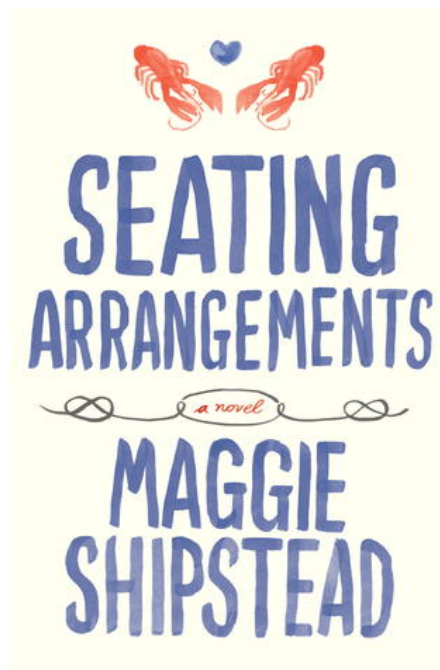




## Seating Arrangements

*Maggie Shipstead*

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# Seating Arrangements

*Maggie Shipstead*

## Seating Arrangements Maggie Shipstead

Winn Van Meter is heading for his family's retreat on the pristine New England island of Waskeke. Normally a haven of calm, for the next three days this sanctuary will be overrun by tipsy revelers as Winn prepares for the marriage of his daughter Daphne to the affable young scion Greyson Duff. Winn's wife, Biddy, has planned the wedding with military precision, but arrangements are sideswept by a storm of salacious misbehavior and intractable lust: Daphne's sister, Livia, who has recently had her heart broken by Teddy Fenn, the son of her father's oldest rival, is an eager target for the seductive wiles of Greyson's best man; Winn, instead of reveling in his patriarchal duties, is tormented by his long-standing crush on Daphne's beguiling bridesmaid Agatha; and the bride and groom find themselves presiding over a spectacle of misplaced desire, marital infidelity, and monumental loss of faith in the rituals of American life.

## Seating Arrangements Details

Date : Published June 12th 2012 by Knopf (first published 2012)  
ISBN : 9780307599469  
Author : Maggie Shipstead  
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Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit, Abandoned

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## From Reader Review Seating Arrangements for online ebook

### Ana Ovejero says

This story happens during a weekend, just three days of a family celebrating the wedding of the eldest. However, the author is able to show in that short period of time the strengths and weaknesses of the human heart.

With a tragicomedy tone, we meet the issues unearthed by the fact that the whole family Van Meters is together in their beach house. Upper class, wealthy, member of golf clubs, the father Winn seems to have everything he wants. However, we soon discover his insecurities as he is obsessed with his business rival (who, btw, is the father of his second daughter's exboyfriend and married to Winn's high school girlfriend) and having a serious crush with one of the young maid of honour, the alluring Dominique.

His wife is the classic glamorous wife but who has a sister, Celeste, prone to alcoholic outbursts, saying whatever crosses her mind. And real life gives her a lot of material: the bride is getting married because she is pregnant (the dress needing readjustments to cover her eight-month belly), her sister Livia, heart-broken, struggling not to fall for the best man, a positively 'bad boy', a dead whale lying in the beach nearby, the lobsters bought for the special dinner with the in-laws missing, and more!!!!

The story is so well-developed that you find new details in every page, giving the characters and the plot the complexity and texture present in everyday life. You can sympathise or hate the characters' decisions and motives, but you won't be indifferent, you will feel the need to take sides, to acknowledge people's urges as possibly your own, to question yourself 'what would have I done in his/her place, to face the fact that we, all of us, are simply humans.

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### Danielle says

Boo hoo. being rich is such a drag because sometimes your beach house on an exclusive island isn't enough, and you want to get into a private club, but they won't have you.

Here's an example of some really bad writing from this book: "The lobsters had turned the clownish red of death." Blech. Bad writing. It abounds in this book. Not everywhere, but it's there. And it strikes you, and you go, "What the...?" and then you move on, try to shake it off, but you're still like, "What kind of stupid metaphor was that?" or "Jeez, she's painting the lessons with a really heavy hand," but still you keep reading.

I didn't like this book. The protagonist is a stunted, old-fashioned, prudish guy - who happens to have chased a ton of tail - who is blind to his immaturity and selfishness, and who thinks he should be entitled to what other people have. I hated him.

I didn't really like anyone else in the book. WASPy and elitist, and not very well-behaved, all the characters were bland and obnoxious at the same time.

Don't bother reading it. You'll be bored. The weekend is boring. Even with an affair, and people falling off roofs, and whales exploding, it reads like nothing happens, and it's just blah. BLAH. Seriously.

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## Anmiryam says

A smart and funny look at a family confronting change -- a wedding, a soon to be born grandchild, prospective infidelity, a daughter destabilized by the end of her first serious relationship and, most of all, the unwinding of decades of self-delusions. Maggie Shipstead's portrayal of the Van Meter's during the few days before the eldest daughter's wedding is a pitch perfect satire and a well crafted examination of a individuals confronting their long held beliefs about themselves and their relationships.

At the center of the tale is Winn Van Meter, now approaching sixty, Winn has spent his life measuring his worth by his place in the narrow universe of WASP society. Ivy League education? Yes. Belong to the right clubs? Yes. Proper disdain for ostentatious signs of wealth - yes. Successful career - yes. Blond wife, but practical wife with appropriate nickname - yes. Sons set to follow in his footsteps - no, only daughters, alien creatures he has never understood how to fit into the model. Plus, he's been waiting to join the Pequod Club for three years and he's getting worried. Could the father of his daughter's ex-boyfriend, who also happens to be the man he kept out of a club at Harvard be behind it? Can he resist his daughter's bridesmaid? Could his whole world be ready to fall apart? Winn, it soon becomes clear has never learned to inhabit his own skin, to be himself. In the run up to the wedding he will irritate us, amuse us and make us cringe at his foolishness, but through it all, we feel for him and root for him. It is this dual perspective on flawed characters that is so elegantly handled by Shipstead that it's hard to believe that this is her first novel.

A great summer read, whether you are in New England or not.

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## Ron Charles says

When I was an English teacher, we always ended the school year with a ritual argument about summer reading. My erudite opponents claimed students should gird their loins and trudge through George Eliot's "Middlemarch" or some other Improving Literature. My free-spirited comrades and I countered that June, July and August were months to let sun-kissed students wander barefoot through the stacks, picking at whim whatever titles they might enjoy.

Many of us are still silently carrying out that argument when we pack our suitcases — or load our e-readers: Should I spend a week at Virginia Beach with Somerset Maugham's "Of Human Bondage" or E L James's "Fifty Shades of Grey"?

Before you get all tied up in knots about that decision, consider our sunny spread on summer reading. The spirit of compromise may have abandoned official Washington, but it still graces these pages, where treasure and pleasure frolic in halcyon harmony. Best-selling novelist Jennifer Weiner recommends three good novels that feature bad vacations, which should put in perspective any mix-ups you encounter on the road. We've also got a helpful guide to using e-readers on the beach and our first roundup of romance novels in years. To get you thinking about what to pack, we've asked some prominent D.C. figures what titles they're lusty to read , and the Book World editors look back at their favorites so far this year — and ahead to some promising titles this fall.

For a sophisticated summer romp, I recommend "Seating Arrangements" (Knopf, \$25.95), the first novel from Maggie Shipstead. Set over three warm days on a WASP-y island off the coast of New England, it's impeccably well-bred for vacation reading. The author is a graduate of Harvard and a dedicated student of the Darien club set, and once she grabs these characters by their pearl chokers and duck belts, she never lets

go.

Like any classic romantic comedy, “Seating Arrangements” culminates in a wedding, but getting down the aisle just about kills the father of the bride. At 59, Winn Van Meter has spent his whole buttoned-down life on a rickety perch of the upper class, trying to fulfill Brahmin expectations. Resigned to the inevitability of “death, taxes, and family,” he’s a persnickety, joyless man, easily annoyed by others’ misbehavior or anyone who impedes his quest for “some axis of perfect exclusivity.” His elder, pregnant daughter’s wedding is just the sort of awkward extravagance that tweaks his bow tie — “a family reunion and missile launch and state dinner all rolled into one.”

Among the guests arriving in madras shorts and L.L. Bean sandals is one gorgeous young bridesmaid unburdened by qualms about hooking up with an older, married man like Winn. Before the rice flies, there will be broken hearts and broken bones, falling bodies and exploding whales, consummations devoutly to be wished and interrupted. Can a family that believes “love was something to be tamped down beneath decorum” ever find romance?

At just 28 years old, Shipstead captures the bride’s forlorn sister in all her wounded disappointments, and she’s particularly astute in her portrayal of a young Egyptian bridesmaid who regards the troubles of the 1 percent with muted exasperation. What’s more surprising is Shipstead’s unnerving insight into the comic-tragedy of middle-aged men, that mixture of smothered envy, aspiration and lust that mutates into irritated superiority. (So I’ve heard. . . .)

The sea breeze blowing through “Seating Arrangements” is Shipstead’s affection for these spoiled people, her tender handling of their sorrows and longings, which you’ll respond to even if you don’t summer on Nantucket. She’s already producing the kind of humane comedy we expect from Richard Russo and Elinor Lipman.

Emerging from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the novel displays that institutional syndrome in which every sentence strains to be the cleverest one in the class, but maybe that’s just my envy talking. Shipstead’s weave of wit and observation continually delights. I wouldn’t be surprised if someday she trades her Lilly Pulitzer for something from Joseph Pulitzer.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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## Julie says

I read so many great reviews about this book that I thought I has to be great. Now, having just finished I am wondering what all the hype is about? Maybe, I am not sophisticated enough to enjoy a book about a family that I thought were not very deep and so self involve they can't be bothered to think about anyone but themselves. I don't know, it was just a big let down.

The Story is about Winn, a 59 year old married father of 2 daughters. His oldest is getting married, she is seven months pregnant. His other daughter has just gone through a traumatic breakup and seems to be quite a wet blanket with major anger issues that are never addressed during the entire story. I hate to read a book where the main character is a person I dislike. I didn't find anything about him that was likable and it doesn't change. Winn doesn't change. He is too worried about status, how things look to others, fitting in with the "right" people. His is a cold fish with the hots for one of his daughters bridesmaid, Agatha. Even Agatha is a complete bitch. (sorry).

I don't recommend this book at all. I will stick with my less sophisticated novels about people I can find sympathy with and or that I like.

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## Elyse says

UPDATE: \$1.99 special today! This book is GREAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I should have given it a solid 5 stars when I read it....as I STILL remember it!!!! The characters will make you cringe --- (none of them are likable) ---but you'll have soooooooo much fun with this story). A wedding from hell..... lol

Maggie is a wonderful writer!!! I can't wait for a 'new release' from her! This book 'is' worth jumping at for \$1.99

4.7 stars

\*Maggie Shipstead's\* writing is explosive and exciting!!!!!!

Seating Arrangements felt like a warm summer tropical storm - with outburst of nature's "groans of roaring wind and rain".

Yet....its the 'people' --(less anything to do with the weather) --that I'm referring to.

Its not often I read a book THIS GOOD in where 'every' character is annoying --(not easy to love), yet I can say, "DAMN, THIS BOOK CRACKS ME UP"!!!! The writing --the writing --the writing!!!!!!

>>>>>Makes this story FUN!!!!!!

I knew I was in for a hell of a ride early into this story when 'The-Father-of-the-Bride', was remembering back to when his daughter was about 5 years old. {Here is a small part of the conversation}:

"Daddy, Am I a Princess"?

"No, Winn said, you're a very nice little girl".

"Will I be a princess someday"?

"Winn bent the top of his newspaper down and looked over it. It depends on whom you marry".

"What does that mean"?

.....

.....

..... [Winn explains to Daphne two different ways of how a woman becomes a princess]. (I'm leaving out a few details here) ...Then Winn returned to his reading.

Daphne is not done.....

"Daddy"????

"WHAT"????

"Am I \*\*YOUR\*\* princess\*\*?"

"Christ, Daphne"

"What"?

"You sound like a kid on TV"

"Why"?

"Because You're full of treacle"

"What's treacle"?

"Something that's too sweet. It gives you a stomachache."

"She nodded, accepting this. But she pressed on. "am I \*YOUR\* princess?"

"To the best of my knowledge, I don't have any princesses. What I do have is a little girl without dignity."

"What's dignity"?

"Dignity is behaving the way you're suppose to so people will respect you"?

"Do princesses have dignity?".

"Some Do"

"Which Ones"?

"I don't know. Maybe Grace Kelly

.....

.....

.....

The conversation WON'T stop. (Daphne won't let it) .....lol

Daphne keeps pushing until her dad gives in: "ALL RIGHT, YOU ARE MY PRINCESS"

"Really?" :)

"Absolutely"

"Daphne nodded then ate a grape. Then she cocked her head to one side. "Am I your FAIRY princess"?

.....

Then...

There are powerful lines like this (between girlfriends):

"Its been awhile since you've talked to him right?" Dominique pressed. "Just keep going with that. Invest some time. I mean think of it this way. How do you think it looks if you go around mooning over him for months after he dumped you?"

Confession time: WHO hasn't wanted to say this to a friend??? Or...."ENOUGH ALREADY"!!!!

Or.....Who can't relate to a line like this at some point in your life?:

"Distant and time had been good for their friendship. Dominique had come to realize Daphne's life was not her responsibility, and now in return, almost a decade later, Daphne seemed to value her precisely 'because' she was less fun than Piper or Agatha, because she was not tiny and blonde, because she preferred quiet bars to lounges crowded with bankers, because she tried to be honest."

"Seating Arrangements" is one LONG WEEKEND ---(the wedding week-end) -- an aphrodisiac -- "love was in the air, weak, and snappy as static electricity".

And...as for the characters themselves: words like: swine, dirtbag, and sleazebag might enter your thoughts from time to time.

This book is not for the innocent-- not a book for people who MUST love the characters.

A very yuppie edge --

Filled with self-obsession people--

Yet--within the ethics of behavior -hedonism- family- fidelity- this book has a very alluring quality about it!!! I liked it --and LOVED the author's witty writing style!

## Danielle says

Hilarious satire of dysfunctional family relationships at a WASPy wedding...sounds like totally my thing. It wasn't. I found the writing tedious and uninteresting. The characters were unlikeable and the relationships seemed contrived and not very compelling. I picked this book up on a whim because I was looking for a lighter read after several very heavy novels. Hoping it would be a fun, light, end of summer novel. And the author's bio indicated she has written critically acclaimed short stories - and I'm a big fan of short stories. But this book disappointed me in every way possible.

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## Rebecca Foster says

*Seating Arrangements* was one of my favorite debut novels of 2012. Taking place over just three days, it is the tale of an upper middle class family preparing for their (heavily pregnant) daughter's wedding weekend on an island off Connecticut. There are shades of Jonathan Franzen (the wry look at family dysfunction), of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*, and of Zadie Smith (e.g. the subtle class considerations of *On Beauty*). But the novel is also reminiscent of Carol Shields's *Larry's Party* and Curtis Sittenfeld's *American Wife* – Shipstead is adept at capturing family interaction and social gatherings, petty feuds and cliques. All this to say: Shipstead has some top-notch literary antecedents, from whom she's adapted a striking talent for characterization and plotting.

The novel is equally canny at portraying humor and seriousness. Family quirks and ridiculous situations (such as an exploding whale carcass and a scene in which the family patriarch ends up hanging from the weather vane on the new-build house of his nemesis) share space with regret and genuine pathos. Shipstead's percipient wisdom on such topics as the psychology of emotions, sex, and family heritage is well beyond her years. She's right up there with the best contemporary realist novelists working in America, and I'm excited to see what she comes out with next.

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## Arlene says

Shipstead has a promising setting (the New England island of Waskeke) and a promising scenario (a wedding), but she doesn't manage to execute a compelling telling of the story. She doesn't make the main characters likeable enough—they are all exasperating—and those characters spend the days leading up to the wedding taking actions that we don't understand (or believe?). Shipstead provides back stories (boy, does she provide back stories) but the stories outline events without providing the psychological insights we need to understand the motivations of the characters. Just when we think we have a character figured out, he or she does something incongruous so understanding slips from our grasp. We don't learn to like the characters, and we don't understand why they are doing what they're doing. That's never a good recipe for a book.

The characters don't really seem to fit together either. The bride, Daphne Van Meter, has terrible taste in bridesmaids. We have to wonder why she thought such a disparate bunch of women would be a good idea.

However, this book has received a lot of positive reviews. It could be a good book for the beach this summer. It's set on an island, some of the action takes place on a beach, and it's about a summer wedding. Good fit? Maybe.



## Patty says

Seating Arrangements

By

Maggie Shipstead

My "in a nutshell" summary...

Family and friends gather on an island for a wedding. A mix of beliefs and personalities lead to an interesting weekend.

My thoughts after reading...

Hmmm...I truly enjoyed this book. It was very character driven but in spite of preppy goofy names...everyone was easy to remember. It had all the things I love in a book...prep schools, clubbiness, very dysfunctional characters, odd situations, drinking and reasonably bad behaviors. It was yummy. I don't want to call this a beach book but it is truly the sort of book that I love to read in the summer. The focus of the book is the wedding of Winn and Biddy's daughter Daphne...who is very pregnant. She is surrounded by friends and family. Everyone is gathered at the summer island home of Winn and Biddy. Winn is frustrated by a weird crush on one of his daughter's friends. That and his frustrated desire to get into a private golf club sort of lead to some odd antics. Add to that his crazed heartbroken other daughter who is also behaving badly. Then there are lots of groomsmen and bridesmaids and grandmothers and friends and even a whale who add to the trauma of this wedding. Even a poor sick lobster plays a role in some more mighty fine dysfunction!

What I loved about this book...

The setting, the house, the preppy names, the drama, the adventure!

What I didn't love...

The image of every man there wearing trousers with whales on them and woven belts.

Final thoughts...

Do not think that this was a light hearted book. It was intense and very dramatic. At times it was very sad. I loved it...read it slowly and deliciously. I loved the author's writing style.

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## Jill says

If you dissected the pages of *Seating Arrangements* trying to locate its literary heart, you'd find nothing bloody or moving or living but instead a cold, hard machine that transmits keen social analysis and psychological insight but nothing emotional or affective. Which is, perhaps, the point. Just look at the title—*Seating Arrangements*—it's about a marriage, a celebration of love uniting of two people, but the title has reduced it to the behind-the-scenes mechanics required to organize such an event.

This novel follows several empty-chested blue blood WASPs preparing for the wedding, but at its core it's about Winn, the patriarch of the Van Meter family, a man who values sons more than daughters yet only has daughters, who values various country club memberships more than the kind devotion of his wife, and who decides to have an existential crisis the weekend of his daughter's nuptials. Winn is a stiff character for whom I could not summon one iota of empathy, therefore I was never quite invested here. There were big moments, like an exploding whale, that kept me reading, but I didn't care how anything turned out.

#### VAGUELY SPOILERISH DISCUSSION OF ENDING:

Despite my indifference, the story hummed right along and I was particularly enjoying Shipstead's sharp eye for human behavior until the disappointing ending. Shipstead spends the entire book critiquing the vacuity of American "aristocracy," mostly by skewering Winn's desperately devolving attempts to recapture youth and meaning. She lowers his character more and more but at the end, Shipstead grants him the opportunity to redeem himself by escaping his soulless family life and depraved WASPy social set. It felt disingenuous and inauthentic. I'm not against redemption narratives; in fact I kind of love them. But Winn is characterized throughout as unredeemable, a man who has made all the wrong choices without knowing it and is just beginning to feel something—guilt, regret, anger?—about his unbalanced life ledger. I wanted him to suffer for it! The way Shipstead writes him, he deserves to suffer for being a simple and simpering man, a man who wants to have an affair with a hot young blonde but cannot even rally himself to consummate this desire.

The ending, therefore, feels a bit neat. I would have preferred a more ambiguous or even blatantly dark ending for these characters. But oh well, I'll forgive Shipstead this and give her second novel, *Astonish Me*, the old college try.

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### Melissa says

When, WHEN will I learn to avoid these insufferable Iowa Writers' Workshop books, all of which blend together in a sea (ocean analogy intentional) of WASP despair? I worry they must be arming these Iowa students with copies of "Catcher in the Rye", "The Great Gatsby", and enough existential, end-of-empire ennui to fell a country club (or this weary reader, at least).

"Seating Arrangements" is the story of the Van Meter family, who is preparing for the eldest daughter's marriage at the family compound on a Nantucket-style island. More specifically, it's a psychological portrait of the family patriarch, Winn, a grasping, thoroughly unlikeable protagonist who has all of the aforementioned Gatsby ambition with none of the relatability. The plot moves along well enough, but it's cluttered with the usual distress signals - gin, Harvard, boat shoes, and overwrought ocean analogies. True to clichéd form, everyone frets over imagined problems as they sense the world of privilege receding from the shoreline (there I go again with the seafaring analogies - thanks a bunch, Iowa).

My bitterness aside, Shipstead isn't without talent - certain lines were laugh-out-loud clever, and the story is engaging despite the alternately unlikeable or bland (there's no middle ground in WASP-dom, apparently) cast of characters. That being said, I struggled to keep the supporting characters clear, though that may have been an intentional move by the author to suggest WASPs are all interchangeably boring or bland; either way, it made for difficult reading at times.

Skip this and read the far superior "Prep" if you're in the market for depressive preppy reads hailing from the vaunted (why?) Iowa Writers' Workshop.

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## DeB MaRtEnS says

Depressing. There, I said it. Ok, there is critical acclaim for this young author describing a jaded view of life among the "monied classes" on the Eastern Seaboard, with their pretensions outweighing in value apparently the love of their children.

She makes a good effort, I guess. Life is messy for everyone, in spite of our efforts to make everything pretty, belong to the best clubs, wear the right clothes. We are all human but the monied classes get to experience life differently, with or without awareness. The novel is messy, mucky, mocking and just plain old dispiriting. The event of a wedding creates upheaval in the lives, manifested in their inner, if not outer paradigm. Stiff, proper adults examine their stiff, proper pasts among the sexually charged energy of the young men and women arriving for the event. One night stands proliferate and create hard feelings and yearning for better futures among them all. Seating Arrangements have to be thought through carefully... every chance for the future of one's successful and happy life must be considered, offers the Mother of the Bride. Of course, the reader is meant to critically ask the pertinent important question, the theme of this novel, "What is a happy, successful life?" Even though it ends with everyone having a real life version of some sort of happiness, - I closed the book no wiser nor more warmly attached to the characters than when I had begun reading it.

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## Bailey says

I should know by now that choosing a book because its cover is cute and pastel and featuring two lobsters in love is not reason enough. And yet, those were my main motivations in reading Seating Arrangements by Maggie Shipstead. Halfway through reading this book I stopped and asked myself if I was failing as a reader—perhaps it was a satire and not meant to be read with an earnest eye. It wasn't until the last sentence that I felt safe in saying that there was definitely some attempted criticism of the East Coast WASP contingent, but it needed to more firmly pick a lane.

The book spent far too little time on the interesting and sympathetic characters—Daphne, Dominique, Biddy—and instead focused on Winn, the stale patriarch of the family, with short interspersed passages from the point of view of other self-absorbed and detestable characters. I also could not get past the character names. I know it is a running joke that waspy types go by odd nicknames but in a group of twenty people how probable is it to find a Biddy, Fee, Dicky Jr., Fenn, Winn, Teddy, Tipton, Greyson, Sterling, Oatsie, and Mopsy?

I'd recommend passing on this one and instead picking up Gone Girl, Prep, or The Paris Wife if you need a light but still substantive read.

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## Michael says

Winn Van Meter and his family head for a retreat on the New England island of Waskeke. While this is normally a haven of relaxation for Winn, now it's overshadowed by the preparation of his daughter's wedding. A weekend with his family and his daughter's bridesmaids only days before the big event is never a recipe for the calmness or solitude he is accustomed to in this house.

Part social satire, part chick lit, this is surprisingly intelligent and humorous in between the relationship

drama of the family and the women staying with them. I know many people will argue with me about this been classed as a chick lit novel (I know my wife did) but for me it very much is one. This genre normally explores the issues with modern womanhood in a light-hearted and humorous way, exploring the relationships, whether being romantic, family or friends. Seating Arrangement ticks all these books but as my wife tells me the protagonist has to be a woman; in this book, it is narrated by a man but the whole focus of the book is the relationships of his wife and his two daughters so in my opinion I think this book can still be classed as Chick Lit.

This book is very much character driven; from the family rivalry, past relationships and plenty of gin soaked shenanigans. I would have liked to learn more about Winn's life; I feel like it is often glossed over and focusing too much on the women in the house. Winn's wife Biddy is spending all her time organising the perfect wedding, his daughter Daphne pregnant and the bride-to-be is enjoying being treated like a princess leading up to her special day. Then there is Winn's younger daughter Livia suffering from a heartbreak and also the target for the seduction from the best man, bridesmaid Agatha and reckless flirt who Winn lusts after, plus many other secondary characters that sometimes just feel like filler subplots.

Seating Arrangement borders on the cliché too many times throughout this book; it's only the social satire elements that seem to help recover the story. I think without these elements this would just turn into a very generic chick lit novel, so I'm pleased to have read something witty and intelligent as well. I will admit there are some elements that could have been explored a little more, but most of them seem to be done perfectly. The heartbreak of Livia wasn't explored enough for my liking and while I get that she discovered that she no longer loves Teddy, it never felt like a real resolution for that subplot. The relationship between Winn and Agatha is one of the best in the book, it hints at lust and scandal exploring the concept of fidelity, desire and even rejection. It offered a little relief from the overly cuteness of most of the relationships.

Maggie Shipstead manages to explore all different relationship types as well as New England society. Parts of this book really didn't work for me and I was in constant fear of falling too much into the realm of the cliché but I'm surprised with the way this book turned out. Personally I would like a bit more scandal but in the end this was a light read with some very intelligent aspects that are worth exploring. For lovers of light reading, the satirical elements can be easily overlooked or missed but for people looking for them, you will be delighted with what you find within this book.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2013/...>

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## Sienna says

What a puzzle. It's been a long time since I've read a book about which I felt so little. *Seating Arrangements* contains some beautiful writing and deftly woven dialogue, characters who seem real enough, if reassuringly unlike anyone I've ever known, and a few laugh-out-loud moments ("*Why had this man of all men made so many sons who wanted to fuck his daughters?*"). We get plenty of viewpoints as the story reveals itself, but the transitions between them feel contrived, as though we're meant to be admiring artistry that disdains traditional immersion. I certainly neither related to any of these narrators nor wanted to do so. To be fair, contemporary literary fiction is not one of my favorite genres, and the subset of upper-crust Cape Cod wedding-gone-wrong invokes a special brand of apathy. I've no doubt there's a market for this, and it caters to aspirational women who correlate dissatisfaction and depth and wear a lot of sky, sea, sand and shell on the coast. For my part, I'll stick with Shipstead's short stories, which have always been a delight.

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## **jenn says**

A review of Seating Arrangements, aka, The Whitest Book I've Read All Year. And I read The Marriage Plot.

A few nights ago, as I was preparing to check this book out of a venerable New England institution that shall remain nameless, I felt the hand of a man I knew to be very elderly graze the entirety of my ass, from left to right. As if to explain the action, the owner of the hand leaned in to whisper the title of this book into my ear. Wine and cheese were had by all.

I recount this story because the experience of it was a lot like the experience of reading this book - audacious and inappropriate, but not without a weird sort of charm. If you like your protagonists to be, well, likable, don't bother, because the world doesn't need another reviewer judging an author for not writing characters of sterling character. Maggie Shipstead has written a story in which those dudes you see in whale-embroidered pants turn out to be exactly what one would expect from those dudes you see in whale-embroidered pants.

The bad news is that the main character reminded me of Mitt Romney, and there are sex scenes.

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## **Emi Bevacqua says**

Have I all of a sudden become 85 years old and intolerant of all popular culture?? Last night I gasped and tssked through the film adaptation of The Descendants, sputtering that if viewers see that George Clooney's own children don't respect him then they're going to be all like oh well I guess it's okay if my kids don't respect me either. And now here I am reading Seating Arrangements by Maggie Shipstead and being similarly outraged! This book, in a word, is MISOGYNISTIC. The whole premise is INAPPROPRIATE. I get that it's poking fun at a guy who wants only to achieve acceptance of his peers, and values WASPy aspirations over any paternal or marital happinesses, but jeez why does this book have to trivialize everything feminine? Why do the sisters have to hate each other so palpably? Why can't anyone show anybody any mercy, or courtesy, or chivalry? Why is the message here that sex is meaningless, and girls suck, and rich people are turds and blue collar laborers are also? And that it's funny to tell the elderly grandmother of your daughter's future husband that she is dying soon?! What?!! The whole time I read this, I was just like, why do we no longer need to have morals or ethics, what is wrong with America? I think I just need to read classics from previous centuries because first novels today totally sicken me.

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## **Elizabeth says**

Well, turns out I just do not give a shit. DONE.

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## **Jen says**

In a fictional universe, this is exactly the book an English major would write, assuming the author of said fictional universe had a really poor opinion of English majors.

This book is full of DEEP MEANING, and UNDER CURRENTS, and BIG EVOCATIVE WORDS. You

can almost hear the author thinking after a particularly annoying sentence "ooh that's good."

The story is about Winn, an unlikeable guy in New England, who is going to host his pregnant daughter's wedding on an island called Waskeke. He's a horrid person. His wife is insipid, his daughter a spoiled brat, his other daughter is an emotional trainwreck. And then there's the drunk aunt. Basically it's the worst house party ever. There is not one person in this book that I didn't hate.

It doesn't help that the point of view switches randomly to give us DEEP MEANINGFUL BACKGROUND STORIES on every single person. I don't care that much about people I actually know. Winn, for someone who is successful, is as socially inept as a person can get. Any bank would have fired him by now for being a jerk.

Livia, the second daughter, has been heartbroken, of course she has. Winn is a jerk about it...of course he is. Biddy, the wife...named Biddy, is emotionally distant...of course she is. Daphne the other daughter is a moron. It's just a pile of awful people in a pile of awful situations saying DEEP MEANINGFUL THINGS filled with DEEP MEANING.

All building to what I think the author intended to be a DEEP MEANINGFUL ending. In truth, it was just a blissful end to the torture.

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