

Summary:

**UP FOR RENEWAL: What Magazines Taught Me About Love, Sex, and Starting Over** is Cathy Alter's true-life story of living by the advice of magazines for one full year. For twelve months, she consulted the sages at *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *O*, *Self*, *Real Simple*, *Cosmopolitan*, and others for advice on everything from getting rid of under-arm jiggle to how to have a meaningful relationship with her mother. For twelve months, she would learn how to make men melt at her feet, throw fabulous parties, command her coworkers with a firm shake of her pen, and (of course) "Find His Seven Secret Pleasure Triggers!"

That was the idea, anyway. But more than learning how many lunges it takes to get great glutes, the true story behind **UP FOR RENEWAL** is Cathy's surprising inner transformation. With equal parts honesty and hilarity, Cathy chronicles the course of her magazine year as she deals with many of the difficulties of life—a rotten job, a dear friend with a serious illness, her complex relationship with her mother, and her own fears of rejection and loneliness. Ultimately, she comes to realize that anything can change a life that's ready for it—even hers, and even *Cosmo*.

### Group Discussion

1. If you were to boil the theme of **UP FOR RENEWAL** down to one sentence, what would it be?
2. Love, according to the book's subtitle, *What Magazines Taught Me About Love, Sex, and Starting Over*, was one of the major areas Cathy tackled in her year. How does the role of love evolve throughout the story? How do her views about sex change in the course of her year? How do both love and sex effect and influence her ideas about starting over?
3. Discuss the scenes in which Cathy faces her family (November, in particular). What are the stressful aspects of her family's dynamics? What does she find comforting? How does what we see in the scenes with Cathy's family give us insight into her other relationships? How do her family dynamics affect her views of love and of herself?
4. What determines whether we take advice or ignore it? How do we decide what advice is good or bad? Besides woman's magazines, who were Cathy's other advisors? Who do you think provided her with the best advice? What can we do when we receive conflicting advice from different sources? Do you think any of the advice she received led her down the wrong path?
5. Three men have starring roles in **UP FOR RENEWAL**: Bruno, Dr. Oskar, and Karl. Do these men have anything in common? What do you think bonded her to each one? Did they help her change her outlook on relationships? On men? On herself?

6. What do you think was at the root of Cathy's depression? Is that reason enough to act out in the ways that she did? Did you identify with her bad behavior? Did it get in the way of her story?

7. Did you find Cathy to be a likeable narrator? Did you relate to her insecurities and anxieties? Did she work hard enough to deserve her happy ending?

8. Throughout much of the book, Cathy is preoccupied with her age, especially the 10-year age difference between her and Karl. Do women in today's culture have to wrestle with fears of seeming shallow if they too are obsessed with their looks? Is there a danger in following the advice of magazines—especially about beauty? Could it make us even more obsessed?

9. What does *Up for Renewal* indicate about the role of writing, particularly humorous writing, in processing the more difficult aspects of life?

10. Did Cathy's yearlong experience convince you to subscribe to any woman's magazines? Make you want to avoid them?

11. How do these magazines function to bring order to Cathy's life? Have you ever mounted a campaign to regain control over some aspect of your life?

12. Cathy dedicated her book to her parents, who hopefully won't disown her after reading the book. What are the difficulties you think Cathy faced trying to write about people—especially complex people like her mother—who are still living? How would your family react if you wrote about them? Do you think it's beneficial to get family issues out in the open?

13. Do you think that living through magazines for a year helped Cathy find Karl? Would they have gotten together if she hadn't been so open to suggestion and new experiences?

14. Can Cathy really owe most of the changes that took place to the magazines? Or, to paraphrase *The Wizard of Oz*, did she have her perfect self in her all along? Could it be that just deciding to make a major change is enough to start your own reinvention?