



# Maine

*J. Courtney Sullivan*

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## **Maine** J. Courtney Sullivan

In her best-selling debut, *Commencement*, J. Courtney Sullivan explored the complicated and contradictory landscape of female friendship. Now, in her highly anticipated second novel, Sullivan takes us into even richer territory, introducing four unforgettable women who have nothing in common but the fact that, like it or not, they're family.

For the Kellehers, Maine is a place where children run in packs, showers are taken outdoors, and old Irish songs are sung around a piano. Their beachfront property, won on a barroom bet after the war, sits on three acres of sand and pine nestled between stretches of rocky coast, with one tree bearing the initials "A.H." At the cottage, built by Kelleher hands, cocktail hour follows morning mass, nosy grandchildren snoop in drawers, and decades-old grudges simmer beneath the surface.

As three generations of Kelleher women descend on the property one summer, each brings her own hopes and fears. Maggie is thirty-two and pregnant, waiting for the perfect moment to tell her imperfect boyfriend the news; Ann Marie, a Kelleher by marriage, is channeling her domestic frustration into a dollhouse obsession and an ill-advised crush; Kathleen, the black sheep, never wanted to set foot in the cottage again; and Alice, the matriarch at the center of it all, would trade every floorboard for a chance to undo the events of one night, long ago.

By turns wickedly funny and achingly sad, *Maine* unveils the sibling rivalry, alcoholism, social climbing, and Catholic guilt at the center of one family, along with the abiding, often irrational love that keeps them coming back, every summer, to Maine and to each other.

## **Maine Details**

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Author : J. Courtney Sullivan

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## From Reader Review Maine for online ebook

### Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

Families are the places we share the most happy times and the most miserable times, the greatest joys and the most pain, places where people lift us up to become our best selves and tear us down to our worst. Maine is a book about families.

There is wisdom about families in this book. Here's a little about having a child:

"No one had told Kathleen about the dark parts of motherhood. You gave birth and people brought over the sweetest little shoes and pale pink swaddling blankets. But then you were alone, your body trying to heal itself while your mind went numb. There was a mix of joy and the purest love, coupled with real boredom and occasional rage. It got easier as the kids got older, but it never got easy."

We who have raised children know the truth of this. Powerful.

And then there is this thoughtful look at why families aren't always helpful:

"But maybe your family could never give you the perfect response, the kindest reply. Maybe their vision of you was too tied up in their hopes and fears for them to ever see you as just you."

Best of all, I loved these thoughts on marriage:

"You all seem to think that you should marry someone when you feel this intense emotion, which you call love. And then you expect that the love will fade over time, as life gets harder. When what you should do is find yourself a nice enough fellow and let real love develop over years and births and deaths and so on."

Very moving saga full of secrets and lies and cruelties and, most of all, the love that combine to make a family.

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### Kim G says

Blah.

I know these ladies. I'm a Masshole with a big, multi-class Irish Catholic family that spent at least a week every summer up in Wells. I'm related to these characters.

Except for I'm not, because even the Alice in my life is infinitely more complex than this. So is the Ann Marie. And they have hearts. These characters are BLOODLESS, it's infuriating. They keep showing up for their 400 pages, never straying from their caricature base, never doing much of anything.

Digging deep, I guess I could muster up some positive things to say about the presentation of the generational differences between these women and their concepts of their motherhood, but it's all drowned out by too much blah blah blah.

One thing that drove me particularly insane? The aftermath of the house reveal, and how the son was like "Oh well, she's got a will, lawyer says there's nothing we can do." BULLLLLLLLLLL\* lazy plot device, what family wouldn't start tearing each other apart for a 2 million+ spread? I guess the story could have become too interesting if the author went there.

And why was there a middle sister who lived in JP? Why did she even exist, other than to add to Alice's brood to justify her misery? To throw another gay grandchild in the mix? To get some more muddled Catholicism shout-out points?

So many extraneous characters that were useless. So many. And yet nothing really happens. BLAH.

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### **Lisa Schmeiser says**

Every once in a while, I think to myself, "Self, you should probably break out of your fantasy and scifi genre and read one of those books about generations of women who are so witless to keep perpetuating the same psychological battles down through the years. I always see women reading these on the ferry or on planes, they seem like the kind of women who get asked to book clubs, and you've really wanted to be part of a book club. So if you read it, perhaps they will come."

And then I pick up a book like this, where every woman's problem can be solved with a decent therapist and some rigorously enforced boundaries around their more damaged family members, and I think, "This is why I'll never be in a book club."

To call the writing "workmanlike" is to insult the practiced diligence with which actual workmen do their jobs. The writer has active contempt for at least one of her alleged protagonists and is clearly on the fence about another two, so why should the reader dispute her? The whole thing was like reading a really sad blog from someone who desperately wants their life to have a bigger meaning and knows deep down it never will.

I clearly do not have the mind to appreciate this kind of book, or this specific book. No book clubs for me!

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### **Dani Peloquin says**

Many of you may remember by review of the author's first novel "Commencement". While I didn't give it that great of a review, I did mention that I was looking forward to reading her books in the future as I thought she had some potential as a writer. It is for this reason that I jumped at the chance to her new novel "Maine". This is certainly very different from her first novel and I love it!

The novel follows four women in the Kelleher family during a monumental summer at their beach house in Maine. Alice, the matriarch, is a strong willed and loose tongued woman who feels little affection for her family. She finds it difficult to relate to her children and grandchildren despite the fact that they are her blood. Her sections flash back and forth between the current summer at her house in Maine and an event from her past that still plagues her with guilt after over 60 years. Kathleen, Alice's daughter, is the misfit in

the family. She is a recovering divorcee with two children and a worm farm in California that she runs with her boyfriend. Her and Alice have always butted heads which was only exacerbated with Kathleen's father died. However, a momentous event causes Kathleen to uproot herself from her peaceful life in California and come east one last time to face her demons...and her mother. Anne-Marie, Alice's daughter-in-law, is the character everyone loves to hate. She was a stay at home mom who is a stickler for proper manners and etiquette. Though she was from the wrong side of the tracks, she has abandoned most of her past in hopes of becoming an upper-class socialite. Her only problem is her dysfunctional children and distant husband. Maggie, Kathleen's daughter, has always looked for love in all of the wrong places. Unfortunately, this last place left her pregnant and alone. She goes to Maine in an effort to get back to herself and plan her next move. When these four women are forced to share a house (or two), fights erupt, skeletons are unleashed from closets, and their love of family is tested.

I know this sounds like a lot of material, but Sullivan pulls it off without ever confusing the reader. Each character has her own dynamic and personality which is a feat when writing a novel that is constructed of all female narrators. Interestingly, none of the characters are likeable but I was still hooked on their every word. Perhaps the reason is that every family has an Alice, Kathleen, and Anne-Marie. The dynamics between the four women was fascinating and completely real. I would have enjoyed some insight from the men in the family, but I think that's another book as this one is all about the Kelleher matriarchy. Some reviewers were annoyed that the book didn't have more to do with Maine and wasn't really a beach read. Both of these statements are true. If you're looking for chick lit complete with a quirky main character and prince charming, this is absolutely not your book. If you're looking for a book that drops the names of various towns and restaurants in Maine so if you have been to Maine you can feel like you're "in the know"...this is not it! This is a reasonably dark family drama that just happens to be set on the beach. Unfortunately, I could not give this book five stars because some of the Kathleen sections were a bit clichéd or clunky. I felt that all of the other women were well developed and unique. However, I felt like I had met Kathleen before in many novels and Lifetime movies. Still, it didn't hurt my opinion of the novel which I will certainly be recommending.

[www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com](http://www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com)

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### **Eliza says**

I found this book highly readable but ultimately unsatisfying. Sullivan is a talented storyteller but there is little substance in her writing. I was thinking about how Jonathan Franzen (and many of his reviewers) were widely criticized. Why, people asked, do his books get so much attention when they are "just" domestic novels, not unlike so many similar novels written by women? But I believe Jonathan Franzen is a wonderful example of an author using the domestic setting to explore powerful ideas about modern life. Other examples that come to mind are Jennifer Haigh and Anna Quindlen. The world and characters created by Sullivan in Maine had potential for similar exploration but lack of analysis and cohesion left them meaningless. This lack of substance is particularly exemplified by the ending; I felt like Sullivan reached her desired word count and then stopped writing. Initially I planned to recommend this novel as I did enjoy much of the story. Unfortunately, the inconsistencies, loose ends and overall shallowness have caused it to sour in my mind.

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## **Jen says**

Note to Good Reads: I hate that you don't have half stars! Two stars seems a bit too critical, but three stars feels too much to award this book. It's finely written, and I loved the construct of offering differing points of view from three generations of women in one family. The author balances this juxtaposition well, effortlessly switching from one character's voice to another. And the great success of the book, for me, is that the author illustrates so well how no one can really ever know another, nor fully understand them. Unfortunately, I think she was a little too good at it b/c ultimately, none of these characters really alter their views of each other in any meaningful way. There's very little character growth, which may be accurate to real life, but frankly makes for a frustrating novel. I kept wanting these women to connect, even just the littlest bit. But we have to wait more than half the book before they are even at the same place at the same time. I thought surely, once that transpired, that something would actually happen...but nothing does, really. The same old patterns are fallen into, and the same old judgments prevail. The book is well-written with richly drawn characters that aren't particularly likeable, yet are each fascinating in their own way...and I found that interesting and readable, but also ultimately unsatisfying. I wish the author could have allowed at least some of the characters to connect a little more than they do. I think it would have made for a richer book, without sacrificing the main theme. My two cents.

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## **CC says**

Two stars means it was "okay" and that's all the enthusiasm I can muster for this one. The cover pulled me in, a woman on a beach, green sky surrounding her. It promised a fun literary beach read and unfortunately, for me, it didn't really deliver.

Three generations of Boston/Irish woman and another daughter in-law meet at the family's beach cottage (and two million dollar main house) in Maine. The narrative is told from the four women's points of view, which was a lot to overcome since only one and a half of the women were interesting. The third (Maggie) was stupid; the fourth (Kathleen), a bitch. The writing was fine -- but the two stars isn't about the writing.

The book is 85 percent backstory. Literally. And only matriarch Alice's backstory was interesting, woven in the mystery of her popular older sister's death. I didn't mind Ann Marie so much, her life of people-pleasing and grasping for joy felt real. But the rest of the pages were nothing but frivolity and petty, insignificant half-drama. Nothing happened. It took until page 200 for anyone besides Alice to even show up at the cottage. The so-called insights were too slight, and too few and far between to warrant the huge and sprawling backstories. Tough to wade through all that when the characters are unappealing/uninteresting.

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## **K says**

I had an odd reaction to this book. I have so many criticisms, and yet I found it surprisingly engaging in spite of its flaws. I wouldn't quite give it three stars -- it was way too flawed for that -- but it's actually a high two, as opposed to a low two.

This is one of those chick lit family dramas, three generations of women in one dysfunctional family, multiple viewpoints, blah blah blah. I can't remember the last time I read a book like this and thought it was well done; they're usually in the three-star range for me at best. So there's the matriarch, crusty 80-year-old

Alice Kelleher, a pretty unsympathetic character although her daughter Kathleen is worse -- what a nasty, self-righteous jerk. Kathleen picks terribly on her sister-in-law Anne Marie, who has spent decades being the perfect Stepford wife and is slowly unraveling. And then there's Kathleen's daughter, Maggie, who is really too stupid to live.

Everyone has some kind of a time bomb brewing, and of course the four women will eventually come together and discover each other's time bombs in one big family mess. Alice's is that she has willed her summer home to the church, not to her kids. Anne Marie's is that she has a secret crush on her neighbor's husband even as she strives to maintain the facade of her perfect marriage and family. I'm not sure what Kathleen's is, but in any case she comes into the picture because of Maggie's crisis. Maggie's crisis is probably the most dramatic -- she is single and secretly pregnant, having taken a chance because she was blindly in love with her boyfriend. Said boyfriend's jerkiness is incredibly obvious to just about everyone but Maggie (really, J. Courtney Sullivan should have given him a few redeeming features other than Maggie's lust for him; it would have made the story far more believable, not to mention interesting), who is willing to risk the pregnancy because she's sure things will work out with this guy. Sigh.

Anyway, the book is incredibly slow. Very heavy on detailed backstory without a whole lot happening in the present for most of the book. The characters, as mentioned, are unsympathetic and not very three-dimensional, for all of the author's attempts at fleshing them out by keeping the reader in backstory hell instead of moving the plot along. Anne Marie was probably the most believable character but even she often felt like the author was trying too hard to depict her as a trope (the increasingly resentful Stepford wife who needs to make everything look perfect in order to feel in control) as opposed to making her a complicated person.

So why did I keep listening, especially when for once I had other tempting audiobooks to choose from? Well, as my sister noted, there was a weird voyeuristic appeal to feeling like I was eavesdropping on someone else's family dysfunction. The gossip, the griping, the secret and not-so-secret resentments, the miscommunications, etc. -- most of the book wasn't particularly dramatic but it still resembled the experience of watching a soap opera in that sense, where you get caught up in other people's issues so you can briefly forget your own. Also, the audiobook reader was actually quite good -- very expressive and authentic-sounding in the voices of the various characters. While I can't say I'll miss this book now that I've finally finished it, it did kind of keep me company on my commute and distract me from my own stuff. I can't give it an enthusiastic recommendation, but it was okay, which I guess is what the two-star rating is meant to indicate.

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### **ilovebakedgoods (Teresa) says**

I felt like I read a different book/story than the one the jacket made me believe I was going to get. I didn't like many of the characters AT ALL, I don't even understand how these people got together every year at the cottage when they seemingly hated one another for so long. I don't know..too much to get into and I'm a very lazy reviewer, but while I don't feel like every character I come to know should be happy all the time, I can't stand reading about the most miserable people on the planet and that's what most of these people felt like to me. The matriarch was a hateful bitch and I didn't feel one ounce of sympathy toward her when her "secret" was revealed. She was horrible from youth to adulthood, why would I feel bad for her at all? (I got the feeling that as readers we were supposed to feel bad for her but maybe I'm wrong). The secret she carried was from young adulthood so it's not like I could even feel like, "Ohhh, now I see why she's so miserable, poor thing!", since she revealed herself to be a pretty shitty person even as a child/teenager.

The writing itself was not bad, I just wish I could have cared about these people and their lives and outcomes more. That is to say, at all. I think Maggie was the only one I actually cared about.

edit: I think it's Kathleen that I liked, not Maggie. I liked the "black sheep", that's all I remember now. Reading the stock description of this book makes me think I meant to say Kathleen, not Maggie in my review. Maggie, from what I recall, was fairly spineless but it's been so long since I read this that I can't recall strongly liking or disliking her. I don't care for spineless women, though, in general. Kathleen was the black sheep because she was the only one who stood up for herself, though she was a bit of a bitch. Ann Marie was okay but came off rather foolishly and we all know what I think about Alice already (she's the matriarch).

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## **Marci says**

See below... I finished the book. There was no good news. The characters were all thin, 1-dimensional angry/bitter or victims with NO redeeming qualities and few redeeming actions (which were performed grudgingly at best.) The male characters were simply parsley on the plate used ONLY to showcase the women...the entire premise of the book apparently was "life's a bitch and then you die".

I am in the middle of this book...I have only gotten this far because...I continue to believe, that with a barn full of sh\*t... there MUST be a pony in there SOMEWHERE, and... SOMEONE actually PUBLISHED this book!! I want to meet the author; I want to ask her WHY she is so angry; who hurt her this badly that ALL of her characters (Alice, her 2 daughters and her 1 daughter-in-law, and then the grandchildren... all adults) are SOOOOOOOOOO angry, dysfunctional, "victims"... whiney, neurotic and generally completely unlikeable. Even the healthiest of her daughters (the one she hated the most) has her own issues ... but she is the most palatable...

Alice, the primary protagonist, takes great pleasure at the cruelties she inflicted onto her children. Frighteningly, I don't get the impression that the author means for these to horrify...

I am -- nearly 1/2 way through the book; so far, her son, and the husbands of her daughters have been mentioned ONLY in the mildest of passing... the author killed off Alice's husband, Daniel (who seemed to be a genuinely decent man and loving father early on.

This book MAY have some redeeming value somewhere along the way, and maybe at the end; so far, I wouldn't have lunch with any of these characters (except for Daniel... who had the good sense to die) let alone befriend them. Who knows; maybe something mystical and magical will occur and they will all get redeeming personalities and lives!

This book is now overdue at the library; I tried to renew it, but there is a hold on it. I laughed out loud. Sadly, the library's online system doesn't have a place to put "patron waiting for this book doesn't know when she's well off. Tell her to be grateful I am a book hog and move on."!!!!

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## **Laura says**

I thought a book with the title "Maine" would portray the state as an integral part of the story. However, this



book could have taken place anywhere. The author did little to set the story in Maine other than citing a few local references. The characters were not well-developed and I found myself only mildly curious about them. The plot was thin and predictable, with Catholic guilt, Irish alcoholism, and sibling rivalry as major themes. Despite the dust-jacket blurb, I didn't find anything "wickedly funny or achingly sad" in this book. Some of the dialog, particularly during the '40's flashbacks, was incongruous. "Flummoxed" is used several times, both in the '40's and current times, for example. The first half of the book focused on the lead-up to Alice's tragic secret and the genesis of her guilt. This secret was the reason for her marriage, her alcoholism and her dissatisfaction with her life, but it took so long to get to this point that I just didn't care, and it was hard to see Alice in a sympathetic light. It seemed as if the author just ran out of things to say and, rather than tie the various plot lines together, crafted a cute you-figure-it-out ending that left me unsatisfied. This book was an exercise in schadenfreude.

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### **Courtney says**

Absolutely loved this book. I thoroughly enjoyed "Commencement", and Sullivan did not disappoint with her latest novel, "Maine." I truly loved the characters in this book and felt invested in them, and enjoyed the story-telling aspects that took us into the earlier part of the 20th century. I read it on my Kindle, where I have the opportunity to highlight passages or phrases that move me, and found myself doing it frequently with this book- mostly in relation to personal experiences. I found myself nodding along with the characters at several points, which usually leads me to label something a good read. I was also able to find myself in each character, at least in some small way, which is a credit to Sullivan's immense writing talent.

I read this book in a day, during the busiest time of year in my job, because it was that good and I couldn't put it down. Now I will just have to wait until Sullivan writes another.....

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### **Jane says**

I had to stop about 30% into the book (I'm reading it on a Kindle and it doesn't show page numbers but percentage) because well, it's just not very good writing. ...The author makes such a crucial mistake in writing which is she fails to SHOW what's happening and instead TELLS you what's happening. Therefore NOTHING HAS BEEN HAPPENING! All I've been reading is the back story of the first two characters, Alice and Kathleen. Don't tell me Alice is a self-conscious, judgmental, unsupportive mother. Show me her carefully getting ready in the morning, going for a walk, weighing herself, let me read a conversation she is currently having with one of her children where she judges them. I don't need the author to explain every single thought going through a character's head and the clear cut reason for their actions. Part of the joy of reading is that I get to figure that out for myself. Be subtle sometimes! I always try to improve my own writing and this book was a good example of how telling and not showing ruins the entire story.

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### **Vicki says**

The cover of this book is misleading -- I think that's upsetting a lot of readers, and that's probably fair. While the book IS set mainly on a beach in Maine, there's not too much that's lighthearted about this novel. But then, what are you going to show? 4 women angrily glaring at each other?

On the other hand, this book is exactly the kind of beach read that I do like. Good drama, easy to get wrapped up in, and a moving story. Three generations of women share the chapters in this book, and the moment that I became impressed with this novel was the moment that I realized I had sympathy for each woman. As readers, we naturally want to draw ourselves to a character to experience the world of the story. What was great about this was that at times, I found myself lining up with each character -- even the awful ones. That's a hell of a hat trick. Very good writing.

And, I don't know. It's just interesting to think of the moments where you leave your family behind to move away from what ails you about them. And if you can come back to it but still let it go. A great book. And actually a nice beach read, too.

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## **Melodie says**

Three generations of family struggle with their expectations, desires and relationships with one another. Points of view are Alice the matriarch, daughter Kathleen, daughter in-law Ann Marie and grand-daughter Maggie.

The one thing beyond family ties that they have in common is a beach front property in Maine. Loved, coveted and harbor of memories good and bad. The one place that draws them inexplicably together is also the biggest bone of contention. And when all four women descend upon the place, the stage is set for high drama.

I struggled with this book from beginning to end. The characters were difficult for me to empathize with. Each of them were on my last nerve constantly. Alice with her passive aggressiveness and drinking problem, Kathleen with her viper's tongue and delight in other's pain. Maggie in her desperate attempt to hang on to a guy who clearly was a liar and cheat, and Ann Marie with her desperate need to be perfect.

There is nothing more complex than relationships among women especially within a family. But I really had trouble with all the extreme bitterness displayed. Most of the book was back story on the women. By the time they all came together at the beach, I was so ready to be done. And for me nothing was really resolved.

Maybe that was the point?

And just a word about the cover. Girl on a beach? Really? Poor choice.

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