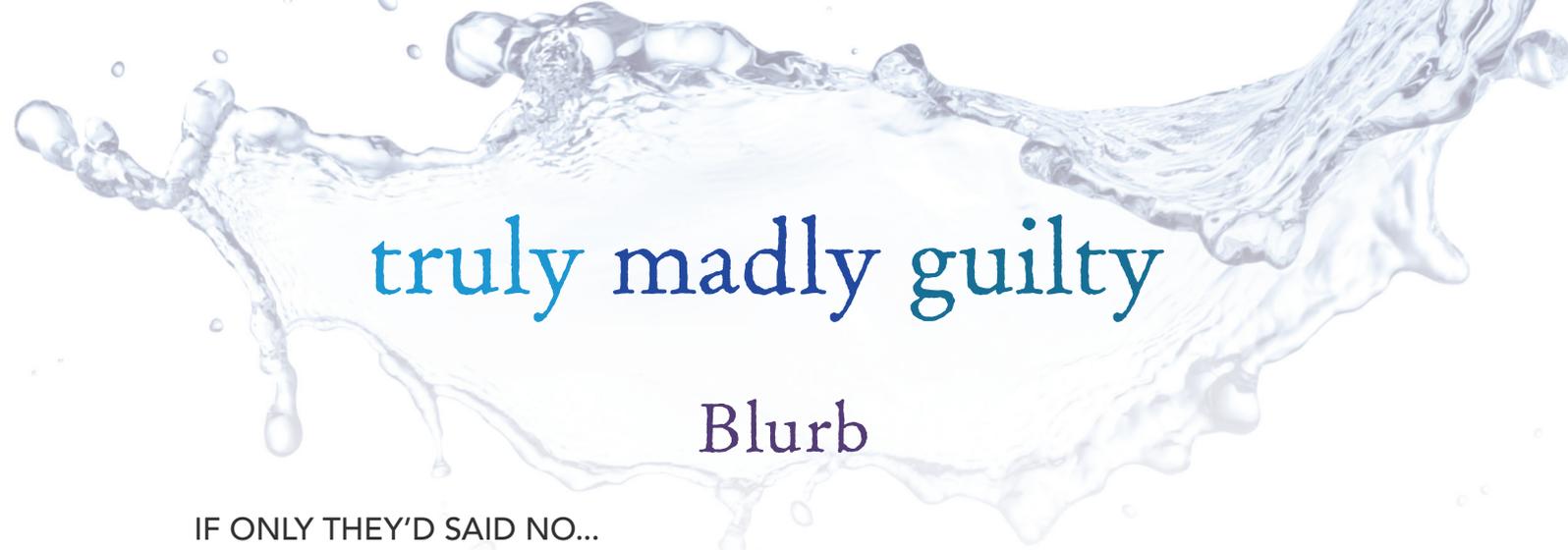


LIANE  
MORIARTY

READING GROUP NOTES



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## Blurb

### IF ONLY THEY'D SAID NO...

Clementine is haunted by regret. It was just a barbeque. They didn't even know their hosts that well, they were friends of friends. They could so easily have said no.

But she and her husband Sam said yes, and now they can never change what they did and didn't do that Sunday afternoon.

Six responsible adults. Three cute kids. One playful dog. It's an ordinary weekend in the suburbs. What could possibly go wrong?

Marriage, sex, parenthood and friendship: Liane Moriarty takes these elements of our lives and shows us how guilt can expose the fault lines in any relationship, and it is not until we appreciate the fragility of life that we can truly value what we have.

## The Author

Liane Moriarty is the author of six bestselling novels, *Three Wishes*, *The Last Anniversary*, *What Alice Forgot*, *The Hypnotist's Love Story*, *The Husband's Secret* and *Big Little Lies*. Her books have been read by more than six million people worldwide. Writing as L.M. Moriarty, she is also the author of the Space Brigade series for children. *The Husband's Secret* was a number one *New York Times* bestseller. It has been translated into more than thirty-five languages and film rights have been acquired by CBS Films. *Big Little Lies* reached number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list in its first week of publication – the first time this had been achieved by an Australian author. It was also number one on the Australian fiction charts and is currently being adapted for television by HBO, starring Nicole Kidman and Reese Witherspoon. Liane lives in Sydney with her husband, son and daughter. You can find out more about Liane's books at her website [www.lianemoriarty.com](http://www.lianemoriarty.com)



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\*Please be aware that the below contains spoilers if you haven't read *Truly Madly Guilty*.

## Plot Summary

Clementine, a cellist, and Erika, an accountant, have been friends since they were children, though the relationship is complicated. Erika, whose childhood with her hoarder mother was very troubled, clung to the stability and belonging that came with her association with Clementine's family while knowing she was a burden to Clementine. Clementine has always been expected to do the right thing, the kind thing, and struggles under the feelings of obligation and resentment that the friendship still raises. Adulthood has brought more freedom to both women, but a request and an incident at a barbecue bring the problems in their turbulent friendship to a head.

Unbeknown to Clementine and her husband Sam, Erika and her husband Oliver have been trying unsuccessfully to have a baby for two years. They have reached a point at which the only way forward is to use donor eggs, and so they turn to Erika's closest friend for help. Clementine is shocked at how repulsed she is by the idea of donating her eggs to Erika, though she says she will consider it.

Directly after the request is made, the two couples and Clementine and Sam's two children go to a neighbour's house for a barbecue. Vid and Tiffany are vibrant, social people, and Clementine and her husband Sam get on well with them. They find themselves enjoying the banter and innuendo of the day. But as the afternoon progresses there is a terrible accident. In a moment of distraction, Clementine and Sam's younger daughter, two-year-old Ruby, falls into the backyard fountain. Erika sees her and she and Oliver are able to revive her.

In the aftermath of the accident, Sam begins to display symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Clementine feels crushed by the debt of gratitude she feels she owes Oliver and Erika. She decides she has no choice but to agree to their request for her eggs. Meanwhile, her marriage to Sam is falling apart as they both struggle with their guilt. Erika and Oliver decide they cannot take advantage of the emotional turmoil of the situation and withdraw their request, turning their attention to the possibility of fostering children in need. Sam seeks psychological help, and Clementine sees hope for their marriage. At the book's conclusion, we see that Clementine and Erika's friendship begins to drift towards something more distant, and Clementine is surprised that this seems to be driven by Erika.

1. Music is a constant backdrop to the events of this novel. How is it used to influence both the characters and the reader?



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## Plot Summary Cont.

2. As Clementine tells us, most children who drown in backyard accidents are being supervised at the time. We also discover that rather than simply falling in, Ruby was pushed by her sister. The characters themselves are divided about whether Ruby's accident was a negligent lapse of parental supervision or a regrettable accident for which no one is fully to blame. Who (if anyone) do you think is ultimately responsible for the near tragedy? Or, like Vid, do you see it simply as a terrible accident?
3. Clementine is conflicted about the fact that she feels revulsion at the idea of donating her eggs. This is clearly a very personal and individual decision, which in Clementine's case is clouded by the complexities of her friendship with Erika. Why do you think she feels so strongly about it?

## Themes

### MARRIAGE

The three marriages depicted in the novel – Clementine and Sam's, Erika and Oliver's, and Vid and Tiffany's – work very differently, but each is successful in its own way.

4. '[Erika] and Oliver didn't do married couple banter. Oliver spoke fondly but politely to Erika in public, as if she were a beloved aunt, perhaps, not his wife. People probably thought they had a terrible marriage.' (p. 157)  
What do the marriages in the novel have in common, and where do they differ?  
Why do you think each marriage works, and where might each fall down?
5. 'Sure, [Clementine] and Sam made each other laugh, they had passion (or they did before kids), they had fun, but their relationship wasn't strong enough to withstand their first true test. It was a feeble marriage. A shoddy marriage. A marriage from the two-dollar shop.' (p. 238)  
It is common for marriages to fail when couples face serious life events. What is it that eventually helps sustain Clementine and Sam's?



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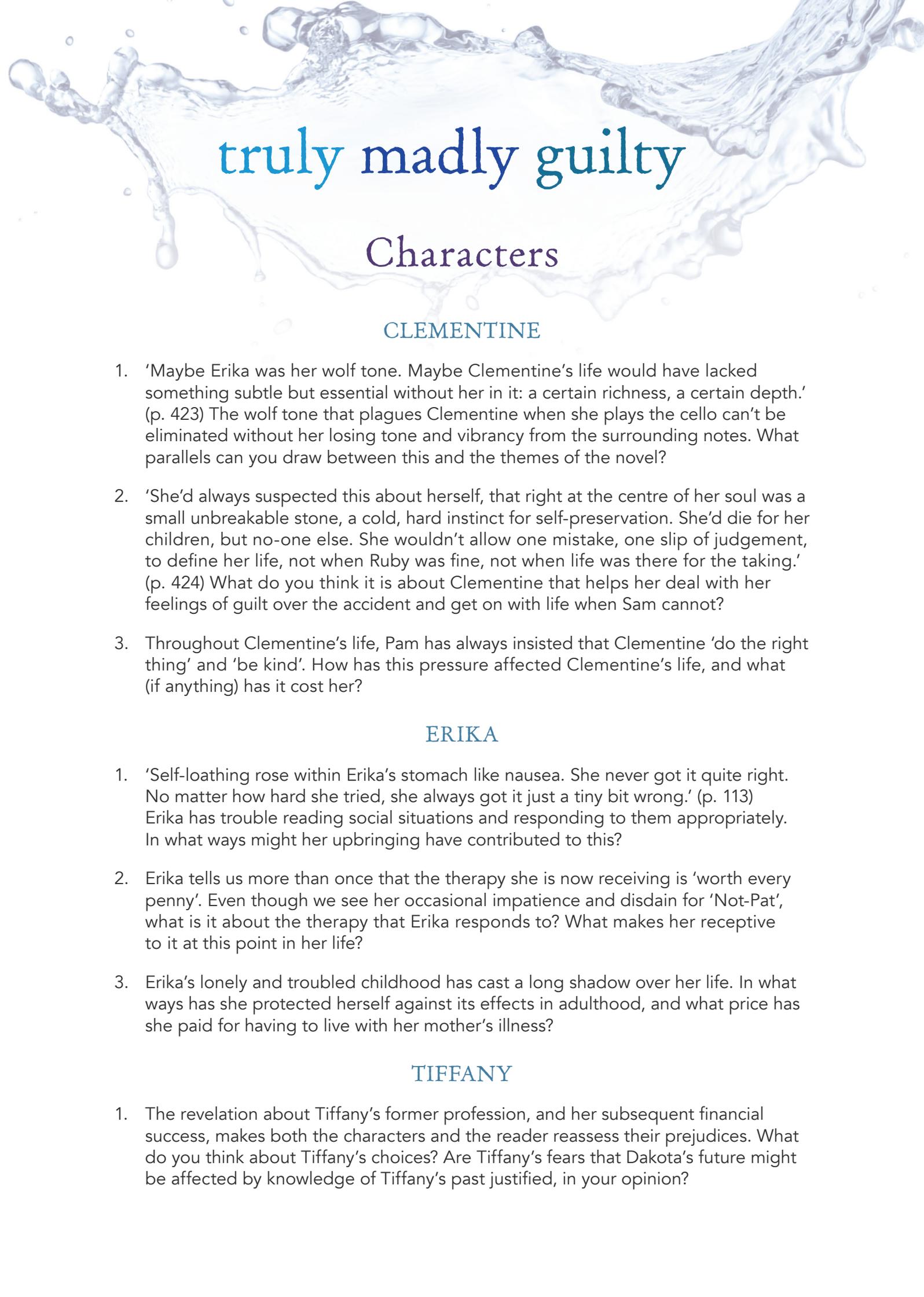
## Themes Cont.

### PARENTHOOD

1. 'You could jump so much higher when you had somewhere safe to fall.' (p. 508) Clementine and Erika's mothers could not have been more different. In what ways have Pam and Sylvia's parenting styles influenced the people their daughters have become? Are there parallels (or otherwise) between the way Pam parented Clementine, and Clementine parents Holly and Ruby?
2. Clementine and Sam are distracted at the barbeque because they are reminded that their role as parents need not be the only thing that defines them. What does this suggest about parenting in the modern day?
3. Though Erika and Oliver don't have children yet, they have given much thought to the way they wish to parent their own children. To what extent has their troubled upbringing informed this? Do you think their attempt to foster children in need will be successful?

### FRIENDSHIP

1. 'Although Clementine had cringed at Ainsley's use of the word, "toxic" was actually an accurate description of the feelings Clementine had so often felt in Erika's presence: the intense aggravation she had to work so hard to resist and conceal, the disappointment with herself, because Erika wasn't evil or cruel or stupid, she was simply annoying, and Clementine's response to her annoyingness was so completely disproportionate, it embarrassed and confounded her.' (p. 54) Clementine has never felt that her friendship with Erika was her own choice. How have the circumstances surrounding the way they met and the pressures put on Clementine to be kind to Erika shaped their relationship into adulthood?
2. 'Her friendship with Erika had been changing, shifting somehow [ . . . ] it was almost as though, and this seemed incredible, ironic, impossible, but it was almost as though Erika was *letting Clementine down gently*. [ . . . ] Clementine was being demoted to a lower-tier level of friendship and she was accepting this with the strangest mix of feelings: amusement, relief, maybe a touch of humiliation and a definite sense of melancholy.' (p. 507) Clementine has long felt burdened by her friendship with Erika. Why, now that it appears they are finally drifting apart, do you think Clementine feels such conflicting emotions about it?
3. Both Erika and Oliver have very few intimate friends. What do you think it is about the trauma of their childhoods that has made it so hard for them to relate to other people?

A dynamic splash of water in shades of blue and white, creating a sense of movement and freshness. The water droplets and splashes are scattered across the page, framing the text.

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## Characters

### CLEMENTINE

1. 'Maybe Erika was her wolf tone. Maybe Clementine's life would have lacked something subtle but essential without her in it: a certain richness, a certain depth.' (p. 423) The wolf tone that plagues Clementine when she plays the cello can't be eliminated without her losing tone and vibrancy from the surrounding notes. What parallels can you draw between this and the themes of the novel?
2. 'She'd always suspected this about herself, that right at the centre of her soul was a small unbreakable stone, a cold, hard instinct for self-preservation. She'd die for her children, but no-one else. She wouldn't allow one mistake, one slip of judgement, to define her life, not when Ruby was fine, not when life was there for the taking.' (p. 424) What do you think it is about Clementine that helps her deal with her feelings of guilt over the accident and get on with life when Sam cannot?
3. Throughout Clementine's life, Pam has always insisted that Clementine 'do the right thing' and 'be kind'. How has this pressure affected Clementine's life, and what (if anything) has it cost her?

### ERIKA

1. 'Self-loathing rose within Erika's stomach like nausea. She never got it quite right. No matter how hard she tried, she always got it just a tiny bit wrong.' (p. 113) Erika has trouble reading social situations and responding to them appropriately. In what ways might her upbringing have contributed to this?
2. Erika tells us more than once that the therapy she is now receiving is 'worth every penny'. Even though we see her occasional impatience and disdain for 'Not-Pat', what is it about the therapy that Erika responds to? What makes her receptive to it at this point in her life?
3. Erika's lonely and troubled childhood has cast a long shadow over her life. In what ways has she protected herself against its effects in adulthood, and what price has she paid for having to live with her mother's illness?

### TIFFANY

1. The revelation about Tiffany's former profession, and her subsequent financial success, makes both the characters and the reader reassess their prejudices. What do you think about Tiffany's choices? Are Tiffany's fears that Dakota's future might be affected by knowledge of Tiffany's past justified, in your opinion?

A dynamic splash of clear water against a white background, with droplets and ripples creating a sense of movement. The splash is centered horizontally and occupies the upper half of the page.

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## Setting

1. The present-day events in the novel take place during an unseasonably rainy spell in Sydney. In what ways does the author use the rain as a tool in the novel?
2. The opulence of Vid and Tiffany's home – in contrast to the shabby chic of Clementine and Sam's and the minimalism of Erika and Oliver's – is much remarked upon by the other characters. In what way might it have contributed to Ruby's accident?

## Writing Style

1. Liane Moriarty has chosen to tell this story in the third person through the eyes of all the major characters in turn, while switching between the events of the barbeque and the present day. What is the effect of this? How does it shape the reader's understanding of the characters themselves as we piece together what happened at the barbeque?
2. What techniques does Liane Moriarty use to distinguish between the different character voices in the novel? How does this influence how we feel about and relate to those characters?
3. The novel begins with a quote by Claude Debussy. In what ways does this quote allude to the themes of the novel?