

Three Cousins

Jessica Levine

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In Jessica Levine's heartfelt coming-of-age novel *Three Cousins*, college roommates bond while figuring out who to become and how to love.

In 1976 at Yale, three cousins share off-campus housing. Excited by the new year, they bring fraught histories with them: Anna, a talented painter, can't bear her alcoholic mother and has outgrown her high school boyfriend; Robin is unsure whether she's a lesbian or bisexual; and Julia, a poet, yearns for true love despite recognizing the freewheeling infidelity around her. In addition to their time on campus, they visit New York, California, and Paris, reveling in endless possibilities; the farther they stray from home, the more their intentions are clarified.

The period is fleshed out in terms of marijuana use, fashion, Bohemian decor, sexual politics, and allusions to figures including poet Adrienne Rich. These details underscore the women's curiosity and desires to find avenues for self-expression. Casual liaisons, the attentions of graduate students, and tangled feelings occupy their time; they experiment and they grow. Sometimes they are indecisive in forming opinions, including when it comes to polyamory and feminism; the latter is explored in terms of its promises of freedom versus what it might cost them. Spare chapters from the men's perspectives amplify some of these concerns.

Family gatherings with the cousins' mothers result in depth. These successful Russian Jewish women—once close—express their love in complicated terms. Indeed, their love is sometimes interpreted as criticism. The girls review their mothers' perceived failings, including Anna's mother's marital alienation, to understand their fear about their futures. The girls' grandmother, who reinvents herself as a worldly grande dame, adds flavor.

A historical novel fueled by optimism, *Three Cousins* is about youthful passions and family loyalty.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2025)

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