

FLANNERY O'CONNOR AWARD



FOR SHORT FICTION

# once removed

STORIES BY COLETTE SARTOR

**BOOK  
CLUB KIT**

# DEAR BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

Thanks so much for selecting *Once Removed* for your book club pick. I participate in several book clubs myself, including the [Literary Roadhouse Bookclub podcast](#), which I cohost. So I love when people bond over books, no matter what the forum.

To help you make the most of your time together with *Once Removed*, I've put together this Book Club Kit. The discussion questions are courtesy of my dear friend [A.P. Murray](#), author of the Rita-award-winning book *Greedy Heart*. A.P. was gracious enough to host the very first book club to discuss *Once Removed*, and she invited me to the gathering. There, I discovered that it's as much fun for me to discuss my own work with book clubs as it is to discuss other books in clubs of which I'm a member.

So please keep in mind that I love meeting with book clubs via Skype or FaceTime or even in person, depending on the place. I've met some wonderful people this way and have enjoyed every minute. I'd love the chance to meet your group, too, so if you'd like to set up a visit, **just contact me through my website, [colettesartor.com](http://colettesartor.com)**.

I'm a voracious reader myself, and I know how quickly the pile can grow—be it virtual or in real life—of books you're longing to read. So I consider it a gift whenever someone picks up *Once Removed* and spends precious time reading it. Thank you for that.

Enjoy!



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Courtesy of A.P. Murray

1. **Lightening Round:** Get the group moving by picking one of the following and commenting in 90 seconds or less:

- Which story affected you most and why?
- Who was your favorite character?
- Best moment/story in the book?
- Worst moment/story?

2. **Place as Character:** Sometimes place functions as a character in a story. How do the places in these stories (e.g., Nonna's farm, Hearst Castle and the surrounding area, New Jersey, Los Angeles, the backyard in "Lamb") function as characters?

3. **Grudgeholding:** There's a lot of grudgeholding in these stories. Which characters were the most obvious grudgeholders? The least obvious? Are there grudgeholders in your own life? How are they similar/dissimilar to the characters in *Once Removed*?

4. **Links Between Stories:** How are the stories linked? How do these linkages influence your reading of the collection?

5. **Heartbreak:** The stories present a spectrum of heartbreak: Relationship heartbreak, parent heartbreak, death-of-a-loved-one heartbreak, the heartbreak of your own limitations. Which one resonated most for you and why?

6. **Intimacy:** The stories also give a spectrum of intimacy and its opposite. What is the opposite of intimacy? Which stories and characters show

versions of that? Which story best shows what intimacy means to you?

7. **Secrets:** It seems as if every story presents a character with some kind of secret. Which secret struck you most and why? What is the power of secrets?

8. **Parenting:** Various stories explore the difficulty and the joy of parenting children. Which parenting depiction was most touching for you and why?

9. **Mothers & Daughters:** The stories also reveal the relationships of adult women with their mothers. Which one resonated with you most? Was there a mother in a story that you wish were yours?

10. **Mean Kids:** There are a bunch of mean kids in these stories. Who was the meanest? Were you a mean kid, or the kid others were mean to?

11. **Animals:** Animals appear in various stories: Elephants, dead cats, live kittens, seals, parakeets. Pick an animal and describe how it had an important function in the story.

12. **Obsessions:** A few of the stories present unhealthy obsessions (e.g. Hannah/Rune, Judith/Zeke, Irene/Hank). What did you make of the meaning of these obsessions? Why do the characters get obsessed? How does the characters' obsession affect others around them and their own sense of self?

# Quick Reference Guide: Story and Key Characters

**“Bandit”** — Rune, Hannah, Clive

**“Daredevil”** — Noreen, Aiden, Grace

**“Extra Precautions”** — Claire, Duff, Judith, Savvy, Zeke

**“Lamb”** — Savvy, Luca, Rose, Judith, Grace, Aiden

**“F-Man”** — Mila, Peter, Rune, Fender, Paw Paw

**“Jump”** — Marney, Winston, Gwen, Dom, Skye, Rose

**“Once Removed”** — Sylvie, Kyle, Aiden, Izzy

**“Elephant Teeth”** — Skye, Lucy, Winston, Eugene, Tate, Fender, Rune

**“Malocchio”** — Rose, Nonna, Mama (Carmella), Louie, Nazy, June

**“La Cuesta Encantada”** — Althea, Owen, Beatrice, Irene, Mama, Hank

# FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

I was raised in an Italian American family where our whole lives revolved around food. We planned lunch and dinner while eating a breakfast big enough to glut an elephant. We still do. Even so, I was surprised by a question author Leslie Peitrzyk posed during an interview about *Once Removed* for her blog, Work-in-Progress.

“Any food associated with your book?” she asked.

At first, I was at a loss. I didn’t recall much food in my book. As far as I was concerned, there wasn’t much food in *any* of my writing. No fights over huge family dinners. No hours spent in the kitchen cooking for a gathering of thirty or more relatives.

Then again, there was that one unfinished short story, “Graveside,” I wrote years ago about the DiCorcias, the New Jersey Italian family in *Once Removed* who are also the main characters in my novel-in-progress, *Piecework* (more about *Piecework* below). In “Graveside,” Rose, the matriarch, plans a graveside dinner party to celebrate her dead mother’s birthday. Then there was my first published story about an overweight woman whose overbearing father insists she plan him a huge retirement party when what she really wants is tell him to piss off and get inseminated to have a baby on her own.

But food was barely a footnote in those stories, unworthy of any real notice.

Which reminded me of the best compliment I ever got in graduate school at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. A classmate, who’s now a well-known restaurant critic, walked up to me after a

critique of one of my stories and said, “God, I can’t believe how well you write about food!”

It hadn’t occurred to me that my story (long since abandoned) even involved food. But when I reread it, there it was, a cocktail party littered with loving descriptions of every single appetizer—a cocktail party where everything essential happened.

So I paged through *Once Removed* and discovered that food does play a significant role in the stories. There’s *zeppole*, polenta and fried apples, a whole roasted lamb, even *stinco d’agnello* (roasted lamb’s head, gelatinous eyeballs and all). Throughout the book, significant moments happen over food. Food is offered as a consolation, a gesture of love, a gesture of aggression, even. And that food is usually Italian.

Growing up, I learned to associate tomato sauce (called “gravy” by my mom when she was growing up) with comfort and family. It’s the basis of many great Italian dishes. So I decided that would be a great recipe to share with you.

What follows is a tomato sauce recipe based on my mom’s recipe. She was a natural chef with gifted taste buds. In law school when I finally decided it was time I learned to cook, I begged for her recipes, which usually involved her saying, “Well, add a handful of this and maybe a jar of that....” When I pointed out that my handful might be smaller than hers (she had big, square palms with long piano player fingers, which I envied), she laughed and gave me actual measurements. And they worked.



## MARIA SARTOR'S MARINARA RECIPE (as modified by her daughters)

Prep Time: 1 hr

Simmer Time: 3 hrs

Total Time: 4 hrs

Yield: 6 quarts

### Ingredients:

- 1 large onion
- 2-3 cloves garlic cloves
- 2 stalks celery
- 3 cups carrots
- 1 bunch fresh parsley (or one handful dry parsley)
- 6 ounces tomato paste
- 1/2 bottle good red wine (full bodied, NOT sweet)
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 tablespoon dried basil
- 1/4 teaspoon oregano
- 2-3 bay leaves
- salt and pepper to taste
- 3 28 oz cans San Marzano tomatoes (pureed, if

possible; if not, get crushed)

- 2-3 tablespoons chicken bouillon (more to taste)
- chicken stock to taste as needed
- olive oil for pan as needed

### Optional Ingredients:

- meatballs (precooked, as many as you can fit)
- 2 large porkchops (preferably bone in)
- salt and pepper to taste
- olive oil for pan

### Instructions:

1. Puree onion and garlic in a food processor, or finely chop with knife.
2. Cover bottom of large pot (I use an 8 quart, but my sister uses a 10 quart; then again, she always makes more sauce than I do) with olive oil and sauté the pureed onions and garlic until they've caramelized, about 5 – 10 minutes. One thing I've noticed about sautéing pureed onions and garlic is that they tend get a little bluish. I threw mine out the first time it happened. They're fine, though, so use 'em.
3. Puree the carrots and celery in a food processor or finely chop with a knife.
4. Add the carrots and celery to the pot with the onions and garlic, plus a little more olive oil if the vegetables look dry, and sauté for another 5 – 10 minutes.
5. Add tomato paste and cook for approx. 5 minutes, stirring frequently.
6. Add red wine and cook approximately 10 minutes to evaporate the alcohol.
7. Optional: if you prefer a smooth sauce and couldn't find

pureed tomatoes, puree the tomatoes in a food processor.

8. Add the tomatoes, herbs, and chicken bouillon to the pot. Also add salt and pepper to taste.

9. Cook sauce until it reduces to about 3/4 of original (2-3 hours on stove on low heat). Stir occasionally and check seasonings about midway through. If the sauce tastes too bitter or acidic, add more chicken bouillon or some chicken stock and then adjust the seasonings to taste. Also, if it gets too thick, add chicken stock and then adjust seasonings to taste.

### Optional:

1. Cook meatballs using any recipe you like. I prefer to cook them in the oven in glass pans after rolling them in olive oil.
2. Season the pork chops with salt and pepper, then brown in skillet coated in olive oil.
3. Before starting to cook down sauce, add browned pork chops and meatballs. Make sure to scrape the browned bits from the meat pans into the sauce, which adds a great flavor. Then proceed to cook sauce for 2 – 3 hours on low heat.



# ABOUT COLETTE SARTOR



COLETTE SARTOR is an award-winning writer who's originally from a large Italian American family in New Jersey. She currently lives in Los Angeles, where she's working on a novel called *Piece Work* that's based on a murder her grandmother helped cover up in the '70s and includes Rose DiCorcia and other characters from *Once Removed*.

Colette frequently visits with book clubs (either in person or via Skype/FaceTime) and is available for speaking engagements. For more information, feel free to contact her using the [contact form on her website](#).



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