


Book
Club
Kit



The Daughters *of* Erietown A Novel Connie Schultz

WINNER *of the* PULITZER PRIZE



A Letter from Connie Schultz

Dear Reader,

For as long as I can remember, I have loved reading fiction. When I was a child, novels gave me a glimpse into worlds far away from our working-class lives in small-town Ohio. As a young adult, fiction helped me find the words for who I was becoming, and who I wanted to be. Throughout my journalism career, my rule for bedtime reading has never changed: Only stories from other writers' minds are allowed to fill up mine before I fall asleep.

In the last decade or so, I found myself yearning for more novels telling the stories of people with my roots. Most of us are just a generation or two from the working class, but where are their stories? Even when a blue-collar character shows up, too often he or she is either romanticized or cast as oafish and incidental. This bears no resemblance to the smart, hardworking people I knew growing up, and who I cherish as friends and neighbors now.

My parents raised me to understand that rich people had no monopoly over dreams and aspirations. What I learned over time, though, is that those dreams can die when life brings big problems and you can't afford to fix them. And one big chance can change everything. I was the first in my family to go to college. That changed the trajectory of my life, but it will never erase the people I come from.

They're the reason I wrote *The Daughters of Erietown*. The characters are fictional, but they carry in their hearts the hopes and dreams of so many souls who helped raise me. "Perhaps one can only tell the truth in fiction," May Sarton wrote. If so, this is the truest story I've ever told.

Connie Schultz

Recipes

To Eat

During lean times in *The Daughters of Erietown*, Ellie McGinty becomes an expert in turning a can of Spam into a casserole that can feed a family of six. She has a lot in common with my mom, who never saw a Spam recipe she couldn't turn into a bountiful, and sometimes alarming, meal for our family. A family favorite in the '60s and '70s was Spam Meatloaf, and I am happy to report the recipe is still available.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup cottage cheese
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 cup egg noodles
- 1 can Spam, sliced into ¼-inch cubes
- 2 tablespoons minced onions
- A bit of minced garlic or garlic powder
- ½ tablespoon of salt
- Grated cheese (any kind will do)
- Tabasco sauce

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Cook the noodles as instructed on package.
3. Drain, and mix in cottage cheese and sour cream.
4. Add the Spam cubes and seasoning.
5. Scoop it all into a greased, 2-quart casserole dish.*
6. Sprinkle with cheese.
7. Bake for about 40 minutes.

* Mom always made this in her Blue Cornflower Corning Ware casserole dish. I'm not saying this is necessary. I just can't see the meatloaf without those blue flowers.

To Drink

I can still remember the first time Mom called home from a bar. I was babysitting my siblings. She was out with Dad, probably at the Crow's Nest, which still exists in Ashtabula. Dad was surely drinking beer—Schlitz if they had it, because it was almost spelled like Schultz—but Mom had taken her first sip of a new after-dinner drink. "It's called a grasshopper, Connie," she said. "And it's green." She talked about it for weeks.

Ingredients:

- ¾ ounces of crème de menthe
- ¾ ounces white crème de cacao
- ¼ ounce heavy cream
- ¾ cup of ice

Directions:

Throw it all into a blender and pulse until smooth. Pour into the fanciest glass you own and call someone to brag.

Discussion Questions

1. How is the American Dream portrayed in this novel?
2. How did your impressions of the characters change throughout the novel, and at which points did they change?
3. What roles do truth and regret play in the story? What are the consequences of guilt and remorse?
4. Brick recites a nursery rhyme in the scene of his death, “One, two, four, five / Once I caught a fish alive.” What do you think this nursery rhyme represents for him?
5. How did the novel’s ending change the way you view the mother-daughter relationship between Ellie and Sam?
6. At one point, Brick “cowers from Ellie’s God.” How does religion in the book add another dimension to how the characters see each other?
7. If Brick or Ellie could have gone back and done things differently, would they have? What should they have done?
8. Brick diagrams for Rosemary how he makes electricity in the same way he previously did for his children. What do the echoes between these two scenes symbolize?
9. Ellie says that Nessa was the happiest woman she had ever known. What might this tell us about how Ellie views her own life choices?
10. What does the lighter Ellie gave Brick represent at various stages of their relationship?
11. In what ways, if any, did the characters overcome trauma from prior generations?
12. What did you think of various characters’ potential for forgiveness?