



# Allegra Goodman

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**A**llegra Goodman, often described as a modern-day Jane Austen, mines the rocky terrain of relationships, social conventions, and human nature in her “moral” fiction. Her newest novel, *The Cookbook Collector*, features a young woman, the CEO of a Silicon Valley startup, and her younger sister, an environmental activist and philosophy graduate student who works in an antiquarian bookstore. Opposites in every way, they each must decide how to prioritize work and relationships as they seek the truth about their values and themselves.

From *The Family Markowitz* (1996), about three generations of a Jewish American family, to *Intuition* (2006), about the culture of science and scientific discovery, competition, and fraud, Goodman observes the morally ambiguous gray areas and social forces that comprise our collective value system and culture. Though her topics and geographies vary, from cloistered religious communities in upstate New York to a woman’s search for enlightenment in Hawaii, Goodman delves deep inside tightly knit worlds operating according to their own ethics and logic. Character-driven and intimately detailed, her fiction exposes our foibles, flaws, and very humanness without creating predictable morality tales. “Like Jane Austen,” notes *Elle* about *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), “Goodman locates the universal in the quiet doings of small, honeycomb societies, deftly tai-

loring the particulars of her characters to generic moments of self-awareness.”

Goodman’s works—six novels, one short story collection, and one young adult novel—reflect, to some extent, her own explorations of faith, identity, and community. Born in Brooklyn in 1967 into a Conservative Jewish family, her family moved to Honolulu two years later. Her father was a philosopher at the University of Hawaii; her mother taught women’s studies and genetics there. Later, the family moved to Nashville. Goodman published her first short story in *Commentary* when she was only 17; she then attended Harvard, where she concentrated in English and philosophy and wrote the short stories comprising her first book, *Total Immersion* (1989). After graduation, she married David Karger, whom she had met at Harvard’s Hillel Orthodox Minyan; both attended graduate programs at Stanford. Goodman studied Shakespeare, earned her PhD, and worked on the stories in *The Family Markowitz*. When her husband accepted a job at MIT, they moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Of her work, Goodman says, “Each book teaches me something new about character and plot and structure. I am dedicating my life to learning how to tell a story” ([www.allegragoodman.com](http://www.allegragoodman.com)).

## SELECTED WORKS

### THE CULTURE OF FAMILY

#### The Family Markowitz (1996)

◆ SALON MAGAZINE BOOK OF THE YEAR

These linked short stories, many previously published in the *New Yorker* and *Commentary*, read like a novel in their portrait of three generations of a Jewish family's history, identity, delicate bonds, and joys and sorrows.

**THE STORIES:** While Holocaust survivor Rose Markowitz sits at the death-bed of her adored second husband, Maury, in Manhattan, Maury's Israeli daughter and her sons, Henry and Ed, complicate matters. This scene sets the stage for the collection's other tales: Henry, a dilettante bachelor and art dealer in Southern California, struggles with his sexual identity; Middle East scholar and terrorism expert Ed deals with Rose's Percodan addiction, his wife's resentment at being a homemaker, and his daughter's rediscovery of Orthodox Judaism; and Rose remains isolated in her widowhood.



**"Ms. Goodman's characters are also grappling with some larger issues: the tension between tradition and change, the pull between familial loyalty and independence, the gap between highbrow ideals and mundane concerns. ... Ms. Goodman has introduced one of the most engaging, maddening and recognizable families to come along in years."**

MICHIKO KAKUTANI, NEW YORK TIMES, 10/22/96

**"The writing is so deft and affectionate, the skewed perceptions so familiar, the dialogue rings so painfully true and is so funny that the stories often feel lighter than they are. ... Goodman is brilliant at capturing the clutter of both interior and exterior life—her characters often say one thing while their minds are elsewhere."** NAOMI GLAUBERMAN, LOS ANGELES

TIMES, 2/16/97

### THE CULTURE OF RELIGION

#### Kaaterskill Falls (1998)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Written in Goodman's early thirties, *Kaaterskill Falls* offers an unsentimental, psychologically astute view of a cloistered, structured community governed by specific principles and traditions. Goodman's mother's family had a house in upstate New York, in a town populated by observant Jews, and Goodman spent many summers there. "I wanted

to write about men and women who were believers and traditionalists and even separatists in America, but to write about them as individuals, and as human, with all their idiosyncrasies, their ambitions, their fears, their flaws and their hopes," she told *BookBrowse*.

**THE STORY:** Each summer, a tightly knit group of three Orthodox Jewish families from New York's Washington Heights migrates to Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskills and reenacts the age-old struggle between religious tradition and secularism. Dutiful mother and wife Elizabeth Shulman looks outside her community for fulfillment. Andras Melish, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor, wonders why he can't love his beautiful Argentinian wife. And Rav Kirshner, the leader of the clan, faces a difficult decision: which son to choose to fill his shoes when he dies. Their individual dramas play out against the daily Jewish rituals and the life of the larger, secular town over two years in the late 1970s.



**"Kaaterskill Falls is a carefully wrought architecture of a particularly insulated world: one where the women play badminton in long woolen skirts (when they play at all), where a son can be cruelly condemned by his rabbinical father for traveling on the Sabbath. The slow, languorous rhythms of the novel mirror the intensity of the internal lives it portrays, whether a devoted man's daily prayers or his wife's steadfast yearning to find a creative path within the strictures of her faith."** GAIL CALDWELL, BOSTON GLOBE, 8/9/98

### THE CULTURE OF SPIRITUALITY

#### Paradise Park (2001)



Whereas *Kaaterskill Falls* offers an insider's view of a religious and spiritual community, *Paradise Park* examines the same topic from the outside. "*Paradise Park* is many things," Goodman explains, "a picaresque novel, a satire, an exploration of religion and identity, a *Songs of Experience* to bookend *Kaaterskill Falls*, my *Songs of Innocence*" ([www.allegragoodman.com](http://www.allegragoodman.com)). Goodman, who grew up in Honolulu (and attended the same private school that President Obama had earlier), imbues her story with personal knowledge of the island and its diverse peoples.

**THE STORY:** In 1974, Sharon Spiegelman, a hippie folk dancer with a tragic family story, drops out of college to follow her lover from Boston to Hawaii. He jilts her, thus

initiating a two-decades-long spiritual quest. Sharon drifts from one adventure to the next—from Christianity to nature, drugs, New Age, Buddhism, and Hassidic Judaism—always seeking, but never finding, exactly what she’s looking for. Then she falls in love—and realizes that one of her searches for God just may bestow lasting fulfillment.

**“[Goodman’s] descriptions contain precisely chosen details mere tourists would never know—from the plants and birds (red-footed boobies), to the little restaurants, to the halls and offices of the University of Hawaii—not to mention the street vendors and the drugs of choice. ... Goodman excels**

**at skewering the various spiritual venues, though she never makes light of human need.”** ANNE MORRIS, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN,

3/4/01

**“This funny story of a woman’s spiritual quest is so well designed for book-club discussions that the competition should just sit out for a couple of months. With Sharon Spiegelman, Goodman has created a Huck Finn for the modern age, drifting down the river of American spirituality.”**

RON CHARLES, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 3/1/01

## TEEN LIT THE DYSTOPIAN CULTURE

### The Other Side of the Island (2008)



Goodman’s first foray into young adult literature, a dystopian eco-fantasy and cautionary tale, is the first in a planned trilogy. Goodman admits that she was “really interested in the idea of a Big Brother that’s feminized,” somewhat of “a cross between Betty Crocker and Chairman Mao.” As far as the characters are concerned: “I think they speak

to the kinds of anxieties people have about where the world is and where we’re going” (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 12/28/08).

**THE STORY:** In the near future, 10-year-old Honor and her parents, lured by an evil Corporation, are relocated to Island 365 from a North America flooded by climate change. In their new home, they are expected to conform to a seemingly benevolent yet dictatorial Earth Mother. When Honor’s parents revolt and her mother is turned into a government flunkey, it falls to their daughter to save them.

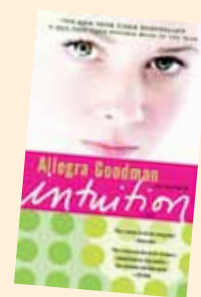
**“Allegra Goodman develops her world with deft strokes, bringing together the linguistic traditions of the dystopian novel with those of classic post-disaster stories like Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* or Walter M. Miller Jr.’s *Canticle for Leibowitz*, in which language is used to demonstrate catastrophic change. ... Goodman writes with such cleverness and sympathetic humor that, for a while at least, it’s Honor who seems the mature one especially in her recognition that people want and need to fit into social structures.”** M. JOHN HARRISON, NEW YORK TIMES

BOOK REVIEW, 3/15/09

## THE CULTURE OF SCIENCE

### Intuition (2006)

In this issue-driven drama told through multiple perspectives, Goodman probes the commitment to scientific discovery and the desire for success while providing a rare insider’s look at a research lab’s subculture—and human survival. Goodman’s younger sister, an oncologist with vast experience in research labs, inspired parts of the novel. Although “scientists [are] the actors in my drama, and the laboratory [is] my theater,” Goodman writes, “the subject of *Intuition* is the human heart and mind” ([www.allegragoodman.com](http://www.allegragoodman.com)). (★★★★ May/June 2006)



**THE STORY:** At the Philpott Institute, a small cancer research lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts, postdoc researcher Cliff makes an amazing breakthrough: he discovers that the R-7 virus has reversed cancer growth in mice. Or so he thinks. When oncologist Sandy Glass sidesteps protocol and publishes Cliff’s preliminary results despite the warning of Philpott’s codirector, the stakes become high. Robin, Cliff’s ex-girlfriend and colleague, attempts to disprove Cliff’s results, while Cliff cries innocent. Soon, unwanted controversy for the grants-driven lab threatens its very existence.

**“The author shows an intricate understanding of the personality, complete with ambition and doubts, of each of her characters; the movement from one to another offers a psychological study. Each character in turn gains in credibility and wins over a reader’s sympathy.”** MONICA DRAKE, OREGONIAN, 3/19/06

**“On the whole, the novel presents a convincing portrait of a precinct of the scientific world. ... To her credit, Ms. Goodman never turns *Intuition* into a morality tale or a whodunnit.”** MATT

MURRAY, WALL STREET JOURNAL, 3/11/06 ■