

THE GREAT GODDEN

MEG ROSOFF

ABOUT THE BOOK

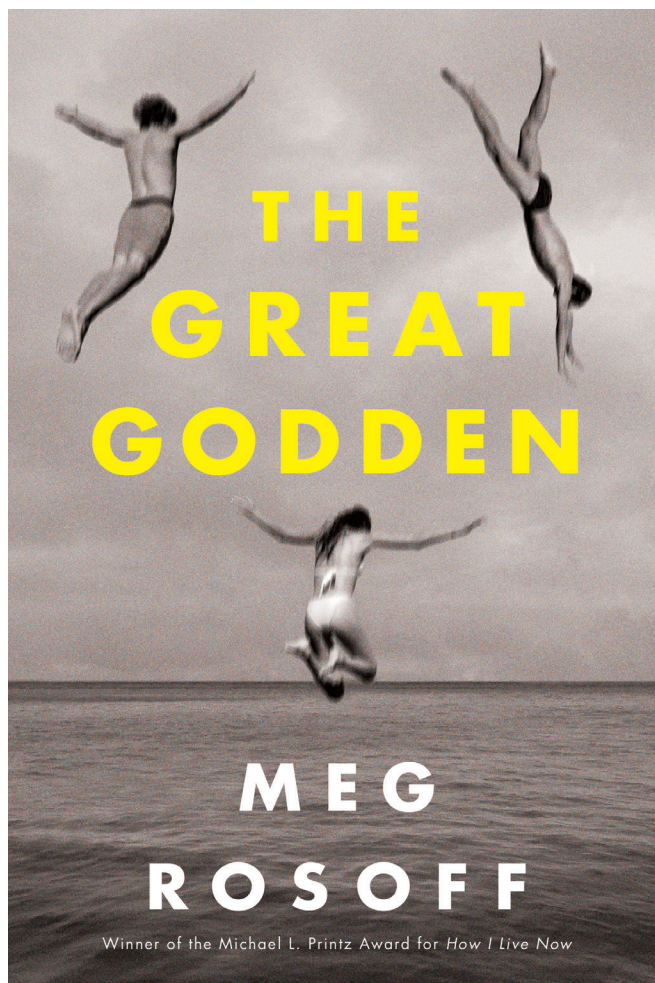
Everyone talks about falling in love like it's the most miraculous, life-changing thing in the world. Something happens, they say, and you know. . . .

I looked into his eyes and I knew. Only, everyone else knew too. Everyone else felt exactly the same way.

This is the story of one family during one dreamy summer—the summer when everything changes. In a turreted vacation house by the sea, our watchful narrator sees everything, including many things that shouldn't be seen, while brothers, sisters, parents, and theatrical older cousins fill the hot days with wine and tennis and sailing and planning a wedding. Enter two brothers, the sons of a fading film actress—irresistibly charming, languidly sexy Kit and surly, silent Hugo. Suddenly there's a serpent in this paradise, and the consequences will be devastating. In a propulsive narrative carrying intrigue and a growing sense of unease, Meg Rosoff, best-selling author of the iconic *How I Live Now*, offers a summer tale of innocence lost that will find its place among the classics of young adult literature.



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Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The title of this book, *The Great Godden*, is intriguing. What did you think it might be about? When you learned that Godden was the last name of two brothers, which one did you think was the “great” one? Did your opinion change by the end of the book?
2. Rosoff includes a quotation by the poet William Blake at the beginning of the book: “And we are put on earth a little space, That we may learn to bear the beams of love.” What does this mean to you?
3. On page 1, we learn that the narrator fell in love with Kit Godden simply by looking into his eyes. So for one very brief moment the reader is allowed to think that this is going to be a lovely romance. But the next sentence is quite foreboding. Speaking of looking into Kit’s eyes and knowing right away, the narrator says, “Only, everyone else knew too. Everyone else felt exactly the same way.” These two short sentences tell you so much about Kit and about the trajectory of the book. What did you think when you read them?
4. Rosoff sets the book up as a play on page 6: “The actors assembled, the summer begins.” There is a lot about theater in this book: two characters are professional actors (Kit and Mal), and there are many references to plays such as *Hamlet* and Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. And there is the conflict between what appears to be happening (as if presented onstage) and what is really happening. How would you describe the interplay between theater and life in this story?
5. Another way the narrator looks at reality is through a brass telescope that has been handed down through the generations. How does this view color the narrator’s thoughts about what is going on?
6. Mattie, the sixteen-year-old sister, is described by the narrator as “the most trivial person I know. She says she wants to be a doctor but her brain seems mostly filled with sex and shoes” (page 12). Does this description hold up or does your opinion of her change throughout the book?
7. “Remember the poor cormorant” (page 20). This is the warning that Hope gives to the kids about not swamping the two Godden boys. The cormorant, which they had tried to nurse back to health, had suffered a heart attack and died from too much attention, according to Mal. The narrator says this warning “welded Kit Godden to the cormorant in my brain forever, the golden boy and the ragged black bird” (page 20). In what ways did the narrator find the two to be similar?
8. The narrator is often disparaging about the advantages that Mattie’s beauty brings to her. On page 48, the narrator says, “What annoys me most is that it takes no effort to be born beautiful, no hard work, no mental agility, no strength of character. Just dumb luck. And yet it’s a universal currency, often mistaken for moral superiority.” Later the narrator says that beauty is “very possibly ruinous for the owner” (page 51). What do you think about these opinions? Are beautiful people lucky or burdened?
9. We come to know Hugo gradually as he reveals more and more about himself. He hates his brother. He is an artist. He is an amazing tennis player. He is socially awkward. He doesn’t consider anywhere home. How would you describe him?
10. Twice the narrator talks about how the less a person seems to do, the more effective they are at doing it (Hope acting in *A Doll’s House* and Hugo playing tennis). Does this make sense to you? Would you agree that this is how an expert seems to work?

11. Were you surprised by Mattie's reaction to the reason the wedding was called off? How would you have expected her to react?
12. Have you ever met someone like Kit? Someone who could have anything he or she wanted? Whose charms worked on everyone? How did that person use those abilities?
13. Of the four siblings, which one did you identify with most? Why? Which one did you like the most?
14. The book could have ended with Chapter 27 when the fateful summer ended. Instead, Rosoff chose to add a chapter that took place a year later. Was that chapter helpful, necessary, significant? How did it add to your understanding of the book?
15. On the final page, referring to his brother, Hugo asks, "Who cares what happens to that bastard?" And the narrator thinks, "Well, I don't. I don't. Obviously, I don't. But I do often think of that face and those hands and a voice telling me that I'm something else. And more and more I think that maybe he was right." Discuss these protestations and why the narrator has come to think Kit was right.
16. You may have tried to figure out if the narrator was male or female, looked for clues throughout the book, and expected it to be revealed at the end. And it wasn't. What did you think of this device? Did it work for you? Does it matter if the narrator was male or female? Why or why not? Which do you think the narrator was? What made you decide that?



ABOUT MEG ROSOFF

Meg Rosoff is the author of *How I Live Now*, winner of the Michael L. Printz Award. She is a recipient of the Carnegie Medal and the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award and was named a National Book Award Finalist for her novel *Picture Me Gone*. Meg Rosoff also completed Mal Peet's unfinished novel *Beck*, a promise she made him before he died. She lives in London.

These questions were prepared by Grace Worcester, a former youth services consultant for the Vermont Department of Libraries. She has served on the Newbery Medal, Caldecott Medal, *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award*, and National Book Award for Young People's Literature committees.



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