

Sycamore

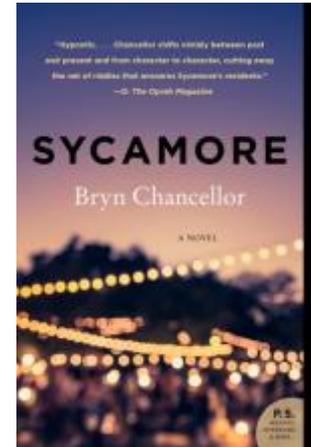
Harper Perennial

By Bryn Chancellor

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Introduction

An award-winning writer makes her debut with this mesmerizing page-turner in the spirit of *Everything I Never Told You* and *Olive Kitteridge*.



Out for a hike one scorching afternoon in Sycamore, Arizona, a newcomer to town stumbles across what appear to be human remains embedded in the wall of a dry desert ravine. As news of the discovery makes its way around town, Sycamore's longtime residents fear the bones may belong to Jess Winters, the teenage girl who disappeared suddenly some eighteen years earlier, an unsolved mystery that has soaked into the porous rock of the town and haunted it ever since. In the days it takes the authorities to make an identification, the residents rekindle stories, rumors, and recollections both painful and poignant as they revisit Jess's troubled history. In resurrecting the past, the people of Sycamore will find clarity, unexpected possibility, and a way forward for their lives.

Skillfully interweaving multiple points of view, Bryn Chancellor knowingly maps the bloodlines of a community and the indelible characters at its heart—most notably Jess Winters, a thoughtful, promising adolescent poised on the threshold of adulthood. Evocative and atmospheric, *Sycamore* is a coming-of-age story, a mystery, and a moving exploration of the elemental forces that drive human nature—desire, loneliness, grief, love, forgiveness, and hope—as witnessed through the inhabitants of one small Arizona town.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the title of the book evoke for you? How does the town itself operate as a character in the book?
2. Chancellor includes thirteen different points of view in *Sycamore*. How does she use language to create different points of view for each of these characters, even when a given character's chapter isn't told in the first person?
3. The reader is given a window into Jess' mind through the close third-person point of view in her chapters, but also more directly through the poetry she writes. What do her poems say about the kind of person she is?

4. The teenaged characters in the book—Jess, Angie, Dani, Beto, and Paul—are not in the popular crowd at their high school, but they seem to form deep connections with their friends. When Jess and Dani play dress-up, Dani asks Jess, “Who do you want to be?” Is that a question that all teens are asking one another?
5. What do Maud’s decision to keep Jess’ room the same and Stevie’s creation of the spiral jetty have in common? In what ways are they paying tribute to Jess’ life?
6. Some of Chancellor’s characters live with people who are no longer alive or otherwise no longer with them. Iris Overton, for example, speaks to her dead husband at night. Is it rational to believe in ghosts, or to speak to the dead?
7. When Laura discovers the bones, she has a feeling that they belong to “a girl who, not so long ago, stood somewhere, her gaze long and steady, as if she had all the time in the world.” What does time represent to Laura? What about to Maud? And Stevie, who counts time in daily units?
8. Discuss the author’s choice to craft one of the book’s climactic scenes—the Thanksgiving dinner—as a play. What did this allow her to do? How is it different from the rest of the prose?
9. What might have happened if Paul hadn’t overheard the conversation in the orchard? How might these events have unspooled otherwise? Was Adam’s obsession with Jess always destined to come to a crisis point?
10. What do you make of Adam’s letter to Dani? Does anything he says in it excuse his behavior, or justify it?
11. Throughout the book, water comes in as a motif—the disappearing lake, the night of heavy rain when Jess disappears, and so on. How does Chancellor use water in a desert landscape to provide support for her themes?
12. Who holds the ultimate blame for Jess’ disappearance? What or who might have kept her from going missing?
13. Did the characters who were close to Jess achieve closure by the novel’s end? Is closure ever truly a possibility after a tragedy?
14. What do you think comes next for these characters? What do you hope for them?