



"Issues"

Sharon St. John

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In Sharon St. John's complex, fascinating novel *"Issues"*, betrayal and deception cross family lines; how women and men relate to each other is called into question.

Jessica is a top accountant in New York state. She loves her boyfriend, James, even though he's not around as much as she'd like. The novel follows her family and friends, all within Jessica's sphere of influence, as they live and work in close quarters. The cast includes her sister, Renee, and her mother, Momma Tyler, whom she lives with; it also includes Jessica's secretary, Charmaine. Across town, Charmaine's close friend, Desire, is at the shelter where Renee works; her children's father left their family.

Though these women put their trust in the men around them, they come to realize that some of the men are not such good guys; some are withholding serious secrets. Between a surprise pregnancy, a boyfriend-stealing family member, a coming out story, and crimes including a murder, the women work toward hard realizations, including that they have been lied to.

Fast and dialogue-driven, the book includes multiple story lines that are brought together in an expert fashion. It draws strength and speed from new revelations in every chapter. Characters who seem kindhearted at the beginning of the story are revealed to be selfish; some are shocking about how vicious they can be.

Jessica, Charmaine, and Renee are most central. Internally, they evaluate their actions, as well as the actions of those around them; aloud, they process events in discussions with their families and friends. In these exchanges, complex mental gymnastics are evident; some characters choose to see only what they want to see, and some remain in the dark long after evidence regarding a central deception is laid bare. The book makes haste toward an exciting showdown, satisfying as those involved discover what's been hidden. The conclusion reinforces notions that women's friendship and bonding are important.

The book's casual language is both clear and authentic, even through emotional situations whose nuances are hard to convey aloud. Some exchanges are too formal for their circumstances, though, as when friends make evening or weekend plans. Many of the characters form their beliefs about their friends and family based on stereotypes; these are challenged at various points in the novel, and in thoughtful ways.

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LAURA LEAVITT (June 13, 2020)

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