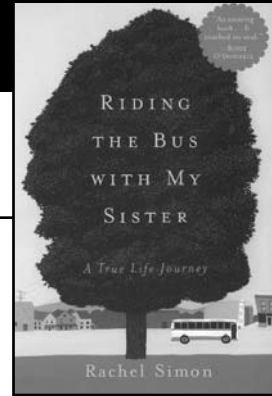


RIDING THE BUS WITH MY SISTER

by Rachel Simon

READING GROUP GUIDE



ISBN 0-452-28455-4
Price \$15.00 (CAN \$22.00)

Introduction

When an editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for whom Rachel Simon writes freelance commentary pieces, finds out that her sister Beth rides the buses, all day, every day, he gives Rachel the assignment of riding with Beth for one day. Rachel commutes the few hours to the Pennsylvania city where Beth lives, and together the pair rides the commuter buses around the city and its sprawling suburbs. A few weeks later, Beth asks Rachel to join her for an entire year, and Rachel agrees, riding for a few days every two weeks.

Beth is a vibrant, creative, and willful woman who happens to have mental retardation. She also lives independently, receiving support from a team of direct support professionals and a network of friends and mentors — the city bus drivers. In the years before she discovered the buses, none of her attempts at employment worked out, and during one of the periods of unemployment, she fell in love with bus riding, and made a decision that this was the calling to which she would devote her life. Indeed, Beth has turned her daily schedule into a job of sorts, performing small favors for her favorite drivers: delivering coffee to one and a favorite soda to another, or providing wakeup calls for one driver's indolent adolescent offspring.

Partly out of curiosity, partly out of a sense of obligation to her sister, and partly out of the guilt of feeling like a “bad sister,” Rachel accompanies Beth on these rides and watches her interaction with the patchwork group of personalities that make up the city's public transportation force. Not all of the bus drivers, or bus passengers, for that matter, welcome Beth; in fact, many grow weary of her dogged determination to go where she wants, when she wants, and for as long as she wants. The people who do befriend her, however, are not saintly — nor lecherous. They are colorful characters, eager to share their life stories and hard-earned philosophies, and are decidedly and agreeably human. As Rachel accompanies her sister on the buses, she discovers the reason for her sister's affection and devotion to these drivers — these people Beth deems “cool.” It is apparent in their open demeanors and good humor, and their ability to accept life as it comes, one passenger at a time.

Beth's determination to live her life in her own way — to fully live out the promise of a new civil rights development called “self-determination” — as well as the optimism and grace of her bus driver friends, encourages Rachel to reexamine her own way of doing things. Throughout the year, she grapples with her self-inflicted isolation and loneliness, compares it to the richness of Beth's own life, and finally comes to terms with the fears and prejudices that have undermined her relationships, romantic and familial, up until this point. Her presence helps Beth, too, who slowly comes to recognize that her older sister is someone who can be relied upon, someone who cares about her, and who is, sometimes, cool, too.

Discussion Questions

- 1.** The memoir opens with Beth's annual Plan of Care review, and Beth's request of Rachel to accompany her on bus rides for an entire year. Discuss Rachel and Beth's relationship at the outset of the book: What kind of dynamic do they have? What kind of a role does Rachel play in Beth's life at this point (and vice versa)? What obstacles to their relationship are evident from the first? What do you think was the motivation for Beth's request? Did their tension reflect tensions that you have felt with family members? To whom did you relate to more, Rachel or Beth?
- 2.** Why does Beth love riding the buses? What does she gain from this ad hoc community? Does our understanding of her devotion to the buses deepen over the course of the book, and if so, how does Simon make that happen? Do we come to certain realizations before the character of Rachel does? Examine your own reactions as you read, and when and why they changed. Have you known other people who are devoted to an activity that you do not understand? How did your understanding of Beth's bus riding affect your thoughts about those other people?
- 3.** How do the italicized sections of the book, which relay Rachel and Beth's family history, inform the present-day chapters? Describe the tone of these sections, and the way in which Simon manages to convey their tragic and convoluted past. How does she deal with emotionally charged scenes from the past, and how do they inform our understanding of not only present-day situations and events, but also present-day relationships?
- 4.** Discuss our perspective of Rachel's mother throughout the book: from her panic and despair over the baby Beth's mental disability, to her growing alienation from her children and husband, to her emotional collapse and marriage to "the bad man." How do we view her reunion with her children when they are grown? How does Simon deal with the way each child shifts from anger to forgiveness? At what points do you sympathize with her mother and at what points do you judge her? Discuss the extent to which this is due to the way Simon writes about her mother. How does the story of Rachel's mother shed light on other mothers you might have known who have reached the breaking point with their families?
- 5.** Consider and discuss Rachel and Beth's father: his departure from the family soon after their move to Pennsylvania; his return when their mother kicks Laura, Rachel, and Max out of the house; and his tumultuous relationship with Beth, both before and after his remarriage. To what degree do we see him as a sympathetic character? Compare his ability to come to terms with Beth's disability when she was a child with his gradually becoming worn down by their relationship in her adolescence and twenties. Compare and contrast his actions with the actions of their mother. Are there ways in which either is more or less adept than the other? If you know other parents of children with special needs, how do their experiences compare with the experiences of Beth's parents?
- 6.** Examine the relationship between all of the children growing up: Laura, Rachel, Beth, and Max. Compare their relationships with each other as children to their relationships with each other as adults. What has changed, and what has remained the same? How supportive of one another were they as children, compared to their lives as adults? How did their dynamic shift over time? What do you think were the direct causes? Would things have been different if the family had stayed together?

- 7.** Discuss the way that Rachel, Laura, and Max were affected by being the siblings of a person with special needs. How much of a role do you think Beth's disability played in their growth as individuals? How did their parents' feelings toward Beth affect the ability of the other siblings to accept her? What are some of the emotions that Rachel reveals she felt about her sister, starting with her being a little child, then a teenager and young adult, and finally a woman entering middle-age? What is the impact of her parents' own difficulties on her sense of her own responsibility toward Beth? Examine Simon's approach to the times when she was not feeling positive about her sister. Discuss the device of the "dark voice." Have you known other siblings of people with disabilities? How do their emotions and concerns mirror those of their parents, and how are they distinct or unique?
- 8.** Discuss Jacob, the Christian bus driver who would have Beth "do unto others as you would have done to you." Consider how we see his role in Beth's life, which goes beyond bus driver to become a true friend (one who takes her to the beach with his family, and cares for her before and after her operation). What kind of a person is Jacob? What makes him likeable, and what keeps him from being an overly sentimental person, or "character," in the book? Compare his role in Beth's life with the friendship he begins to form in Rachel's life. He is clearly on a spiritual journey. Are other characters in the book also on a quest to live a more spiritual life? What is the role of spirituality in the book?
- 9.** Compare and contrast the different bus drivers with one another: Claude, Jacob, Happy Timmy, Rodolpho, Rick, Henry, Estella, Crazy Bailey, Jack, Bert, Cliff, and Melanie. Who are your favorites? Which personalities are more vivid than others? What does each contribute to Beth's daily rides? Describe Beth's "falling out" with men such as Claude, Henry, and Cliff. Do we see these men as sympathetic characters or slightly villainous for their lack of patience? Discuss how your perceptions of bus drivers were affected by the characters you "met" over the year. What do their experiences teach us?
- 10.** Now consider Rachel's relationships with the bus drivers. How does her need for their insight and kindness compare to Beth's? How do her relationships with them differ from Beth's, or do they at all? What do you think the bus drivers gain from their friendships with Beth, and subsequently, Rachel (for example, Jacob, Rick or Rodolpho)? How do we see their relationships progress from the opening of the book to its end?
- 11.** Discuss Beth's romantic relationship with Jesse: How would you describe their dynamic? How does their relationship compare with what you know of Sam and Rachel's relationship? Is mental disability portrayed as being a significant factor in Beth and Jesse's compatibility? What did you think of the way Rachel's family handled Beth's burgeoning sexuality, and Beth's annual reminder to Rachel: "Its TEn years since I cant Have a baBy?" Did learning about Beth and Jesse's relationship affect the way you view adults with disabilities? How?
- 12.** What kind of a man is Jesse? What kind of a role does he play in Rachel's life, let alone Beth's? What kind of "character" does he play in the story that unfolds throughout the memoir? Discuss his and Beth's relationship in light of their racial differences, and how they handle their commitment to one another in the face of social opposition. What is the effect on the reader of Jesse riding his bicycle on the periphery of scenes that haven't been about him? What do you think of Jesse's definition of love?

13. Why does Rachel struggle with self-determination? How did it develop in the community at large, and why was Rachel unaware of it until she rode with Beth? What is the role that self-determination plays in Beth's present-day life? Does Rachel's acceptance of it lead her to deal with her sister differently? Compare and contrast the way that Rachel dealt with Beth's "knock-out shot" with the way that Olivia would have dealt with it. What are your feelings about self-determination?

14. Discuss the symbol of the moon. When does it first appear as a symbol, and how does it develop over the course of the book? Examine the symbol of the mountain, which also appears throughout the book. Discuss the use of certain objects or natural phenomena within specific chapters: Beth's bus pass in "The Journey," the airplane in "The Dreamer," the snow in the sterilization section of "Lunch with Jesse," Jack's book in "The Loner," the ocean in "Be Not Afraid," the blue bus in "The Girlfriend," the outdoor candles in "Swans and Witches," and the rainstorm in "Beyond the Limits of the Sky."

15. Is the book enhanced by the inclusion of Beth's letters? How and why? What about Jack's recipes? The references to music?

16. Discuss the various explorations of language that occur throughout the book. What do you think about People First Language? The epithet that Rachel hears her classmates use in school? Did you find yourself questioning your own way of speaking, in the past or present? What is Beth's definition of "cool"? Why does Simon elaborate on Beth's three different meanings for "I don't know"? How does all of this discussion of language expand the larger themes of Beth's struggle for independence and Rachel's struggle to accept Beth?

17. Discuss the ramifications of Rachel's outburst near the culmination of the memoir, where she blurts out "I hate you," in response to Beth's surly, inhospitable demeanor. What does this heat-of-the-moment admission do to both sisters? What kind of change does it invoke in Beth's behavior, and what does it reveal to Rachel about her own feelings? How does it alter their relationship? Why did Simon include it?

18. Compare the annual Plan of Care review at the end of the book with the one at the beginning. What kind of progress or change has been made in the way Beth lives her life? What relationships have altered between the people in Beth's apartment? Discuss Rachel's revelations at this meeting and her reaction to Beth's curt "the year's over."

19. Describe the impact of the epilogue to the book, "A Year and a Half Later." What does it demonstrate about Rachel's transformation over the year? What progress has Beth made? How satisfying is this ending, for both the reader and Rachel? What kind of message does Simon leave us with, and how effective is her story as a medium for that message? How did you feel when you finished the final paragraph?

A Conversation with Rachel Simon

Q: *In Riding the Bus with My Sister, you describe the slow and gradual process you had to go through in order to be honest with yourself about your life and the people that you love. You write at the end of the memoir: "The biggest change has been my own . . . I know that it would never have happened had I not spent my year with Beth. It was she whose very presence caused the ice around my heart to thaw . . ." Did you have to "thaw" further in order to write this memoir?*

How different was the experience of being honest with yourself from the experience of committing this honesty to paper, and making this honesty public?

Yes, I would say that it was psychologically challenging to write this book. First, I had to be willing to be honest with myself about my many feelings about my sister, then I had to accept the unflattering picture of me that they revealed, and then I had to find a way to put all of that down on paper. I struggled with this a lot. I didn't want the readers to side with either sister, nor to dislike either sister. I also didn't always know how to describe the harder emotions, but when I finally developed the concept of the Dark Voice, the writing became less stressful. I should add that none of this would have been possible had I not had such a strong editor. Elaine Pfefferblit was as astute about human interaction as she was about sentence structure. Through our discussions and sometimes our disagreements, she guided me toward a deeper understanding of myself and my dynamic with Beth. I credit her with helping me truly understand the difference between loving Beth and trying to control her. So my many conversations with Elaine helped me not only to write our story more effectively, but to get on with the business of becoming a better sister.

Q: *You changed the names of the people you described in your book, and you never revealed the city in which your sister lives. Nevertheless, this must have had some kind of impact on Beth, her local notoriety and her daily life, and maybe even other family members as well. Has this been good or bad? (If it's possible to make such a cut-and-dried statement.) What kind of reaction has your book evoked from the public? (Both locally and nationally.)*

The effect on Beth's life has been very positive. Initially, the book wasn't real to her until I put a copy in her hands, but ever since, she's felt a great sense of pride. She read the book (the first non-picture book she had ever read), and then reread it to Jesse. She set up a book signing for me in the drivers' room. She carried the book around for months, drawing pictures on the Table of Contents, showing it to everyone she met, and memorizing the pages about Jesse — and Donny Osmond. I think the book also helped with some of her problems on the bus, because when some of the drivers encountered passengers who spoke ill of Beth, they would respond that she was a whole person with a huge, involved history, and would sometimes then describe the story about Beth's time away with our mother and the bad man, and how that experience contributed to her love of the buses. Several passengers then rethought their previous reactions to Beth.

Jacob e-mailed me such a story recently, saying that after he spoke to the judgmental passenger, "Her whole character immediately changed, much like an exorcism. She said she was very, very, sorry. I later told Beth, she again shrugged it off as my being too soft. She said that she probably won't apologize to her. The next day I saw Beth and she told me that the woman walked up to her and apologized. I had to ask Beth, 'Is this not proof beyond a doubt that God's way works? That people have misunderstandings and sometimes just need some education, a few nice words? Even people you do not like and act like your enemies can change for the better with love?' Beth said yes. She continued to say that the woman was nice to her now but she did not want to be her friend. I said that was all right, you don't have to make her your friend but isn't it right to just care enough about her that you would like to see her go to heaven? Beth said 'I guess.' Let that be our hope for all. Love, Jacob."

As for the public outside of Beth's city, the book has been very helpful to many people. I've heard from thousands of people with disabilities, as well as their families and the people who work with them. Beth's story gave them hope that people with disabilities can live independent, self-determined lives, with friends out in the community. My story gave them (especially brothers and sisters)

the reassurance that their own mix of feelings was not unique, and that they were not alone in this lifelong journey. I've also heard from thousands of folks in the public and community transit industry, who told me, much to my surprise, that my book is the first positive portrayal they've seen of themselves in literature. The result of this is that I've become a national speaker for both the disability field and the public transit industry. This, in turn, has led me to travel the country, meeting many people who have something in common with Beth or me, and hearing their stories. I've taken to doing my book signings standing up, since it seems that our story triggers a lot of emotions in people, sometimes to the point where they start crying and need a hug. I take this very seriously.

I've also learned a lot. I see that, for millions of people with disabilities, seniors, and folks who can't afford or drive cars, public transportation is the key to a full life. It's the difference between the job programs or educational opportunities or Tuesday-night bingo games that fail and the ones that succeed. I now get angry when someone says, "We don't support transit around here because everyone drives." No, not everyone. Not the people who can't drive. A Special Olympics athlete said to me recently, with tears in her eyes, "The day I learned to ride the buses was the day my life began."

In addition, I now know that almost every transit system has a passenger like my sister—or, to use a term coined by writer Frank Rubino in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, a "serial bus rider." And they, like vast numbers of other, more typical, passengers, have found community and friendship on their lines. Clearly, riding the bus isn't only about the destination. As Beth could have told me from the start, it's about the journey.

Q: *As the author of a collection of short stories, a novel, and various newspaper articles, how did the process of writing a book-length work of nonfiction differ from your past work? Did the subject matter facilitate or impede your progress?*

The writing process was similar, because I used fictional techniques, such as scene, character, dialogue, and structure to write this book. (Of course, when you write fiction, you don't also have to work through your own feelings about the characters.) I do want to add that the scenes with my mother were surprisingly easy to write. This was not because, as some readers suggest in the letters I receive, that those scenes were therapeutic. I actually think that writing for therapy is a different kind of thing, one that's almost impossible to shape into a story that others can appreciate. (Indeed, I recommend to my students that if they're writing for publication, they do the therapy first, and don't expect the public to do it for them.) The reason the mother sections flew out of my pen is that when I sat down to start writing this book, I'd already spent five years writing and rewriting a memoir about the situation with my mother. I never published it, but the years I put into writing it taught me how to present all the characters in a way that was, I hope, credible. Perhaps equally important was that I wrote any residual anger out of my system, and learned that I needed to write about all characters with compassion.

Q: *What are your thoughts on the Hallmark Hall of Fame movie based upon this book (due to air on CBS in April or May of 2005)? What creative control, if any, did you have in the making of the film? How do you feel about having your work adapted for television or the screen? Did you ever envision a movie version of your memoir, before the book was published or after its initial success?*

When I was writing the book, I didn't think about the possibility of a movie at all — such opportunities seem to happen only in fantasy or *People* magazine, not in any reality I knew firsthand.

Besides, I was more concerned about getting the writing to read well. But friends kept bugging me about who I would cast as Beth if there were a movie. I had no answer for them at all, until one day, six months before the book came out, I was driving to work and an idea zinged into my head: “If there is a movie, Rosie O’Donnell should play Beth.” Immediately I knew Rosie would be perfect. She and Beth share a number of physical attributes, as well as certain aspects of their personalities. Of course, I had no connection to Rosie O’Donnell, so the idea was amusing, and that was about it. Five days later, I got a message on my phone at home: “Hi, Rachel Simon. This is Rosie O’Donnell. I read your book, I love your book, I want to make a movie of your book and play your sister. Call me.” You can imagine that I burst into tears, and felt overwhelmed by astonishment and thoughts of something far greater than a book. I was later to learn that my agent Anne Edelstein had sent the editors of Rosie’s magazine *Rosie* my book in manuscript form, to consider for excerpt purposes. Unbeknownst to me, they passed the book along to her, and that’s how she saw it. I met Rosie the day after that call, made sure Beth was okay with everything, and things started to move forward.

I’ve been very impressed by how respectful everyone has been as the process has unfolded. The producer, Larry Sanitsky, and the screenwriter, Joyce Eliason, spent time riding the buses with us, and treated Beth, Jesse, and everyone they met with dignity. They then showed me the script, and asked for my comments, most of which they incorporated into a revision. Of course the script differs from the book, but Larry gave me the reasons for the various differences, some of which involved the difference between a book and a visual medium, and everything made sense. I also visited the set, and felt very welcome by everyone, from the crew to the stars. Rosie was generous and kind (and funny). I feel as if we triumphed together.

As for Beth, as I write this, in the fall of 2004, the movie isn’t very real to her since, like the book, it’s not yet a physical entity. Perhaps more importantly, it’s just not relevant to her, and, in fact, she doesn’t even bring it up unless I do. Why should she? She knows what matters in her life — the buses, the drivers, and Jesse. So she’s already in heaven. Why bother thinking about a movie?

Q: *What kind of projects are you working on now? Do you anticipate writing more book-length non-fiction, or will you focus on your short stories and novels?*

I’m working on several book-length projects, some fiction, some nonfiction. But at the moment, nothing is yet ready to be published. I’ll do my best to remedy that situation soon.

