for squeezing over the cakes.

Credit: FineCooking.com

BLACK-EYED SUSAN COCKTAIL

Serves: 1



Ingredients

1¼ oz. vodka
½ oz. St. Germain liqueur
2 oz. pineapple juice
¼ oz. lime juice
¾ oz. orange juice

Garnish:

Orange slices
Maraschino cherries

Instructions

1. Combine ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice.
2. Shake vigorously.
3. Strain over ice into a Collins glass.
4. Garnish with an orange slice and a cherry.

Credit: Creative-Culinary.com

GREEN TEA SHOT

Serves: 1



Ingredients

½ oz. Irish whiskey, such as Jameson
½ oz. peach schnapps
½ oz. sour mix
Splash of Sprite or other lemon-lime soda
2–4 ice cubes

Instructions

1. Combine the whiskey, peach schnapps, and sour mix in a cocktail shaker with a couple of ice cubes.
2. Shake for about 10 seconds to combine all of the ingredients.
3. Pour your shot glasses ¾ full with the green tea shot mixture, using a bar strainer to keep the ice from falling in.
4. Top off each shot with the lemon-lime soda.
5. Enjoy your green tea shot shortly after it's prepared.

Credit: ChefIso.com

BALTIMORE BERGER COOKIES

Yields 20 cookies



Ingredients

Cookies

- ⅓ cup unsalted butter
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- ⅓ cup milk

Icing

- 2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1½ tbsp. light corn syrup
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- 1½ cups confectioners' sugar, sifted
- ⅛ tsp. salt

Instructions

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Lightly grease (or line with parchment paper) two baking sheets.
 2. **To make the cookies:** In a large mixing bowl, beat together the butter, salt, vanilla, and baking powder.
 3. Beat in the sugar, then the egg.
 4. Add the flour to the wet ingredients alternately with the milk, beginning and ending with the flour. Do this gently; there's no need to beat the batter.
 5. Using a spoon or a cookie scoop, drop the dough onto the prepared cookie sheets. The balls of dough should be about 1¼-inches diameter. Flatten each mound of dough to a circle about 1½-inches across; wet your fingers or a knife, or grease the bottom of a drinking glass or measuring
- cup to do this. Leave 2- to 2½-inches between each cookie, for expansion.
6. Bake the cookies for about 10 to 11 minutes, or until they're a mottled brown on the bottom (carefully tilt one up to look), but not colored on top. You may see the barest hint of browning around the edges, but these cookies are supposed to be soft and cake-like, so don't over-bake them. Remove the cookies from the oven, and let them cool right on the pan as you make the frosting.
 7. **To make the icing:** Place the chocolate chips, corn syrup, vanilla, and cream into a large microwave-safe bowl, or into a large saucepan.
 8. Heat the mixture until it's very hot; the cream will start to form bubbles. Remove from the heat, and stir until smooth.
 9. Beat in the confectioners' sugar and salt. Let cool to warm room temperature while you make the cookies.
 10. Dip the top of each cookie into the warm icing; swirl the cookie around to really give it a good coating. Set the cookies back on the baking sheet.
 11. Spread the remaining icing evenly atop the cookies. If it's too soft and flows off the cookies, let it set a bit until it's firmer. It'll feel like you're piling on a lot of icing; that's precisely the point!
 12. Allow the icing to set completely, then store the cookies airtight in a single layer. Keep at room temperature for several days; freeze for longer storage.

Credit: KingArthurFlour.com

MUSIC PLAYLIST INSPIRED BY THE NOVEL

One thing you may have noticed about *Last Couple Standing* is that there are musical references everywhere. I assure you, that's not an accident.

Early on in my writing career, I made a commitment to use music whenever possible to help shape the moods of my scenes. I figured if movies could do it, why couldn't I, right? The result, I hope, are moments that feel and sound—at least in your head—more vivid and real than they otherwise would.

Here's a list of songs that either come directly from the book or are inspired by key moments. For extra Book Club credit, you're encouraged to make a Spotify playlist and turn it up just loud enough to annoy your neighbors.

- “Mrs. Robinson” by Simon & Garfunkel
- “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” by Paul Simon
- “Lonely Boy” by The Black Keys
- “Howlin’ for You” by The Black Keys
- “Faithfully” by Journey
- “Any Way You Want It” by Journey
- “Both Sides, Now” by Joni Mitchell
- “Big Yellow Taxi” by Joni Mitchell
- “1979” by The Smashing Pumpkins
- “Tonight, Tonight” by The Smashing Pumpkins
- “Hypnotize” by The Notorious B.I.G.
- “Big Poppa” by The Notorious B.I.G.
- “Loyalty” by Kendrick Lamar
- “Runnin’ Down a Dream” by Tom Petty
- “Don’t Do Me Like That” by Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers
- “Mr. Jones” by Counting Crows
- “Accidentally in Love” by Counting Crows
- “Friday I’m in Love” by The Cure
- “Lovesong” by The Cure
- “Ooh La La” by Faces
- “You Give Love a Bad Name” by Bon Jovi
- “Maggie May” by Rod Stewart
- “Love Will Keep Us Together” by Captain & Tennille

