

'Marrying the Ketchups' by Jennifer Close

A novel about lessons in life, love and business centered around one family's suburban Chicago restaurant

By Cory Oldweiler
Star Tribune

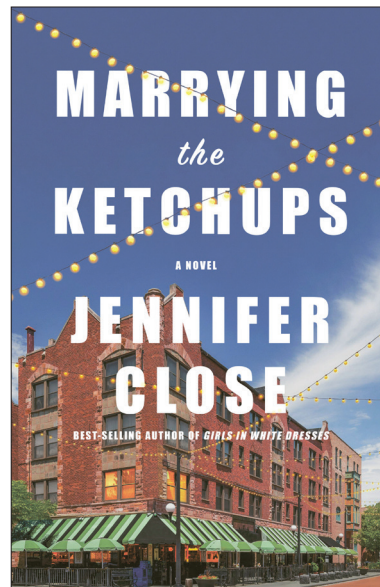
One of the worst parts of waiting tables comes at the end of the shift. You're tired, you're hungry, but you still have side work to do, like making all the pawed-over, schmutz-smearred ketchup bottles into facsimiles of their once brand-new selves. This process often starts with pouring the vestiges of one bottle into another, which is a deceptively frustrating and potentially very messy task because, quite frankly, ketchup doesn't want to be poured.

Jennifer Close's lovingly lived-in novel "Marrying the Ketchups" takes its title from this dreaded duty, which it cleverly enlists as metaphor for the efforts of three cousins — Teddy, Gretchen and Jane — trying to scavenge and repackage the pieces of their lives in the wake of the 2016 election. Their

existential despair comes on the heels of their grandfather's death in late October, just a week before his beloved Cubs won their first World Series in 108 years. As Gretchen observes, "Three impossible events, one right after the other. Nothing made sense anymore."

In attempting to make sense of the senseless, the 30-somethings each seek the friendly confines of Sullivan's, their family's restaurant in Oak Park, west of Chicago, which had been a neighborhood staple since their grandfather opened it in 1979. Close knowingly expounds every insider-y nuance of the restaurant business as vividly as she recaptures the rage and frustration that many Americans felt in early 2017.

Teddy's journey seems easiest, trading his job running a trendy West Loop eatery for his dreams of revitalizing the unintentionally retro Sullivan's. But his determination is frus-



Knopf

trated — both professionally, by employees like his uncle who resist change, and personally, by his 16-year-old half-sister who moves in with him.

Gretchen had remained in New York City after college, stuck leading a '90s cover band whose glory days selling out East Coast shows had given way to learning "Macarena" for Long Island weddings. When her drummer boyfriend confesses to cheating on her with their guitarist, she breaks free and moves back into the apartment above Sullivan's where she grew up.

Her older sister, Jane, married with two kids in the affluent North Shore, seemingly has it all figured out. But even she is restless, tired of bunko with judgmental housewives and increasingly lavish birthday parties hosted by neighborhood children. As her fears of complacency and divorce materialize, she too heads

to the comfort of Sullivan's.

These three, and indeed all their friends and family, are intensely recognizable characters, funny and flawed, angry and desperate, and much of the novel is dedicated to their engaging development — or lack thereof. The story accelerates in the final section owing partly to an all-too-real scandal surrounding consent, harassment and the internet, particularly acute issues in the sleazy klieg lights of the 45th president.

The conclusion is too neat, perhaps, but the characters acknowledge the privileges that made it possible. And they also realize that just because there are things that can be saved, it's often better to throw it all out and start from scratch.

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