

THE FREEDOM CLAUSE

BY HANNAH SLOANE



BOOK CLUB KIT

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READERS:

The seed of the idea for this novel came years ago. I was in London, at a friend's house for dinner. It was getting late when she shared, unexpectedly, that she wished she'd met her husband later, specifically ten years later (they met at university). It would've been fun to date in her twenties, she continued. I glanced at her husband, wondering what he had to say about this, but it was a topic they'd discussed already. They both would have preferred more experiences in their twenties. There was no desire to course correct the past at this stage in their marriage. It wasn't a deep regret. It was a passing thought, spoken wistfully, in the same manner one might murmur: I wish I'd lived in Paris at some point.

That evening sat idly in my head for years. My friend's remark fascinated me, mainly because it posed a myriad of other questions. Is there a perfect age to meet your partner? And if you do meet your partner sooner than you'd like, is there a way to manufacture experiences with others within the safe confines of your existing relationship? While my friend and her husband considered which defining moments they might have missed out on, I reflected on my twenties too.

As an idealistic teen, I'd had big plans for this decade. I'd nurture my independence and my yet-to-be-defined career, living life on my terms, discovering who I was. And once I'd done that (hopefully as the end of my twenties sharpened into focus), the right person would waltz into my life. And while a lot of that did happen, there was plenty I didn't anticipate. While it was fun to date, most of my relationships were short-lived, and there was nothing fun about getting my heart broken (often). But most of all, I'd neglected to factor in bad sex, lots of it, or just how long it would take for me to understand sex, to enjoy it, to assert what I needed. Much of my twenties were strange, a mundane slog, a too-steep learning curve, but I was checking the experience box. Would I have felt differently if I'd spent the entirety of that decade cocooned in a forever relationship?

By the time I started seriously considering this idea as a novel, with an actual plot and characters, and pacing and tension, I was navigating other questions too. I was 37. I was in a long-term committed relationship, but rather than happily cocooned, I felt stuck and anxious. I tried to compartmentalize these feelings, ignoring the uneasy twinge in my stomach late at night. Why didn't I just end it, you might ask? Because ending a committed relationship in my mid-to-late-thirties felt like an enormous personal failure. Because the single woman in her forties is not a celebrated figure. Because I was worried

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about how the breakup would impact him (classic people-pleaser move). Because I didn't want to go against the grain of societal pressure, which dictates that the women we aspire to be in our thirties, the women who are truly accomplished, are married or in relationships headed in this direction. Finally, at a wedding in Italy, as I watched my friend who was clearly, deeply, wonderfully in love exchanging vows with her husband-to-be, I made a vow of my own. I broke up with my boyfriend a week later. I was 37, and very single, and exactly where I needed to be in life. And I decided to channel my experiences and emotions into this book.

Initially, I was writing *The Freedom Clause* for my younger, less-experienced self. I wanted to rewrite the romanticized, misleading versions of dating, and more specifically sex, that I had seen across countless mediums. For years, women have been informed through movies and books and porn that sex is beautiful and effortless—which is simply, and categorically, untrue. In writing Daphne's first sex scene, I set out to write about the kind of sex that leaves you feeling vulnerable and exposed. The kind of sex that serves as a reminder you are young and insecure and clueless. The kind of sex that leaves you with a distinct sense of loneliness, an overarching concern that there is something wrong with you. It was not difficult to write this scene, as these moments were deeply familiar to me.

But as the book developed, I began to write this novel for my current self too, for the woman looking to define herself beyond romantic relationships and societal expectations. I wanted to reimagine the traditional definitions of a relationship by exploring what happens when a couple tests the waters of freedom. Most of all, I wanted to write about a young woman on a journey of self-assertion and how finding her own sexual confidence plays out in other areas of her life, particularly as she ignores external pressures and focuses on what she needs. These are the women we must aspire to be, and these women are truly accomplished.

HANNAH SLOANE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Dominic and Daphne meet young, their first week at university. How do you think their age impacts the arc of their relationship over the course of the novel?
2. When reflecting on the beginning of their relationship, Daphne says she “felt seen, admired” and that Dominic “remained demonstrative.” How did their perceptions of each other change over time?
3. Daphne says she “wanted her twenties to be a period that liberated and defined her.” What key moments did she miss out on during those years in marrying Dominic? Do you believe in the popular belief that your twenties are made up of key moments and decisions that will impact the rest of your life—more so than any other decade of your life? Why or why not?
4. How do you feel about Daphne’s attitude towards, and relationship with, her body? How does the Freedom Clause alter her image of herself?
5. Would you ever agree to a “freedom clause” in your relationship? Why or why not? What stipulations would you add or change?
6. While *The Freedom Clause* starts with a couple and a marriage, it ultimately focuses on the surprising revelations of what happens when a woman asks for what she wants. Why do you think this is a particular struggle for women? Did this novel inspire you to ask for something you want and, if so, how?
7. Discuss the importance of the epigraph in relation to the novel: “It had not occurred to him that she might not consider herself to be the minor character and him the major character. In this sense, she had unsettled a boundary, collapsed a social hierarchy, broken with the usual rituals.”
8. Why do you think Daphne turns to food as a means for comfort and processing as she navigates the Freedom Clause? And why do you think her newsletter took off in the way it did? How did these recipes add to your reading experience? What was your favorite recipe?
9. What do you think of Dominic’s arc as a character? Do you think he is, at heart, a “good guy,” or is he irredeemable, and why?
10. Consider the following quote from the novel: “the flip side of loving Dominic so intensely is his ability to inflict hurt.” Do you believe the people who you love the most, have the power to hurt you the most? Why or why not?

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11. How do you think Dominic and Daphne's distinct relationships with their families impact the way they see themselves and their relationship?
12. Daphne has never felt interested in motherhood, whereas Dominic believes they will have children once "her maternal instincts magically kick in." Do you think a relationship can work if someone wants children and the other doesn't? What do you consider non-negotiable when considering a long-term partner? Discuss.
13. The Freedom Clause begins as an agreement to explore a little freedom outside the traditional confines of marriage. But what other forms of freedom do both Daphne and Dominic discover over the course of the novel?
14. Before they come up with the Freedom Clause, Dominic and Daphne both recognize that they haven't been having much sex. Dominic worries about it, as "men prioritize sex over everything," but Daphne hasn't really noticed, and later, she reflects that she is, perhaps, just "not a sexual person." How important do you think sex is in a relationship?
15. What do you think about how Dominic and Daphne's story ends? Do you wish the novel had a different ending?