

# MISTAKES WERE MADE (CH. 2):

## "BEST FRIENDS"

### PATTY GOES TO COLLEGE

If we attempted to capture the 'message' or meaning of the first chapter of *Mistakes were Made* (Patty's autobiography) we might summarize it as Patty's view of growing up in a family she thinks has never cared about her.

This chapter then moves on to the unsatisfactory early years of supposed adulthood she experiences going to college in Minnesota where she meets Eliza--a "disturbed girl" (53) who seemed like the antithesis of All-America Jock-ish Patty

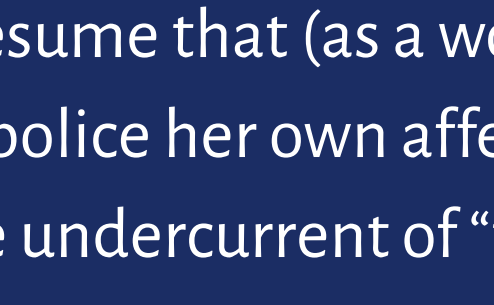
#### Don't Forget to Consider the Title!

One of the first tips for interpretation we talked about earlier in the semester was to consider why an author chose a specific title.

- Did you find this title to be telling?
- Is it Ironic?
- Are any of the relationships in this chapter really "Best Friend" material?

### PATTY & ELIZA

Patty and Eliza's friendship is their friendship is portrayed as passionate and intense. Patty enjoys Eliza's friendly affection, but she's also confused about her feelings for her new friend:



**"She was also fearful about Eliza — she suddenly realized that she had some kind of weird crush on Eliza and that it was therefore of paramount importance to sit motionless and contain herself and not discover that she was bisexual." (60)**

Thinking about the **Setting** of this

section being midwestern America in the 1970's, it seems realistic to presume that (as a woman) Patty' has been socialized not to embrace this kind of feeling but instead to police her own affection, "to sit motionless and contain herself." Franzen's description here shows the undercurrent of "fear" that society has taught Patty to feel about a passionate relationship with another woman in the absence of men. Despite Eliza's remarks earlier in the chapter referring to Patty's teammates as "the lesbians" (56)--paired with the dim-witted stereotype that female athletes are more prone to homosexuality--Patty isn't actually bisexual; this is the only place in the text where her possible desire for another woman is expressed.

**Why do you think Franzen included this sexual tension into the story? Does it reveal/teach us anything? Do you think he was trying to subvert the expectation for the "college girls experimenting" trope/cliche?**

### From Friends to Competitors

After Franzen assures us that Eliza isn't there to fulfill the cliché role of "token lesbian" that Patty "experiments" with in college, he quickly repositions the girls into adversaries vying for the same guys

#### CARTER

Carter, in Patty's mind, was her "first boyfriend" who may or may not have had an intimate past with

Eliza (64). Patty's blind trust in her friend comes back to bite her when she finds Carter, Eliza and another girl in a questionable situation, but Patty's naivety failed to see her "friends" duplicity:

**"The night did not end, as it should have, with ta cooling or cessation of Patty's friendship with Eliza but instead with Patty swearing off Carter and apologizing for not having told Eliza more about her feelings for him" (68).**

#### RICHARD

We meet Richard shortly after Patty and Eliza moved in together (and at a point in the story that the reader can see how manipulative Eliza is). Eliza describes being with Richard as "being rolled over by a neutron star...like being erased with a giant eraser" (70). This choice of **imagery** on Franzen's part seems to **foreshadow** the fact that ultimately the arrival of Richard marks the end (or "erasing") of Patty and Eliza's friendship that happens at the end of the chapter. This scene is also when we get the arrival of young Walter--who we already know is Patty's future husband--and his friendship with Richard.

**"Few circumstances have turned out to be more painful to the autobiographer, in the long run, than the dearth of Walter and Richard's friendship" (70).**

**Do you think title of this section ("Best Friends") is less about Eliza and Patty and more about the seemingly more important friendship between Richard and Walter?**

### WALTER & RICHARD

Walter and Richard (described as an "odder couple than even Patty and Eliza" (70)) are introduced as polar opposites, and really almost **caricatures** of the two kinds of guys you might see in a romantic comedy: The dark, mysterious "bad boy" who's In a rock band and seems generally uninterested in the story's heroine (in this case Patty), and the nerdy, sweet and sensitive "nice guy" who the leading lady thinks she doesn't want but ultimately ends up with.

Although initially we may think the appearance of Walter in this chapter signals the beginning of the Patty/Walter's relationship, we find out it's actually the where we learn that Patty had--at one point--feelings for her husband's "best friend".

Abandoned by Eliza (who we presume was with Richard doing drugs or some other illicit activity) at the concert venue where Richard's band--the Traumatized--were playing, Patty is "rescued" by Walter who drives her home after the show. In the car, Patty and Walter make small talk before going into a conversation about who (among the 4 main characters in this section) is a "nice person" (78).

When asked by Patty if Richard was a "nice person", Walter settles on calling Richard "loyal" (78). Walter then asks Patty if she's a "nice person" because he thinks Eliza is so terrible. Patty admits that part of the appeal of being friends with Eliza is that she can "be herself and still be *better* than her" (79). This scene continues with Patty deeming Walter a genuinely nice person while simultaneously trying to convince him of her badness.

### Goodness, Badness, & Niceness

This chapter--which, remember, is still told to us **NOT** by a third person omniscient narrator but by Patty-as-autobiographer--has a heavy focus on the idea of being "nice" or a "good person" (and what it means to be those things).

In thinking about the seemingly notable relationships within this chapter (Eliza and Patty, Richard and Walter, Richard and Eliza, Richard and Patty, Walter and Patty) can you deduce who you think is a "nice person"? Is niceness and goodness the same? Is it defined by socially dictated morals and manners or something else?

**Are the nice characters the characters you would want to hang out with? Be friends with? Ask for a ride to the airport at 7am?**

10. Good/Saintly

#### Characters:

Walter  
Patty  
Joey  
Jessica  
Connie  
Richard  
Eliza  
Carol  
Blake

1. Bad/puppy kicker

**EXERCISE:** Take a moment assign each of the main characters a value from 1 to 10 based on how "good" or "bad" of a person they are. Make sure you have a reason as to WHY you gave them that score

### What about "Freedom"?

By this point I would HOPE that you have started noting moments in the novel where the word "freedom" or "free comes up in the text--it is the title of the book after all--but if not the good news that this is the chapter it really gets going. And since we are in Patty's autobiography, we can start with talking about Patty's individual/personal freedoms:

The first time Patty feels "free," is when she was drunk at the high school swim party where she was raped by Ethan (38).

The second time was after finally ridding herself of Eliza, "She sprinted down Eliza's street in sheer exhilaration at her freedom" (97) before ultimately incurring an injury that ended her sports career.

And finally at the end of the chapter, she refers to herself as "almost free" (123) when she decides to change her life trajectory by leaving Richard halfway through their road trip to be with Walter.

### Pattern Strategy: Tracking the words Free/Freedom

Other moments where "free" or "freedom" have appeared/come up in the novel :

- **Page 108:** Richard explains to Patty that Walter thinks "the American bourgeoisie will voluntarily accept increasing restrictions on their personal freedoms.
- **Page 111:** When Patty asks Richard if she can catch a ride with him cross country back to New York, Richard tells her she needs to "fish or cut bait here" and not keep stringing Walter along if she wasn't interested in being with him.

**Did Patty pick safety and security over passion? Was she free of her past, or did it influence her decision? Was Patty really ever free, or is freedom an illusion?**

### Teacher Thoughts

Throughout Chapter 2, we get the perfect picture of just how lost and selfish Patty is. She strings Walter along (a fact that Richard confronts her about) with no clear sign of actually wanting to be with him--except the fact that we, the readers, know they will **EVENTUALLY** get married.

She's presented with a choice at the end of two years: spend the summer in Richard's old room -- sharing, no strings attached, the apartment with Walter -- or driving home to New York with Richard, who is dropping out and intends to live there from now on.

It's a no-brainer--Patty chooses the "bad boy".

But the drive with Richard is a complete failure. Patty soon realizes how uninterested Richard is in sleeping with her (or even spending time with her) and his apathy and self-centeredness ultimately make her miss her mother's party--the whole reason she was going to New York in the first place. The chapter ends with her leaving Richard in Chicago after she decides to "go home" (123)-- which turns out to be Hibbing, the two-bit town where Walter is, with his now dying father, ailing mother and useless brothers.

In true RomCom cliché, she arrives at the bus station...in the pouring rain...and "throws her arms around his neck" to kiss him for the first time. In the chapter's final words, she remarks that Walter kisses -- wait for it -- "very **nicely**" (124).

### Discussion Board 6: FREEDOM (pt I)

Your sixth Reading Discussion Board will focus on the first 125 pages of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. The first chapter of the novel--"Good Neighbors"--centers around the Berglund family and their immediate circle, and then abruptly changes course into a "book within a book" structure in which we begin to read Patty's autobiography MISTAKES WERE MADE and learn more about her childhood, young adulthood, and college years.

Like many of the short stories we read, this novel deals with some familiar thematic elements (**Gender rolls/female identity, The 'American Dream' and identity, classism, coming of age, dysfunctional family dynamics, etc.**) as well as rhetorical elements such as **satire, motifs, irony, and structure** to invite literary analysis of the novel's depth--some of this will become more clear the more you read. One of the most prominent lens to analyze the novel how it also does a deep dive into what it means to be 'free'/have 'freedom' through the story of the Berglund family.

You are welcome to explore any of the above ideas, rhetorical devices, or come up with your own exploration of the text so far.

**Don't forget you can also go back to questions, themes and lines of inquiry from last week's lesson as well!**

### 6 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. As a young woman, Patty is phenomenally strong on the basketball court yet vulnerable in relationships, especially with her workaholic parents, her friend Eliza, and the conflicted duo of Richard and Walter. What did her rapist, Ethan Post, teach her about vulnerability? After the rape, what did her father and the coaches attempt to teach her about strength?

2. How would you characterize Patty's writing? How does her storytelling style compare to the narrator's voice in "Good Neighbors"?

3. Why do you think Franzen made the structural decision to put a story within the story with Patty's Autobiography? What value does this bring? How does it make you view Patty?

4. Thinking about "Goodness" and "Badness" is there a protagonist or antagonist in this story? How would you morally categorize the characters you've met based on their actions, thoughts and dialogue?

5. Why do you think looking at the good/bad characterization of these people is valuable to interpreting the novel as a whole?

**Remember:** Just because you are just starting the novel does NOT mean you cannot do a proper analysis with close reading and unpacking of quotes and scenes, nor does it mean you cannot already decipher a hidden meaning or message about the book. You will be able to write about whatever you want as long as you have at least 3 direction quotes or passages that you are closely analyzing/unpacking to offer a unique interpretation of the text in conjunction with your idea.

**PRIMARY POSTS ARE DUE FRIDAY BY 11:59PM**

**PEER RESPONSES ARE DUE SUNDAY BY 11:59PM**