

# THE FAMILY NEXT DOOR

## SALLY HEPWORTH

1. The novel opens with quite a dramatic scene: Essie, a new mother, forgets her baby in the park and panics as soon as she realizes what she's done. How do you think this chapter sets the tone for the rest of the novel?
2. What was your initial impression of Isabelle and, more specifically, the interactions between Isabelle and Essie? Were you as suspicious of her motives as Ange and some of the other residents of the neighbourhood? Why or why not?
3. Throughout the novel, Essie struggles to balance taking care of her children, taking care of herself, and maintaining a healthy marriage. How do you see this balancing act playing out in your own life, or the life of someone close to you? How do you think this struggle shapes the experiences of women in particular?
4. The story moves between the present time and the story of an unnamed narrator in the past. How do you think this structure affected your reading experience? When the unnamed narrator was revealed, were you completely surprised?
5. Fran and Ange use running and social media, respectively, as a way to cope with the stressful situations in their lives. Do you think that Isabelle became Essie's coping mechanism? Or did she have something else? Are the coping mechanisms the women use healthy or unhealthy, in your opinion?
6. At the core of *The Family Next Door* are questions about the bonds of the family you are born into vs. the family you choose for yourself. Do you have strong familial bonds in your own life, whether biological or not, and how do they affect the choices you make? Can you see any of your own relationships reflected in the novel?
7. In chapter 33, Leonie says to Ange, "If you tell yourself enough that life is perfect. . . somehow, it is." Ange disagrees, thinking, 'Or maybe you end up living a perfect-looking lie'. Which of them do you agree with, and why? Do you believe in the power of positive thinking to create change in your life?
8. Do you think that the events of the novel led to a lasting change in Essie's neighbourhood, or only a temporary one? Do you think the women will be closer now, after their respective familial dramas, or will they still feel distant from each other?

