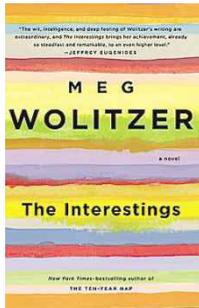


bookshelf

The ties that bind

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

In the enticing first chapter of Meg Wolitzer's *"The Interestings"* (Riverhead, \$27.95), set in 1974, a band of teenagers has gathered in a teepee at summer camp to cement and christen their friendship. There's a pair of siblings from a wealthy New York family, a homey genius artist, a blonde dancer, the quiet son of a famous folk singer — and a new girl, Julie Jacobson, who that night gets the nickname Jules to mark her membership in the clique.



Meg Wolitzer

The rest of the book covers the next four decades of the Interestings' lives, mostly seen from Jules' perspective. By the time she receives the 2009 Christmas letter from Ethan Figman (the genius) and Ash Wolf (one of the siblings), now married, she jokes about "falling down in a snowbank and dying of a combination of hypothermia and envy." Jules and her husband — not an Interesting, but a social worker who suffers from depression — are struggling to make ends meet. Ethan, by contrast, has an animated cartoon franchise that generates a fortune, Ash is a feminist theater director, and together they spearhead an anti-child-labor-initiative and other such projects. This dramatically unequal friendship is "untouchable . . . the centerpiece of the two marriages," though it involves the Figman-Wolfs taking the Jacobson-Boyds on all-expenses-paid vacations and even straight out writing them checks.

Only one of the other Interestings remains central at this point — the musician's son, now out as a gay man, but isolated by a secret he carries from childhood. The other two — Ash's brother and the dancer — have disappeared due to a terrible incident that occurred not long after summer camp. Wolitzer's intricate plot unearths them and slots them into what is no longer a fire circle of friendship so much as a totem pole of power.

Passion and envy among friends in two new novels



Claire Messud

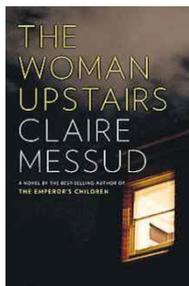
As she tries to cope with her feelings about the Figman-Wolfs, Jules reads that "Jealousy was essentially 'I want what you have,' while envy was 'I want what you have, but I also want to take it away so you can't have it.'" The fact that so caustic an emotion can be thoroughly intertwined in our deepest bonds of love is the truth at the heart of this insightful tale.

Envy, as defined above, is also the theme of Claire Messud's *"The Woman Upstairs"* (Alfred A. Knopf, \$25.95), as tightly focused and intensely first-person as Wolitzer's novel is sprawling and omniscient.

Messud's narrator, Nora, storms onto the page in a fury, spewing allusions and metaphors, to tell us the story of a few months that changed her life.

Once "the Gerber baby of school teachers," Nora is transformed by her relationship with the family of an Italian-Lebanese boy, Reza Shahid, who shows up in her third-grade classroom the year his father is a visiting professor at Harvard. This adorable child, who is only beginning to speak English, immediately becomes the target of violence in the schoolyard.

In addition to her work with children, Nora is an amateur artist who makes — yes, Ibsen fans — dollhouses, tiny replicas of the settings inhabited by women like Emily Dickinson and Edie Sedgwick. Reza's mother, Sirena, is an internationally acclaimed installation artist — so when she asks Nora to share a studio, the latter is dazzled. Soon, an old friend observes that Nora adores Sirena, wants to steal her son and sleep with her husband. But Nora insists she loves each of them separately, as if they had no relationship to one another. "I hated to think of them all together, in the evenings and on the weekends, without me and with barely a thought for me."



The stage is set for a terrible betrayal, and the ending delivers it on schedule. The writing in this book is on fire, and the connections it makes — a Chekhov short story, a Larkin poem, "Alice

in Wonderland" — pop like intellectual fireworks from the page. Says Nora, "You know those moments, at school or at college, when suddenly the cosmos seems like one vast plan after all, patterned in such a way that the novel you're reading at bedtime connects to your astronomy lecture, connects to what you heard on NPR, connects to what your friend discusses in the cafeteria at lunch — and then briefly it's as if the lid has come off the world, as if the world were a dollhouse, and you can glimpse what it would be like to see it whole from above — a vertiginous magnificence."

You may well experience one of those moments reading "The Woman Upstairs."

bestsellers

Publishers Weekly's list of national bestsellers powered by Nielsen BookScan for the week ending April 14.

hardcover

FICTION

1. **DADDY'S GONE A HUNTING**, by Mary Higgins Clark (Simon & Schuster)
2. **DON'T GO**, by Lisa Scottoline (St. Martin's)
3. **STARTING NOW**, by Debbie Macomber (Ballantine)
4. **UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES**, by Stuart Woods (Putnam)
5. **SIX YEARS**, by Harlan Coben (Dutton)
6. **LIFE AFTER LIFE**, by Kate Atkinson (Little, Brown/Reagan Arthur)
7. **GONE GIRL**, by Gillian Flynn (Crown)
8. **THE STORYTELLER**, by Jodi Picoult (Atria)
9. **THE BURGESS BOYS**, by Elizabeth Strout (Random House)
10. **MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN ACCRA**, by Paulo Coelho (Knopf)

NONFICTION

1. **LEAN IN**, by Sheryl Sandberg (Knopf)
2. **THE FAST METABOLISM DIET**, by Haylie Pomroy (Harmony)
3. **IT'S ALL GOOD**, by Gwyneth Paltrow (Grand Central)
4. **THE DUCK COMMANDER FAMILY**, by Willie & Korie Robertson (Howard Books)
5. **LIFE CODE**, by Dr. Phil McGraw (Bird Street Books)
6. **THE FASTDIET**, by Michael Mosley (Atria)
7. **GIVE AND TAKE**, by Adam Grant (Viking)
8. **MAKING GOOD HABITS, BREAKING BAD HABITS**, by Joyce Meyer (FaithWords)
9. **I DECLARE**, by Joel Osteen (FaithWords)
10. **GULP**, by Mary Roach (Norton)

paperback

1. **THE WITNESS**, by Nora Roberts (Berkley)
2. **PROOF OF HEAVEN**, by Eben Alexander (Simon & Schuster)
3. **THE FORGOTTEN**, by David Baldacci (Grand Central)
4. **I, MICHAEL BENNETT**, by James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge (Grand Central)
5. **WILD**, by Cheryl Strayed (Vintage)
6. **WALKING DISASTER**, by Jamie McGuire (Atria)
7. **BEAUTIFUL RUINS**, by Jess Walter (Harper Perennial)
8. **OBAMACARE SURVIVAL GUIDE**, by Nick J. Tate (Humanix Books)
9. **AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL**, by Ben Carson (Zondervan)
10. **FIFTY SHADES OF GREY**, by E.L. James (Vintage)