

# the reading group insider

Book Club  
“Buzz Books,”  
Resources,  
and Ideas for  
Great Reading  
and Meeting

A Publication of

the  
ebook  
insider



# **The Reading Group Insider**

**Book Club “Buzz Books,” Resources, and  
Ideas for Great Reading and Meeting**

by The eBook Insider



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Starting a Reading Group . . . Picking the Books</b>	<b>11</b>
Trial Runs	11
Joining a Group	12
Starting a Group of Your Own	13
Making a Selection	14
New and Favorite Fiction	15
<i>A Visit From the Goon Squad</i> by Jennifer Egan	15
<i>The Cat's Table</i> by Michael Ondaatje	17
<i>Maine</i> by J. Courtney Sullivan	19
<i>The Night Circus</i> by Erin Morgenstern	25
<i>The Astral</i> by Kate Christensen	28
<i>The Lake Shore Limited</i> by Sue Miller	34
<i>Last Man in Tower</i> by Aravind Adiga	39
<i>Girls in White Dresses</i> by Jennifer Close	42
<i>Aleph</i> by Paulo Coelho	43
<i>Ed King</i> by David Guterson	46
<i>The Invisible Bridge</i> by Julie Orringer	48
<i>The Things We Cherished</i> by Pam Jenoff	51
<i>The Stranger's Child</i> by Alan Hollinghurst	53
<i>The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake</i> by Aimee Bender	54
<i>1Q84</i> by Haruki Murakami	56
<i>The Widower's Tale</i> by Julia Glass	58
<i>Swamplandia!</i> by Karen Russell	59
<i>The Upright Piano Player</i> by David Abbott	64
<i>Buddha in the Attic</i> by Julie Otsuka	68
<i>Jamrach's Menagerie</i> by Carol Birch	69

<i>The Gap Year</i> by Sarah Bird	70
<i>Daughters of the Revolution</i> by Carolyn Cooke	75
<i>Low Town</i> by Daniel Polansky	79
<i>Conquistadora</i> by Esmeralda Santiago	82
<i>Red Hook Road</i> by Ayelet Waldman	90
<i>The False Friend</i> by Myla Goldberg	92
<i>Lord of Misrule</i> by Jaimy Gordon	94
<i>To the End of the Land</i> by David Grossman	96
<i>Private Life</i> by Jane Smiley	97
<i>The Best of Times</i> by Penny Vincenzi	104
New and Favorite Nonfiction	105
<i>Born to Run</i> by Christopher McDougall	105
<i>The Wave</i> by Susan Casey	111
<i>I Remember Nothing</i> by Nora Ephron	112
<i>The Tiger</i> by John Vaillant	113
<i>The Grace of Silence</i> by Michele Norris	114
<i>Hellhound on His Trail</i> by Hampton Sides	115
<i>The Warmth of Other Suns</i> by Isabel Wilkerson	115
Thriller Corner	122
<i>The Snowman</i> by Jo Nesbo	122
<i>The Troubled Man</i> by Henning Mankell	125
<i>Fragile</i> by Lisa Unger	127
<i>Damaged</i> by Alex Kava	128
Out of Ideas?	129
Timing	129
Setting up the Meeting	130
Choose a discussion leader	130
Set a meeting time	130
Pick a place	131
Come prepared	131
Set the tone	131
<b>Tips for Meetings</b>	<b>133</b>
Do Research	133

Attend a Reading or Chat with the Author	134
Take a Trip	135
Read Authors In-Depth	136
Author Spotlight: William Faulkner	136
<i>Absalom, Absalom!</i>	138
<i>As I Lay Dying</i>	138
<i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	139
Author Spotlight: Alexander McCall Smith	142
<i>The Charming Quirks of Others</i>	144
<i>Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party</i>	145
<i>Corduroy Mansions</i>	146
Focus on a Theme	148
Explore a Different Culture	149
Consider Movies and Theatrical Tie-ins	150
<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> by Stieg Larsson	150
<i>One Day</i> by David Nicholls	152
<i>I Don't Know How She Does It</i> by Allison Pearson	153
Plan Questions and Discussion Topics Ahead of Time	155
Track Your Reading List	156
Seasonal Reading	156
Author Chats	156
Cooking Tie-Ins	157
<b>More Discussion Resources . . .</b>	<b>165</b>
. . . for Books into Film	165
. . . for Fiction	167
. . . for Memoir	169
. . . for Mystery, Thriller and Crime Fiction	171
. . . for Nonfiction	175
. . . for Poetry	176
<b>Excerpts</b>	<b>177</b>
<i>Maine</i> by J. Courtney Sullivan	177
<i>The Night Circus</i> by Erin Morgenstern	196
<i>The Astral</i> by Kate Christensen	201

<i>The Things We Cherished</i> by Pam Jenoff	207
<i>The Upright Piano Player</i> by David Abbott	217
<i>Jamrach's Menagerie</i> by Carol Birch	223
<i>Daughters of the Revolution</i> by Carolyn Cooke	229
<i>Conquistadora</i> by Esmeralda Santiago	231
<i>The Snowman</i> by Jo Nesbo	238
<i>The Troubled Man</i> by Henning Mankell	249
<i>I Think I Love You</i> by Allison Pearson	255
<b>Reading Group Guides</b>	<b>261</b>
<i>A Visit From the Goon Squad</i> by Jennifer Egan	261
<i>The Night Circus</i> by Erin Morgenstern	264
<i>The Lake Shore Limited</i> by Sue Miller	267
<i>Last Man in Tower</i> by Aravind Adiga	270
<i>Girls in White Dresses</i> by Jennifer Close	272
<i>Aleph</i> by Paulo Coelho	274
<i>The Invisible Bridge</i> by Julie Orringer	277
<i>The Things We Cherished</i> by Pam Jenoff	281
<i>The Stranger's Child</i> by Alan Hollinghurst	283
<i>The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake</i> by Aimee Bender	286
<i>The Widower's Tale</i> by Julie Glass	288
<i>Swamplandia!</i> by Karen Russell	292
<i>The Gap Year</i> by Sarah Bird	294
<i>Daughters of the Revolution</i> by Carolyn Cooke	296
<i>Red Hook Road</i> by Ayelet Waldman	299
<i>The False Friend</i> by Myla Goldberg	302
<i>Lord of Misrule</i> by Jaimy Gordon	304
<i>To the End of the Land</i> by David Grossman	307
<i>Private Life</i> by Jane Smiley	310
<i>The Best of Times</i> by Penny Vincenzi	314
<i>The Wave</i> by Susan Casey	316
<i>I Remember Nothing</i> by Nora Ephron	318
<i>The Tiger</i> by John Vaillant	322
<i>The Grace of Silence</i> by Michele Norris	325

<i>Hellhound on His Trail</i> by Hampton Sides	330
<i>The Warmth of Other Suns</i> by Isabel Wilkerson	334
<i>Fragile</i> by Lisa Unger	337
<i>Damaged</i> by Alex Kava	339
<i>Absalom, Absalom!</i> by William Faulkner	342
<i>As I Lay Dying</i> by William Faulkner	346
<i>The Sound and the Fury</i> by William Faulkner	349
Three Titles by William Faulkner: Comparative Reading Group Guide	352
<i>The Charming Quirks of Others</i> by Alexander McCall Smith	354
<i>The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party</i> by Alexander McCall Smith	356
<i>Corduroy Mansions</i> by Alexander McCall Smith	359
<i>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</i> by Stieg Larsson	361
<i>One Day</i> by David Nicholls	363
<i>I Don't Know How She Does It</i> by Allison Pearson	367



# The Reading Group Insider

Reading groups offer book lovers a wonderful opportunity to meet new people who share their interests, enjoy stimulating discussion about interesting topics, and best of all, read great books! Whether your group is an intimate one organized with friends or a large one run by professionals, the goal is the same: to meet other readers, share theories and opinions, develop a more enriched understanding of the book, and have fun.

The Reading Group Insider is a valuable resource for book club members and those who want to know more about reading groups. As you read on you will find excerpts to browse for help with choosing good discussion titles; tips on how to start or join a reading group; Q&As with the authors of some tried and true reading group picks; travel and field trip ideas to spice up your meetings; recipes to complement what you're reading; and much more. Reading group guides are also included for more than 30 titles.

If you are looking for ideas to enhance your current group's experiences, interested in joining a reading group, or starting one of your own, we have many suggestions offered here, so read on!



# Starting a Reading Group . . . Picking the Books

## Trial Runs

Not sure that a book club is for you? One way to find out is to attend a meeting of an existing group and see what it's like. Most local bookstores and libraries offer open groups that meet on-site on a regular basis and welcome walk-ins and new members. Visit their websites or ask at the information desk about existing groups—their themes, meeting times, and membership policies. Most likely you'll find at least one that interests you, and there will be no pressure to join if you find it's not what you are looking for. Or join a group online! Many online bookstores and book review sites host book discussions, often including live chats with authors. Here are a few sites to get you started:

[ReadingGroupCenter.com](http://ReadingGroupCenter.com)

[GoodReads.com](http://GoodReads.com)

[BookTalk.org](http://BookTalk.org)

[Book-Clubs-Resource.com](http://Book-Clubs-Resource.com)

[OnlineBookClub.org](http://OnlineBookClub.org)

[DearReader.com](http://DearReader.com)

# Joining a Group

You may find that you are interested in joining a group, but do not want to start one of your own. Some places to start include your local bookstore or library, or through a simple search online. Bookstores and libraries often sponsor a variety of different groups which are open to the public, providing the location—and often the leaders—for group meetings. Some bookstores even offer discounts on bulk purchases for reading groups that register with their store, while libraries take advantage of the inter-library loan system to ensure that club members have access to book club selections. If neither of these options appeal to you, check their bulletin boards for private groups looking for new members, check listings online, or contact your local church, synagogue, alumni club, or professional association. Even if these organizations don't have groups already, they'll likely be able to put you in contact with other interested readers.

# Starting a Group of Your Own

It's easier than you think! All you really need are a few avid readers and a good book. There are no set rules. Reading groups can be single sex or coed and vary in size. You may find that smaller groups (4-12 members) tend to provide the liveliest discussion and allow each group member to participate. Quite often groups are formed by friends—try calling a few of yours and suggesting that you all read the same book. If that doesn't work, post a notice at work, in your church, or synagogue; place an ad in the paper, on Craigslist, or on other social networking sites; or contact the local branch of your college alumni club or professional organization. You might be surprised at the outcome. Then meet informally at a local coffee shop, restaurant, or in members' homes to discuss.

# Making a Selection

The books are the most important part of the meeting. One of the best things about reading groups is that they can introduce you to titles, authors, and genres that you haven't tried before—you may discover a new favorite!

Not sure how to choose your first book? There are many ways to go about it. You can have each member of your group bring a “wish list” to your first meeting and vote on the suggestions—the title with the most votes wins. Some groups prefer to take turns choosing what to read. This way everyone gets to read a favorite. Or, you can leave it up to the discussion leader to choose.

You may find it useful to focus your group around a specific type of book, such as fiction or memoir, or a subject, such as current events or history. Themed discussions not only help you to choose your titles, but they provide natural points of comparison and discussion. Consider focusing on a specific author's books—either for one meeting or a series of meetings. You could have each group member read a different title and compare notes. Or focus on a specific subject or historical figure. You may find, for instance, that two biographies on the same person reveal very different aspects of that person's life. Another simple way to choose books is to consult award lists like the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, Man Booker Prize and many others. Choose a few titles from the list to read, then compare the books and talk about why the selection committee might have chosen those particular titles. Keep in mind that the choices that touch on thought-provoking and even controversial themes and issues make for the liveliest discussions.

If you're thinking about focusing on a specific type of book, here are over 40 fiction, non-fiction and thriller titles that would make incredible reading group picks. Read on for descriptions of each, along with excerpts, Q&As, author essays, questions for discussion and more.

## New and Favorite Fiction



### *A Visit From the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

#### Winner of the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction

Moving from San Francisco in the 1970s to New York City sometime after 2020, Jennifer Egan portrays the interlacing lives of men and women whose desires and ambitions converge and collide as the passage of time, cultural change, and private experience define and redefine their identities. Bennie Salazar, a punk rocker in his teenage years, is facing middle age as a divorced and disheartened record producer. His cool, competent assistant, Sasha, keeps everything under control—except for her unconquerable compulsion to steal. Their diverse and diverting memories of the past and musings about the present set the stage for a cycle of tales about their friends, families, business associates, and lovers.

A high school friend re-creates the wild, sexually charged music scene of Bennie's adolescence and introduces the wealthy, amoral entertainment executive Lou Kline, who becomes Bennie's mentor and eventually faces the consequences of his casual indifference to the needs of his mistresses, wives, and children. Scotty, a guitarist in Bennie's long-defunct band, emerges from a life lived on the fringes of society to confront Bennie in his luxurious Park Avenue office, while Bennie's once-punk wife, Stephanie, works her way up in the plush Republican suburb where they live. Other vignettes explore Sasha's experiences and the people who played a role in her life. An uncle searching for Sasha when she runs away at seventeen becomes aware of his own disillusionments and disappointments as he tries to comfort her. Her college boyfriend describes a night of drug-fueled revelry that comes to a shocking end. And her twelve-year-old daughter

contributes a clever PowerPoint presentation of the family dynamics—including hilariously pointed summaries of her mother’s “Annoying Habit #48” and “Why Dad Isn’t Here.”

*A Visit from the Goon Squad* offers a trenchant look at the vagaries of the music business and the ebb and flow of celebrity, incisive dissections of marriage and family, and a vision of where America is headed.

## AUTHOR ESSAY

*In this exclusive essay, Jennifer Egan tells us how and why she created the unusual structure of A Visit from the Goon Squad—and why it is that she writes fiction at all.*

Readers of *A Visit From the Goon Squad* are sometimes startled at first to find that each of its thirteen chapters has both a different main character, and a different mood, tone and feel from the other chapters. My thinking was: if this novel is made of parts—rather than one central story—why not take full advantage of that structure and make the parts as unlike one another as they can possibly be, while still fusing together? I wanted to provide the greatest possible range of reading experiences: some parts of the book are unabashedly tragic; others are satiric; a few moments are openly farcical. One chapter is written in the form of a celebrity profile; another is in PowerPoint. I tried writing a chapter in epic poetry, but it turns out that to write epic poetry, you have to be a poet.

*Goon Squad* is a microcosm of what I’ve tried to do from book to book throughout my writing career. Each time I finish a book, I try to imagine my way into a world that has no overlap with the one I’ve just left. *The Keep*, which I wrote before *Goon Squad*, is a gothic thriller. And yet in one sense the two books are similar: *The Keep* is set both in a castle, where the gothic adventures unfold, and also in a prison, where an inmate is creating the gothic castle story in his writing class. The two layers of action feel completely different from each other, much in the way the chapters of *Goon Squad* are. In some deep way, I’m more comfortable interweaving contrasting stories than sticking with just one. And while I often tell myself (and others!) that my fiction has no connection to my real life, I think this inclination originates from my childhood.

I was born in Chicago, of young parents whose marriage ended when I was two. My only memories of my parents together involve one of them delivering me to the other before or after my Sunday visits with my father. Those visits began with Mass: my father was Irish American and devoutly Catholic, the son of a police commander on Chicago’s South Side. My mother was Protestant, the Vassar educated daughter of an orthopedic surgeon who had played football for the University of Chicago to pay

for medical school there. When I was four, my mother remarried, and at age seven I moved with my new family to San Francisco, where I grew up. I remember my first glimpse out the window of the San Francisco hotel where we were staying at the beginning: a flash of sun on pastel that revealed to me instantly, on an almost cellular level, the contrast between this California landscape and the urban, industrial contours of Chicago. It was 1969. San Francisco was full of hippies and rolling fog. But even after all that had become normal to me—after years when my exposure to Chicago was limited to the three weeks I spent with my father and his new family each summer—a shadow version of me remained in the Midwest and grew up in parallel, surrounded by smokestacks and yellow brick and deep, sparkling Lake Michigan.

Sometimes I wonder if my need to occupy two opposing worlds is what led me to write fiction in the first place. I drop my kids at school, throw laundry into the machine, fret over bills and what to make for dinner, and all the while I'm in another landscape that hovers apart from my tangible life, beckoning and amusing me, winking in the background, awaiting my arrival.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *A Visit From the Goon Squad* [here](#)]



### ***The Cat's Table* by Michael Ondaatje**

From Michael Ondaatje, author of *The English Patient*: a novel about the magical, often forbidden, discoveries of childhood and a lifelong journey that begins unexpectedly with a sea voyage.

The narrator is eleven when he boards the *Oronsay* in Colombo, bound for England where his mother awaits him. At dinner, he's seated at the “cat's table”—as far from the Captain's table as can be—with a rag-tag group of “insignificant” adults and his new on-board friends, Cassius and Ramadhin. For the 21 days of the voyage, the boys move

from one adventure to another, “bursting like freed mercury all over the place.”

But there are more sophisticated diversions as well: one denizen of the cat’s table talks with the boy as if he were already a man about jazz and women; another opens the door to the world of literature; another—the “pale as a pigeon” Miss Lasqueti—appears to be both a spinster and a spy. His elusive, beautiful, older cousin, Emily, becomes his confidante and enables him to feel the first stirring of desire. And very late every night, he and his friends gather to watch a closely guarded prisoner, shackled in chains, being walked along the deck, his crime and his fate a galvanizing mystery that will haunt the boys forever.

Looking back from deep within adulthood, our narrator comes to see the “damage and influence” of events that took place on the ship. And moving between the voyage and its aftermath—the increasing complexity of his connections to Cassius, Ramadhin, and Emily—he unfolds a story about coming of age, about the vast differences between the electrifying innocence of childhood and the burdens of earned understanding, about a journey that merely began with a spectacular sea voyage.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Ondaatje is the author of four previous novels, a memoir, a non-fiction book on film, and several books of poetry. *The English Patient* won the Booker Prize and was an Academy Award-winning film; *Anil’s Ghost* won the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, the Giller Prize, and the Prix Médicis. Born in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje now lives in Toronto.

## Q&A WITH MICHAEL ONDAATJE, AUTHOR OF *THE CAT’S TABLE*

Q: Do you ever talk about your books while you’re writing?

A: No, I never talk about the book. I’m one of those awful writers who keeps to himself for the duration of the book. So it’s kind of like a paper in one’s pocket that’s not revealed for a long time.

Q: And when you do reveal, is it in one fell swoop, all at once?

A: Yes, what I do is after about 5 or 6 drafts, or many times more, when I’ve taken it as far as I can go by myself, I then find 3 or 4 people who I trust enough to give it to who will then respond to it. And then, after

those responses, I go back and work on it again for another year or so. So those are really kind of useful. By that point, I've got the story, physically sort of finding: Is this the right shape, is this the right pacing? Is this the right detail, does one character seem weak? Do I need to build that character up a bit more? So all those things come in at this second stage of rewriting.

**Q:** So you really are taking on board any kind of constructive criticism?

**A:** Well I don't always agree with it. Not everything they say, I do. But it is important to me as I've been living in a kind of solitude with the story for so long that sometimes I don't realize that one character has sort of disappeared, or something like that, you know? That's the great joy of a book as opposed to a film. A film has already been filmed. They've already been to Spain and Portugal so they can't go back, unless they've got a lot of money. Whereas, with a book you can turn someone into a Scotsman and have much less expense.



### ***Maine* by J. Courtney Sullivan**

In her best-selling debut, *Commencement*, J. Courtney Sullivan explored the complicated and contradictory landscape of female friendship. Now, in her best-selling second novel, Sullivan introduces four unforgettable women who have nothing in common but the fact that, like it or not, they're family.

For the Kellehers, Maine is a place where children run in packs, showers are taken outdoors, and old Irish songs are sung around a piano. Their beachfront property, won on a barroom bet after the war, sits on three acres of sand and pine nestled between stretches of rocky coast, with one tree bearing the initials "A.H." At the cottage, built by Kelleher hands, cocktail hour follows morning mass, nosy grandchildren snoop in drawers, and decades-old grudges simmer beneath the surface.

As three generations of Kelleher women descend on the property one summer, each brings her own hopes and fears. Maggie is thirty-two and pregnant, waiting for the perfect moment to tell her imperfect boyfriend the news; Ann Marie, a Kelleher by marriage, is channeling her domestic frustration into a dollhouse obsession and an ill-advised crush; Kathleen, the black sheep, never wanted to set foot in the cottage again; and Alice, the matriarch at the center of it all, would trade every floorboard for a chance to undo the events of one night, long ago.

By turns wickedly funny and achingly sad, *Maine* unveils the sibling rivalry, alcoholism, social climbing, and Catholic guilt at the center of one family, along with the abiding, often irrational love that keeps them coming back, every summer, to Maine and to each other.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN

Q: Why Maine (as in, the state)?

A: I grew up outside of Boston, about a ninety-minute drive from southern Maine. We went to the Ogunquit/Wells/York area all the time, whether it was to rent a little cottage on the beach for a week or just to have a lobster dinner at Barnacle Billy's. I love that part of New England so much. It's physically beautiful and has such a rich history. I've always been intrigued by the artists' colony that popped up in Perkins Cove in the late 19th century. The juxtaposition of urban painters and Maine lobstermen living side by side seemed like it was just begging to be put in a novel.

Also, the Kellehers are a family in which everyone talks about everyone else behind their backs; each has an opinion on the shortcomings of the others. The funny thing is, they're all right. I like the idea of family bonds having elasticity to them, so that even when they're stretched to the breaking point, they rarely just go ahead and break. A secluded family beach house seemed like the perfect setting for all of this to percolate.

Q: *Maine* is told from the point of view of four women in the Kelleher family. Alice, the matriarch, Maggie, Alice's granddaughter, Kathleen, the prodigal daughter, and Ann Marie, Alice's daughter in law. How and why did you choose to focus on these four women out of all the characters in the novel?

A: I wanted to explore how certain things—like alcoholism, religion, resentments, and secrets—move from one generation to the next. We hear women say all the time, “Please God, don't let me turn into my

mother.” In most cases, we either become a lot like our mothers or we work like hell to do the exact opposite of what they did, which creates all new problems. The mother-daughter dynamic is powerful and often fraught, so I wanted to really dig into that. With Kathleen and Alice, we have a mother-daughter pair who can never seem to see eye-to-eye. Kathleen tries to cultivate a much more casual relationship with her own daughter, more of a friendship. In turn, her daughter Maggie longs for boundaries.

In early drafts, there were more voices: Ann Marie’s daughter, Kathleen’s sister Clare. But these four women rose to the top. Alice and Maggie are the generational bookends. Kathleen represents the one who went away—the complex blend of guilt and freedom that comes from throwing off one’s familial responsibilities. Ann Marie is essential because, as an in-law, she represents a sort of outsider, even though she is Alice’s main caretaker.

Though we’re not inside the heads of the other characters, I tried to make every member of the family three-dimensional. Many early readers have said that Daniel, the grandfather, is their favorite character, and he died ten years before the present day action of the book. There’s something about that that seems right to me. Often, the people whose presence looms largest are the ones who are no longer here.

**Q:** The Kelleher women of *Maine* range in age from 30 to 80. Was it difficult for you to write from such a wide range of perspectives?

**A:** The time in which we are born shapes so much of who we become, and writing women from different generations allowed me to show this fact in action. Alice wanted to be an artist, but as the daughter of working class Irish parents in 1942, she got pushed into a more traditional life. She couldn’t use birth control, because a priest forbade it. Her granddaughter Maggie is born more than fifty years later, and the landscape for women is entirely different. At the age of thirty-two, she lives alone in New York City, works as a writer, and makes a (possibly foolish) decision to stop taking the Pill.

Alice was probably the most challenging character to write. I wanted to get her childhood in the 1920s and her young adulthood in the forties just right. Luckily, I love doing research. I pored through old editions of the *Boston Globe* and talked to my grandmother and great aunt many times about their youth. I’d call my grandmother every so often to ask what exactly she would have worn out to a party in 1939, or how much she made babysitting as a kid. (About a quarter a day, as it turned out. She told me that she was indignant when her sister was once paid for an

entire day's work with a hardboiled egg. That anecdote, and others like it, just had to be included in the book.)

**Q:** Catholicism is important to the characters of *Maine* to varying degrees. Why did you choose to include the women's relationship with religion throughout the novel?

**A:** The Catholic Church in America has changed so much over the last century. You can have members of a single Catholic family who experience their faith in entirely different ways. Vatican II was a major turning point, and more recently, the sexual abuse scandal. For Catholics of my grandparents' generation, there seems to be a much more literal reading of things. Alice experiences this in her fear of going to Hell for a sin she committed sixty years earlier. To her, Hell is a very real place, not just a theoretical concept.

Catholicism is a culture as much as a religion. Many who have rejected the Church still feel that Catholicism is part of their identity. The Church has mandates on so many modern social issues: Divorce, infidelity, homosexuality, premarital sex, birth control, abortion, IVF, and so on. If you're a practicing Catholic like Alice or Ann Marie, you have to negotiate this in your day-to-day life. If you're lapsed like Maggie or Kathleen, this probably really ticks you off (even as certain aspects of it might niggle away at your conscience.) Either way, a story emerges. In my experience, you rarely meet someone who was raised Catholic and has lukewarm feelings on the matter.

**Q:** Your debut novel *Commencement* was a breakout bestseller in hardcover and paperback. What did it feel like to achieve success so early in your career?

**A:** There is something magical, and slightly terrifying, about the process of creating characters in the safety and privacy of your own head, and then suddenly seeing them go off into a world full of strangers. I've written short stories and novels since I was about six, but the publication of *Commencement* marked the first time that anyone other than my mom and dad had read them.

It was deeply gratifying to hear readers all over the country recount their own tales of post-college friendship, and the process of navigating a world full of confusing and sometimes contradictory choices. The thing that probably surprised me the most was the reaction to a scene in the book that deals with date rape. So many young women wrote me and said that they had lived through similar events, and that reading *Commencement* helped them process what happened. That was incredible and unexpected.

I set my first novel at my alma mater, Smith College, and some alums were angry about what I wrote. On the other hand, in what was perhaps the single most memorable experience of this entire journey, I was walking through Northampton (the town where Smith is located) after a reading one afternoon, and a student passing by just looked at me and said, “Thanks for writing it.”

**Q:** The Kellehers are an Irish Catholic family from Massachusetts. You’re an Irish Catholic gal from Massachusetts. Are any of the characters modeled after you or your family? A little birdie told us you took Irish step dancing lessons as a kid, just like Ann Marie’s daughters . . .

**A:** When *Commencement* was first published and I gave a reading in Boston, my extended family went out afterward for a celebratory dinner. By then, word had spread that I was working on a second novel about a big Irish Catholic clan. One of my uncles gave a moving toast, and he finished it off by saying, “We just want you to know how proud we are and how much we love you, since a year from now none of us will be speaking to you anymore.”

He was only kidding (I hope), but I got the point. None of the characters are based on any one member of my family. That said, all novels borrow a bit from real life. My great-grandmother used to take one look at a girl in a short dress and say, “Your knees should have a party and invite your skirt down.” This became one of Daniel’s signature phrases in *Maine*. And then there’s the Kellehers’ fondness for Irish music, the hot toddies, the Hail Marys, and the cousins by the dozens. (As one of my cousins says.) A lot of that stuff came from my own life. As for the step dancing, guilty as charged. Like Celia, one of the characters in *Commencement*, I credit those Irish Step days with my excellent posture and complete inability to dance like a normal person.

**Q:** Where do you ‘summer’?

**A:** The Kellehers’ beautiful house in Maine is, alas, not based on my own family’s home. It is, however, based on the family home of my best friend from high school—a gorgeous waterfront property in Kittery Point. It was there on the beach a few summers back that I first conceived of this novel. I borrowed the layout of Alice’s cottage from that house, as well as the story of the family building it themselves from the ground up.

When I was a kid, we’d often spend a week or two on some beautiful New England beach—Cape Cod, Nantucket, New Hampshire, and of course, Maine, were the places we frequented, often with ten or twelve relatives in tow. These days, I mostly summer in my sweltering Brooklyn

apartment, where I alternate between sitting at my desk and sticking my head in the freezer.

Last August, as I was completing *Maine*, my boyfriend and I rented a lovely house in Cape Neddick, not far from where the Kellehers' property would be. He had never been there, and it was fun to share things with him that I'd done a million times before with family and friends. There was something a little bittersweet about it, too. I felt nostalgic, even as I was in the process of making new memories. It made me aware of the way time seems to unfold upon itself when you revisit familiar places from your childhood. A lot of that made its way into *Maine*.

Q: *Maine* goes on-sale in June, just as people are hitting the beach. In your opinion, what makes 'the perfect summer read'?

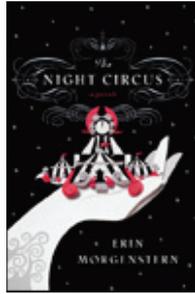
A: Something so absorbing that it transports and consumes you. Last summer, while I read *Heartburn* by Nora Ephron on Ogunquit Beach, a seagull came along and ate half the contents of my tote bag, including my wallet. I didn't even notice.

Q: What's next for you?

A: I'm in the early stages of a new novel. It's a portrait of four very different marriages that span the course of the twentieth century, and have something surprising in common.

One of the characters is a paramedic. Yesterday I got to spend the entire day on an ambulance ride-along. It was truly great, a reminder of how much fun it is to be a writer. As a reporter and novelist, I get to be nosy and ask people about their own private worlds—and rather than telling me to buzz off, they actually share it all. People want to tell their stories; that's something I've realized along the way. Of course, I'm referring to people other than my relatives.

[Read an excerpt from *Maine* [here](#)]



### ***The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern**

The circus arrives without warning. No announcements precede it. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not. Within the black-and-white striped canvas tents is an utterly unique experience full of breathtaking amazements. It is called *Le Cirque des Rêves*, and it is only open at night.

But behind the scenes, a fierce competition is underway—a duel between two young magicians, Celia and Marco, who have been trained since childhood expressly for this purpose by their mercurial instructors. Unbeknownst to them, this is a game in which only one can be left standing, and the circus is but the stage for a remarkable battle of imagination and will. Despite themselves, however, Celia and Marco tumble headfirst into love—a deep, magical love that makes the lights flicker and the room grow warm whenever they so much as brush hands.

True love or not, the game must play out, and the fates of everyone involved, from the cast of extraordinary circus performers to the patrons, hang in the balance, suspended as precariously as the daring acrobats overhead.

Written in seductive prose, this spell-casting novel is a feast for the senses and the heart.

### **Erin Morgenstern, on the writing of *The Night Circus***

“*The Night Circus* began as a detour during an entirely different manuscript, a circus dropped into a storyline that was going nowhere, that was far more interesting than anything occurring around it. Poppet and Widget (and their kittens) appear in that first foray through what was then a nameless circus (it wasn’t even nocturnal), so despite being the youngest members of the circus, they’ve existed as characters longer than anyone else.

For two Novembers (in 2006 and 2007), I wrote all about the circus for National Novel Writing Month, resulting in over 100,000 words worth of interconnected vignettes, covering bits of circus history and taking meandering tours through various tents.

Early drafts contained a great deal of atmosphere and very little else. It is not an exaggeration to say that every page changed completely from that first draft to the finished book. Like a painting that has an entirely different sketch hidden under layers of pigment.

Celia does not appear in that original draft. I do wonder if it might be the only book ever written in which the main character didn't exist on the first go-round. Even after she turned up, it took me a while to realize that it was her story, even though she was immediately my favorite.

What I discovered through revision after revision was that the novel needed something to tie all the elements together, a nice wrought-iron fence to keep everything contained. The competition between Celia and Marco ended up serving that function, and as I quickly realized, all of the characters directly involved were already in place, it just took me a while to figure out that it was all, indeed, a game.

I had all the parts on paper, even down to Tsukiko's tattoo, but I couldn't see the meaning until I fit the puzzle pieces together in a certain way.

Suffice to say, I excavate when I write. I find entire worlds, fully formed in my head, and I have to dig around inside them to discover themes and connections and plot. Sometimes I get lost. It's likely not the most efficient way to write fiction, but I find really interesting things when I just keep digging.

I started with a circus, and it turned into a story about choices and love, and finding the shades of grey between the black-and-white. And, of course, that is what it was always meant to be.”

[Read an excerpt of *The Night Circus* [here](#)]

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Night Circus* [here](#)]

## RECIPE BY THE BOOK

### Le Cirque des Reves Caramel Popcorn Recipe

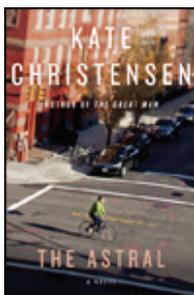
This caramel popcorn recipe, courtesy of allrecipes.com, is a tasty treat to pair with your reading of Erin Morgenstern's *Night Circus*.

Total prep and cook time: 1 Hour 30 Min

SERVES 20

1 cup butter  
2 cups brown sugar  
½ cup corn syrup  
1 teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
5 quarts popped popcorn

1. Preheat oven to 250 degrees F (95 degrees C). Place popcorn in a very large bowl.
2. Melt butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Stir in brown sugar, corn syrup, and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Then, boil without stirring for 4 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda and vanilla. Pour in a thin stream over popcorn.
3. Place in two large shallow baking dishes and bake in preheated oven, stirring every 15 minutes, for 1 hour. Remove from oven and let cool completely before breaking into pieces.



### ***The Astral* by Kate Christensen**

From the PEN/Faulkner Award-winning author of *The Great Man*, a novel of love, loss, and literary rivalry set in rapidly changing Brooklyn.

The *Astral* is a huge rose-colored old pile of an apartment building in the gentrifying neighborhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn. For decades it was the happy home (or so he thought) of the poet Harry Quirk and his wife, Luz, a nurse, and of their two children: Karina, now a fervent freegan, and Hector, now in the clutches of a cultish Christian community. But Luz has found (and destroyed) some poems of Harry's that ignite her long-simmering suspicions of infidelity, and he's been summarily kicked out. He now has to reckon with the consequence of his literary, marital, financial, and parental failures (and perhaps others) and find his way forward—and back into Luz's good graces.

Harry Quirk is, in short, a loser, living small and low in the water, but his floundering attempts to reach higher ground and forge a new life for himself become funny, bittersweet, and terrifically moving. Kate Christensen knows what secrets lurk in the hearts of men—and she turns them into art of the highest order.

### **Q&A WITH AUTHOR KATE CHRISTENSEN (for [www.threeguysonebook.com](http://www.threeguysonebook.com))**

**Q:** Kate, in my first post on your new novel, *The Astral*, I said that the most important subject in fiction is marriage. Mixing up Tolstoy's statement a bit, if the marriage is happy, then there's no story. I can think of two extreme ways of looking at marriage in fiction: One is just functional, that the writer needs to tell a story and examining a marriage is a convenient structure on which to hang your narrative. The other extreme is

that marriage is the most intimate expression of what it is to be human. Why is the subject of marriage important? And why did you want to portray the breakup of one? Why is it interesting?

KC: The qualities in the kind of novel I've always found most interesting and memorable are interpersonal drama, trouble, tension, mischief, and/or emotional duress. For me, the key word is "interpersonal." Unless the novel in question is a murder mystery, science fiction novel, or some other genre requiring traditional external plot machinations, an overly contrived or clever or unwieldy plot just gets on my nerves and detracts from what I find most important in a story: how are the people getting along? How do they feel about one another? What sorts of mistakes are they making, and what are the consequences?

Therefore, marriage and sex, friendship, and social goings-on are my favorite novelistic subjects (novels about parenthood and childhood interest me far less, if at all). Marriage is particularly high-stakes and intense—no two marriages are exactly alike, and not even one marriage is the same thing from year to year. Marriage is a mutable, infinitely faceted animal. When a writer dives straight into its dark, murky, dazzling, dangerous depths, it can be as thrilling to read about as a climb up Everest or a voyage to outer space.

Marriage as plot device is superficially limited but intrinsically riveting. It's a story with two basic possible endings: the couple either stays together, or they split up. The same way bystanders in real life find themselves invested in, judgmental of, and involved with the breakup of a couple they know well, readers tend to invest themselves in fictional characters' lawful unions and project their own hopes, beliefs, fears, and desires onto their travails, and to react strongly to either outcome.

I paced and structured *The Astral* according to the rhythms and atmosphere of a classic detective novel: Love is dead—who killed it? Harry is the chief suspect determined to prove his own innocence, the by-default detective bent on finding the answer. Clues accrue through the novel as he talks to anyone who might help him. And—as in a "crimney," as my grandmother called them—the novel ends when all the facts have come to light.

Q: In your earlier novel, *The Great Man*, you focus on several contrasting women. There are some male characters but they are peripheral. Your last novel, *Trouble*, focused on a friendship between two women. But as I got into *The Astral*, I thought: My gosh, Kate's made the central character a man . . . and Harry Quirk is on virtually every page of *The Astral*. It an amazing concentration on one character. Harry is our Brooklyn hero

in your story. What do you think of him? Maybe imagine that you ran into your own character in Greenpoint. What would he look like to you?

KC: Harry looks like any one of the energetically shambling, slightly down-at-heels men of a certain age who walk the Greenpoint streets looking solitary and full of stories; during all the years I lived there, they sparked my imagination. Their lives seemed so different from mine; they seemed to belong to an altogether different (earlier) era. I would walk by such a man and wonder: what is his story? Where does he live? Where is he going?

For many years, I lived around the corner from the legendary, sprawling Astral Apartments. I always vowed to write a novel about the place. Harry sprang into my imagination straight from my ideas about the Astral (I've never set foot in the building)—he's a guy who's been kicked out of that big red ghetto-castle pile and yearns to go back. He could only exist in a certain kind of place.

Q: Your novel takes place in Brooklyn. It *is* Brooklyn. What is Brooklyn? Tell me about the place. What do you like about it? And the sections of Brooklyn that are the stage for *The Astral*: Greenpoint, Crown Heights, and Red Hook. Are those your favorite Brooklyn neighborhoods?

KC: Harry is a manifestation of Greenpoint, a neighborhood where it's simultaneously 1876, 1933, 1958, and 1974, and where even the present feels sepia and eternal. The streets are full of grit and sediment from the lives of the people who've lived there, their workaday stories, bar fights, petty crimes, marital turmoil, moments of wonderment and beauty and so forth—and it would be easy to sentimentalize the place if it hadn't stayed so much the same through the decades. Nothing has been lost. Even with the current colonizing influx of so-called “hipsters,” the streets absorb and transform them without losing anything. I was transformed by the neighborhood, myself. Greenpoint's very powerful that way.

I first moved to north Brooklyn in 1990. I lived in Williamsburg and Greenpoint until two years ago. I wrote the book as a kind of farewell to a place I both loved and hated, a neighborhood I was intensely involved in for many years—because of this, an elegiacal nostalgia pervaded the writing of the book for me. My own marriage of twelve years had ended just before I began the book; I'd recently left the neighborhood where I'd lived, on and off, for twenty years, which was most of my adult life. The novel is, among other things, a metaphor for an era in my own life.

I wrote about north Brooklyn—Bushwick, Red Hook, Crown Heights, the southside of Williamsburg, and Greenpoint—from visceral,

clear, deeply familiar memory, a sense of loss and finality: that part of my life is over. *The Astral* is a sort of oblique record of a time and place in my life, although it's not directly about me or my own experiences.

**Q:** I want to get to the point of your take on friendship. You happen to take friendship farther in your stories than any other writer I know. In *The Astral*, Harry has a best friend, Marion, who he appears to like better, and is more compatible with, than his wife, Luz. Yet it's clear from the text that he loves Luz, not Marion. How far can friendship go? What is it capable of?

**KC:** If I knew, I wouldn't need to write about it, so in a way, I'm glad I don't—maybe there is no real answer. It's a question I've always asked myself, or rather, a series of questions. What do we owe our friends, what do they owe us? What are the rules? Friendship is very different from marriage, no matter the occasional superficial similarities. There's no legally binding commitment, no intertwining of two people's finances, belongings, and families. There's no adultery or divorce. There's no expected or promised monogamy. We can go weeks without seeing our friends and reunite as if no time had gone by; this is generally not the case with spouses, to put it mildly.

But friendship is a peculiar animal—like marriages, no two are alike. Sometimes a friendship runs its course, and its end comes as a relief. But the end can also be as heartbreaking and devastating as a romantic breakup. Friendships can be as intensely passionate, turbulent, and complicated as love affairs, and the sense of shared history, trust, and love in a lifelong friendship is as sustaining and important as marriage.

And two friends' mutual delight in each other's company can sometimes even surpass the feelings between spouses, which can become muddy and dulled over time, with the familiarity of daily life, the boredom and tension of monogamy and cohabitation. Friends are almost always excited to see each other; spouses often aren't.

Hence Harry's happiness at a night out with his friend Marion . . . a platonic friendship between a man and a woman, especially when one or both are married, is generally and specifically complicated. There don't seem to be any ground rules; it's generally understood that if a spouse feels threatened, then the friendship has to be throttled back or ended, but I'm not sure that's entirely fair or warranted. What I do know is that it's rich with dramatic potential, the spouse-friend-spouse triangle, and it's a lot of fun to write about.

**Q:** Your last two novels have featured interesting roles for psychotherapists. Therapy casts your characters into a fog. Your engaging characters, for

whom we have so much sympathy, seem to be floundering around like we all are. But the shrinks operate in a higher atmosphere, above the fog line. Doesn't a writer have that role with her characters? In *The Astral*, we're absorbed with the befuddlement of Luz and Harry about their marriage. But you're the writer. So, is a novelist like a therapist towards her own fictional creations or not?

KC: The job of a therapist is to treat her clients' confidences with seriousness, compassion, finely honed curative techniques, utter confidentiality, and clinical dispassion. The novelist, on the other hand, appropriates and broadcasts her characters' tender feelings, traumatic memories, embarrassing behavior, and humiliating dilemmas far and wide to anyone who cares to listen, often with humor, irony, and downright glee. A therapist is supposed to be a conduit to change and healing and growth; a novelist is a troublemaker and a gossip. Writing about Harry and Luz, I was as salaciously interested in gossiping about their troubles to the reader (in Harry's voice, but even so) as any local busybody on a barstool. I had very little idea what would happen once I had set them in motion, and I was surprised by the ending; it wasn't the one I had expected or foreseen when I began the novel.

Q: *The Astral* has two features which I greatly admired. One is the depiction of economic hardship. Your characters are living in tough times. If you had written *The Astral* 15 years ago, maybe you would be depicting characters who are flush. And I noticed that several of your hard-pressed characters end up working for very wealthy people, like there's no middle class anymore, just the wealthy and their staffs. The other feature that I keep thinking about is the sadness of belief. Both Luz and Harry have crazy beliefs about their marriage. And the remarkable Hector, who leads a religious cult, does so by faking miracles. But what is the truth about all this false believing, this lying to people for their own good? Is it that economic hardship makes escapism more appealing? What do you want your characters to believe in, if anything?

KC: Harry calls himself a "fundamentalist atheist." At the beginning, he's adamantly and vehemently sure that empirical experience is the only reality. He feels superior to Luz's devout traditional Catholicism and other poets' flights into religious speculation or ecstasy. But, as the novel goes on, it gradually dawns on him that adamantly espousing the nonexistence of God, eschewing any leap—of faith, belief, or religious transcendence—might in its way be as limiting and constricting as rote adherence to dogma. As he expands out of the repressions required by his marriage into a fuller life, his atheism begins to feel like an organizing

principle, a crutch, that has kept him from the fullest expression of his humanity and poetic potential. As he flounders around, his carefully crafted formal poetry disintegrates into free verse and runs aground; his displacement drives him outward, into the streets. He loses his way as a man and a poet, and it's good for him in the end.

Cult mind control is another story entirely. The leaders of Hector's group, the Children of Hashem, manipulate and lie to the followers, keep them compliant through controlling techniques that were also useful to fascist governments: sleep deprivation, loss of privacy and autonomy, pressure to report dissenters to the people in charge, and a superabundance of belief-reinforcing meetings, to name a few. It's not a genuinely held belief so much as coerced compliance in the interests of money, power, and control.

The connection between religion and economic status is a complex one; it wasn't something I addressed consciously in the novel. My ideas and observations about the socioeconomic divides in New York City are generally separate from my thinking about belief, religion, and atheism; the truism is that poor people need faith to get by, but I haven't observed that poor people are any more or less religious than rich ones.

I have experienced, in a great variety of ways and settings, the gamut, or maybe the word I want is spectrum, between the wildly rich and the struggling poor. New York is a place of strivers and achievers and scrappy go-getters of every nationality and religion. Some people have, and others want. This gulf is fascinating to me—the proximity of the rich to the poor, the lack of insulation in the city from any one class, the great sense of extremes of wealth and poverty from block to block or even within one building. It's an extraordinarily rich environment for a novelist, especially in terms of teasing out the implications in relationships between people with very different financial situations—who has the power, how this upsets or determines the balance between them.

These disparities are everywhere in *The Astral*: Harry is broke and down on his luck; his old friend James is a self-made millionaire who runs his own business; Marion isn't rich, but she owns her house and always has food in her refrigerator and whiskey on her counter; Luz works hard, makes a good living as a nurse, loses her job, and finds another one; Karina is a freegan who Dumpster dives but has a car and owns a house with a paying tenant; Hector joins a group who live in a Sag Harbor mansion but try to live a simple, self-sustaining lifestyle while their leader shops at Anthropologie; and so forth.

This is a classic New York scenario: even within groups of friends, within families, there are great differences. It's not a question of class,

but of how successful you are at the collective, citywide striving game, a game everyone acknowledges, respects, and plays to win.

Harry finds himself, as the novel opens, 57 years old, suddenly without a wife or a home or a poetry career, just scrambling to get by from day to day. He's opted out, or maybe he's been pushed out, of his participation in the great New York dream—now—rather than fame or riches, he's just glad to have a bed to call his own, the ongoing respect of his daughter, a date with a woman he's just met, a rather menial job in Accounts Payable, and his old friends.

*The Astral* is in part about the necessary, rueful, and ultimately satisfying acceptance of your own limitations as you get older, the diminishment and rejiggering of identity to reflect reality after a certain point. It's about the end of youth.

[Read an excerpt from *The Astral* [here](#)]



### ***The Lake Shore Limited* by Sue Miller**

“Miller’s take on post-9/11 America is fascinating and perfectly balanced with her writerly meditations on the destructiveness of trauma and loss, and the creation and experience of art.”

—Publishers Weekly

Four characters beckon you into this novel from Sue Miller, the author of 2008’s heralded bestseller *The Senator’s Wife* and the Oprah’s Book Club pick *While I Was Gone*. First among them is Wilhelmina—Billy—Gertz, small as a child, fiercely independent, powerfully committed to her work as a playwright. The story itself centers on *The Lake Shore Limited*—a play Billy has written about an imagined terrorist bombing of that train as it pulls into Union Station in Chicago, and about a man waiting to hear the fate of his estranged wife, who is traveling on it. Billy had waited in just such

a way on 9/11 to hear whether her lover, Gus, was on one of the planes used in the attack.

The novel moves from the snow-filled woods of Vermont to the rainy brick sidewalks of Boston as the lives of the other characters intersect and interweave with Billy's: Leslie, Gus's sister, still driven by grief years after her brother's death; Rafe, the actor who rises to greatness in a performance inspired by a night of incandescent lovemaking; and Sam, a man irresistibly drawn to Billy after he sees the play that so clearly displays the terrible conflicts and ambivalence of her situation.

How Billy has come to create the play out of these emotions, how it is then created anew on the stage, how the performance itself touches and changes the other characters' lives—these form the thread that binds them all together and drives *The Lake Shore Limited* compulsively forward.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR SUE MILLER

**Q:** *The Lake Shore Limited* takes its title from the famous train, but it is also the title of a play embedded within this novel—a play about a terrorist bombing of that train as it pulls into Union Station in Chicago, and a man waiting to hear whether his estranged wife is among the survivors. Billy Gertz, the woman who's written the play, has waited in just such a way on 9/11 to hear whether her lover, Gus, was on one of the planes used in that attack. Was there one event in particular that sparked the idea for *The Lake Shore Limited*?

**A:** Yes. The spark came from a friend who had a relationship that would have ended sooner than it did had not her lover's brother died on 9/11. While this situation is not like the one I created for Billy, my fictional playwright, the situation started me thinking about the far reach of such an event; and the variety of responses that play out around it, even at some distance. And the way in which the responses may be based in feelings that might be not the expected one—ie, the way in which sometimes we're called on to enact something we don't feel, and the discomfort and sense of alienation from ourselves that comes from that.

**Q:** Much of the book centers around the characters' reactions to Billy's play, "The Lake Shore Limited". How and why did you structure the book as, in essence, a play within a play?

**A:** As I began to include some of the lines from the play and create scenes in rehearsal, it began to seem more important to me. It began to seem

central to the book, actually. I began to see the book as at least in part a kind of speculation on how the experience of art can be transforming in life—for those who create it, as Billy and also Rafe, the actor, do; and for those who take it in and ponder it and ask about its connections to their own lives. And then, I suppose, I just got interested in the play, too—in writing it, at least the part you read in the book.

Q: Billy Gertz is a playwright. You, Sue Miller, are a fiction writer. There is seemingly much overlap between these two professions. At one point, Billy is having an argument with her lover, Gus. Gus is upset that Billy used a private moment between the two of them in one of her plays. Billy says, “I use me, Gus. . . . I use me up. I need all of me, and if you’re with me, that means I use you, too. I use everything. How could I not? And what I don’t use, I don’t use because it doesn’t work. Not because it’s sacred. . . . Nothing is sacred. That’s just the way it is.” Is this a conversation taken from your own life?

A: I had originally thought of making Billy a director, a director who would be working on a play like *The Lake Shore Limited*. But then I began to think that I wanted the connection between what she was working on and her own experience with Gus to be more than coincidence, or accident, so I made her the playwright. And while I’ve never had exactly the conversation Billy has with Gus, I’ve often thought about what the limits are for writers in terms of what they use of their own lives, and others’. There are obviously great differences in the way writers work with the material they come by through living in families, having lovers and spouses, children, friends—even pets. I think I probably fall about in the middle in terms of making use of such material—not as close to the bone as some, not as distanced as others seem, anyway. In the end, though, we all call up what we know. Perhaps the greater difference then is in the degree of transformation of the material. And perhaps part of the reason I’ve never had the discussion Billy has with Gus with anyone in my own life is that I’ve transformed what I’ve used. The transformation is the point.

Q: Have you always been a fan of the theatre? Could you see yourself writing a play one day?

A: I’ve always been interested in seeing and reading plays, though occasionally I’ve felt the way the character Pierce, in the book, does—that they’re too damned THEATRICAL. But the form interests me, as dialogue in my books has always interested me, and I could—can—imagine writing a play.

**Q:** The viewpoint in *The Lake Shore Limited* flips amongst four characters, two male (Rafe and Sam) and two female (Leslie and Billy) all of whom are at various ages and stages of their life. Why did you choose to cast the book in this way?

**A:** I wanted the book to look at the way this play strikes a variety of people. I had Billy nearly from the start of thinking about the book, and Leslie came next, because I knew I wanted two versions, two understandings, of what the real story was about Billy and Gus, with the play mediating between them. But I wanted to broaden the impact of the play too—to have it speak not just to the people directly involved, but to others, with other stories. Rafe and his life came next, more or less in a rush of notemaking and writing. Sam’s was last, and most complicated to develop—though I knew from the start about his connection with Leslie.

**Q:** You so eloquently write about the interior lives of people who are trying to understand their feelings, their relationships, themselves. How do you create such three dimensional characters, each with their own vivid and complicated pasts?

**A:** Now THIS is the kind of question I like, wrapped neatly in a compliment. And I think I’ve started an answer with my response to the last question. But let me also say that this is one of the most pleasurable aspects of writing for me—the construction of lives and histories. The process of imagining them so deeply as to feel I actually know these other people, these other stories. A way of escaping myself, I suppose.

**Q:** How do you research the specifics of what you write about? For instance, how did you know the specifics of producing a play?

**A:** With each book I do, there is usually at least a little research. Sometimes I can get there by reading, and I did do a lot of reading about 9/11 for this book, actually, and the experiences of people who lost family on that day as well as the history of how it happened, the timeline of the planes, the story of the telephone calls—even the book *The Commission*. A lot of that didn’t make it into the book, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to feel that I could begin to understand it.

As for the play, I sat in on the production of a play at the Aurora Theater in Berkeley in the spring of 2008, watching and making notes from the early stage of talk around a table about what the actors thought was intended, to the choreographing of a fight scene, to the final production. It was fascinating and not just helpful—necessary.

Q: You teach English at Smith College. What is the best advice you give to aspiring writers?

A: Read.

Q: Tell us a little about your writing process—how you write, when etc.?

A: I make a lot of notes before I write. I want to know what I'm doing. Where I'm going. I want to feel that I'm working on a whole thing, the idea for which I have clear in my mind—the way perhaps an architect would know what he wanted to do without knowing every detail of it from the start; or a composer might know what he wanted a piece of music to do, the way he wanted it to move, without knowing all the themes in it.

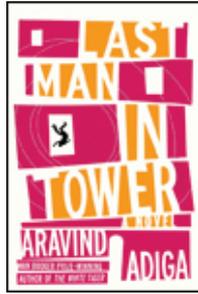
I write in longhand for the first draft, typing it in when I feel ready to work on revision. Sometime that's a small piece—a chapter—sometimes a longer chunk of the book. I type it in, pull it out and write all over it again in longhand, type it in again, pull it out, etc. etc.

I try to write in the morning, before I get enmeshed in the demands of daily life—though those are all easier now that I don't have responsibility for a child. Towards the end of a book, I write longer days.

Q: What's next for you?

A: I've signed a contract with Knopf for a new novel I've described to them, so I'll be working on that for a few years. I'd like to try, anyway, to write Billy's play—"The Lake Shore Limited". And I have a two-year-old granddaughter I'd like to spend as much time with as I can.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Lake Shore Limited* [here](#)]



### ***Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga**

Aravind Adiga’s first novel since his Man Booker Prize-winning best seller *The White Tiger*: a darkly comic story of greed and murder that lays bare the teeming metropolis of Mumbai.

Real estate developer Dharmen Shah’s offer to buy out the residents of Vishram Society—a formerly respectable, now crumbling apartment complex that abuts the infamous Dharavi slums—is more than generous. But one man stands in the way of Shah’s luxury high-rise: Masterji, a retired schoolteacher who will not leave his home in Vishram’s Tower A. Shah is a dangerous man to refuse, but as the demolition deadline looms, Masterji’s neighbors—friends who have become enemies, acquaintances turned co-conspirators—may stop at nothing to score their payday.

A suspense-filled story of money and power, luxury and deprivation, peopled by unforgettable characters, *Last Man in Tower* exposes the hearts and minds of the everymen and women of a great, booming city—ordinary people pushed to their limits in a place that knows none.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Last Man in Tower* [here](#)]

### **RECIPE BY THE BOOK**

Read the following excerpt from Madhur Jaffrey’s *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, which includes a recipe for *gulab jamun*, also known as “fried milk balls in syrup.” These would be perfect to serve to your reading group at a meeting while discussing Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*.

### Indian Tea Time, by Madhur Jaffrey

“Snack time” seems to have an unusually elevated place in Indian life. I remember when I was working in television shows in Delhi. We would be deep in rehearsal when, almost every hour, there would come a desperate cry from some corner of the studio: “*Quon bhai, chai hojai?*” (“Well now, brother, how about tea?”). Every actor and technician would stop (happily) in his tracks, and the whole group would saunter off to the nearest snack shop to have sweet and savory snacks—and tea. The very spicy hot *samosas* and the sugary—sweet *gulab jamuns* were eaten simultaneously—a bite of one balancing a bite of the other and each swallowed with a soothing sip of scalding tea.

Tea has not always been drunk in India. Until the end of the last century it was more or less unknown in the subcontinent. With their sweet and sour snacks, Indians generally drank *shurbut*—fruit juice concentrates diluted with cold water—or hot, frothy milk. This milk was, and still is, sold by the snack vendor whose status often hinges upon how much froth he can raise. Since he has no frothing machine at his disposal, he achieves his bubbly result by briskly pouring the hot milk back and forth from one tumbler to another. These tumblers are first held close to each other. Slowly they are moved to a distance of several feet. The fast-flying milk never misses its mark and the stream of milk looks like taffy being pulled between the tumblers. This sight is responsible for one of Delhi’s oldest jokes, about the visitor from the old Northwest Frontier who asked if he might have “two yards of that white thing” along with his other sweets!

Tea, which is easily North India’s favorite snack beverage, has now replaced both *shurbut* and milk. It was introduced to India by the British in the early 1900’s. By this time the English had already been drinking Chinese teas for over two centuries. They decided to try planting Chinese tea seeds in the hilly regions of Assam. There they discovered, much to their surprise, fully grown tea trees that turned out to be not solitary accidents of nature, but parts of whole forests of tea trees. So the English went in with their Chinese seeds, their Chinese labor, and their pruning shears to tame this “wild” area. Soon they realized that neither the Chinese seeds nor the Chinese labor was necessary and that the native Indian tea was not only good but also proving very popular with the customers in England.

The next market they looked to was India itself. This turned out to be no problem at all. The Indians took to tea like fish to water. They learned to drink it like the English—strong, with a little milk and sugar. The milk was added to the strong tea to “fix” the tannin content and rid it of most of its astringency.

The Indian teas come from various regions of both North and South India and are generally of the dark fermented varieties. My own favorite is the Orange Pekoe from Darjeeling, with its smoky, nutty flavor. Indians almost never use tea-bags. They generally brew their loose tea leaves in a warm teapot. Here is how you can make a good pot of tea: 1. Use freshly boiled water. Do not let it over-boil, since water that is kept boiling tends to become de-aerated. 2. Heat the teapot by rinsing it with boiling water. 3. Put into the teapot one teaspoon of tea leaves per cup of water to be used plus one teaspoon more for the pot. (If you like your tea weak add more hot water once the tea has brewed.) 4. Pour the boiling water over the tea leaves, cover and set aside for three minutes. If you are lucky enough to have a teacozy, cover your teapot with it. 5. Lift cover, stir, and strain into teacups. 6. Serve plain or with lemon and sugar or with hot milk and sugar or, if you like, with just sugar or just milk.

Many of the packaged teas available in America are blends of teas from several regions—often from several countries. Teabags also contain blends—some being slightly better than others. Pure Darjeeling teas, labeled as such, are available in some supermarkets and most specialty food shops. If you buy a pound of loose tea, store it in a tightly covered, light-proof container, away from the scent of strong spices and herbs.

### *Gulab jamun*

This is a simple, very sweet dessert which can be served warm or at room temperature. It is made with dried milk. You could call it “fried milk balls in syrup.”

SERVES 6-8

*4 cups granulated sugar*

*3 cardamom pods, slightly crushed*

*2 cups powdered milk*

*½ cup all-purpose white flour*

*½ cup melted vegetable oil*

*½ cup milk*

*Vegetable oil for deep frying, enough to have 3 inches in pot*

First make the syrup. In a 4-quart pot, combine 4 cups water, the sugar, and the cardamom. Lower heat. Simmer 2 to 3 minutes, or until all the sugar has been dissolved. Do not stir.

Pour half the syrup into a serving bowl (about a 3-quart size). Leave the other half in the pot, with the cardamom pods.

Combine the powdered milk, flour, oil, and milk in a bowl. Make a soft dough. Make small, smooth balls out of the dough, each about 1 inch in diameter. You should be able to make more than 2 dozen *jamuns*.

Heat oil for deep frying in wok, *karhai*, or any heavy-bottomed wide pot. You should have at least 3 inches of oil. Keep on *low* flame. The *jamuns* need to be fried *slowly*.

Put a *jamun* into the oil as a test. If it begins to brown immediately, your heat is too high. Each *jamun* should take 4 to 5 minutes to get a reddish brown color on all sides. If the first *jamun* does not turn out right, correct the heat. It is better to take this precaution than have a whole batch burn outside and stay raw inside.

Now put in 6 *jamuns* at a time. Turn them over as they turn reddish brown on one side. As they get fried, put them into the syrup in the pot. Bring this syrup to a boil. Let each batch simmer in the syrup for 5 minutes. When the *jamuns* are “syruped,” lift them out with a slotted spoon and place them in the fresh syrup in the serving bowl. Keep frying and “syruping” a batch at a time—as one batch fries, another can “syrup” until they are all done. When cool, cover serving bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate. The syrup in the pot can now be discarded.

To serve: *Gulab jamuns* can be served cold, at room temperature, or slightly warmed. Remember, you serve yourself only the *gulab jamun*, not the syrup in the bowl!

Adapted from *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, Knopf, 2011



### ***Girls in White Dresses* by Jennifer Close**

“*Girls in White Dresses* is about a group of smart, funny, unapologetically grouchy, always-hungover female friends who kvetch their way through one another’s weddings and showers, stare blearily at one another’s

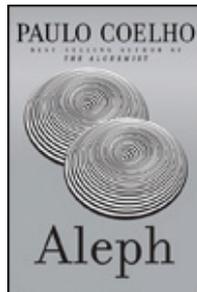
offspring, sometimes barely tolerate one another's men but nonetheless have one another's backs through thick and thin. Jennifer Close has written an unsentimental, frank novel about female friendship—its permanent, lifelong loyalties and unconditional love.”

—Kate Christensen, PEN/Faulkner Award-winning author of *The Great Man* and *The Astral*

Isabella, Mary, and Lauren are going to be bridesmaids in Kristi's wedding. On Sunday after Sunday, at bridal shower after bridal shower, they coo over toasters, eat tiny sandwiches, and drink mimosas. They're all happy for Kristi, but they do have the ups and downs of their own lives to cope with. Isabella is working at a mailing-list company, where she's extremely successful, and wildly unhappy. Mary is in love with a man who may never love any woman as much as he loves his mother. And Lauren, a waitress at a midtown bar, finds herself drawn to a man she's pretty sure she hates.

With blind dates and ski vacations, boozy lunches and family holidays, relationships lost to politics and relationships found in pet stores, *Girls in White Dresses* pulls us deep inside the circle of these friends, perfectly capturing the wild frustrations and soaring joys of modern life.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Girls in White Dresses* [here](#)]



### ***Aleph* by Paulo Coelho**

Transform your life. Rewrite your destiny.

In his most personal novel to date, internationally best-selling author Paulo Coelho returns with a remarkable journey of self-discovery. Like the main character in his much-beloved *The Alchemist*, Paulo is facing a grave crisis of faith. As he seeks a path of spiritual renewal and growth, he decides to begin again: to travel, to experiment, to reconnect with people and the landscapes around him.

Setting off to Africa, and then to Europe and Asia via the Trans-Siberian Railway, he initiates a journey to revitalize his energy and passion. Even so, he never expects to meet Hilal. A gifted young violinist, she is the woman Paulo loved five hundred years before—and the woman he betrayed in an act of cowardice so far-reaching that it prevents him from finding real happiness in this life. Together they will initiate a mystical voyage through time and space, traveling a path that teaches love, forgiveness, and the courage to overcome life's inevitable challenges. Beautiful and inspiring, *Aleph* invites us to consider the meaning of our own personal journeys: Are we where we want to be, doing what we want to do?

Some books are read. *Aleph* is lived.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE ALEPH

In 1945, Jorge Luis Borges published “The Aleph,” a cryptic short story that introduced his readers to a new and provocative spiritual concept. In it, the narrator—a fictionalized version of Borges himself—is tempted into a dark cellar by a poet and enemy who claims that it contains the true source of his creativity: a small spot that he called the Aleph, or “the only place on earth where all places are seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending.” Suspicious of the poet’s motives, the narrator is nonetheless dazzled by the visions and sensations that overtake him when he steps past the narrow trapdoor. “The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch,” he writes, “but all space was there, actual and undiminished. . . . I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall. . . . I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth.” Overwhelmed, the narrator staggers upstairs to the waiting poet and enacts the ultimate revenge: he pretends he has seen nothing and recommends that the man take advantage of the curative effects of country air and sunshine. But in reality, his entire future has been altered; he dedicates himself to discovering all there is to know about the Aleph, its origins, and the very real possibility that these magical points of infinite understanding exist all over the world.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Aleph* [here](#)]

## WISDOM FROM PAULO COELHO AND HIS WORKS

“It doesn’t matter what we do, each of us is playing a central role in the History of the World.”

—*from* The Alchemist

“Don’t live every day as if it were your last. Live every day as if it were your first.”

“People have been searching for their Soulmate since time began, by looking into another person’s eyes in search of that special light, desire.”

—*from* Brida

“Today don’t beg, don’t ask, just thank God in silence for all the blessings in your life.”

“Fear makes us ashamed of showing our love.”

—*from* By The River Piedra I Sat Down And Wept

“Don’t compare your life to others. You have no idea about their sufferings.”

“You cannot avoid pain, but you can choose to overcome it.”

“The gates of Paradise are open to those who are determined to enter. The world lies in the hands of those who have the courage to dream and to live out their dreams.”

—*from* The Valkyries

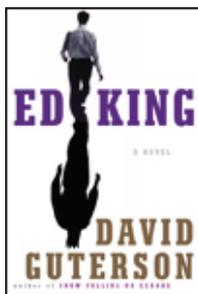
“The way you see yourself will determine how people see you.”

“Train your eyes: they were made to see more than you think.”

—*from* The Witch of Portobello

“When you want something, the whole Universe conspires in your favor.”

—*from* The Alchemist



### ***Ed King* by David Guterson**

From the author of *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a thrilling reimagining of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: a riveting novel that brings a contemporary urgency to one of the greatest stories of all time.

In Seattle, 1962, Walter Cousins, a mild-mannered actuary—"a guy who weighs risk for a living"—takes a risk of his own, and makes the biggest error of his life. He sleeps with Diane, the sexy, not-quite-legal British au pair who's taking care of his children for the summer. Diane gets pregnant and leaves their baby on a doorstep, but not before turning the tables on Walter and setting in motion a tragedy of epic proportions. Their orphaned child, adopted by an adoring family, becomes Edward Aaron King, and grows up to become a billionaire Internet tycoon and an international celebrity—the King of Search—who unknowingly, but inexorably, hurtles through life toward a fate he may have no power to shape.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

David Guterson is the author of *Snow Falling on Cedars* and *East of the Mountains*, and of the story collection *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind*. A Guggenheim Fellow and PEN/Faulkner Award winner, he lives in Washington State.

Like many great writers before him, David Guterson draws on the rich local culture of the Pacific Northwest for inspiration in creating unforgettable characters and settings. Guterson credits many influences on his writing, beginning with his father, Murray Guterson, a distinguished criminal defense lawyer: His father's example taught him first and foremost to choose a career he would love, which also meant making positive contributions to the world.

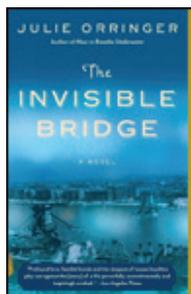
Guterson was intrigued by the narrative of his father's cases. He often sat in on trials, but never felt the urge to become an attorney. When he started college, after one week in a creative writing class, he decided to become a writer. He eventually studied under Charles Johnson (author of *Middle Passage*), developing his ideas about the moral function of literature, and concluded that it is the obligation of writers to present moral questions for reflection.

As Guterson honed his writing skills, he investigated a variety of jobs that would afford him the time to practice his craft. He finally chose to become an English teacher, mainly because he wanted to surround himself with great books and authors. He moved to Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound, teaching at the local high school, writing short stories, and freelancing as a journalist for *Sports Illustrated* and *Harper's* magazine.

During his years as a teacher, Guterson discovered another major influence in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "No other book had such an enormous impact [on me]" he has said of Harper Lee's splendid Southern classic. "I read it 20 times in 10 years and it never got old, only richer, deeper and more interesting." He admits freely to borrowing many of the novel's structural and thematic elements for his own 1994 tour de force, *Snow Falling on Cedars*.

Although it was not his first book (he had previously published a collection of short stories and a treatise on home schooling), there is no denying that *Snow Falling on Cedars*—ten years in the making and a true labor of love—put Guterson on the literary map. Set in 1954 on an island off the coast of Washington State, the novel tells the intertwined stories of an interracial love affair and a murder trial that divides a community still haunted by its shameful wartime past. Critics responded ecstatically, calling it "haunting" (*Los Angeles Times*), "compelling . . . heartstopping" (*The New York Times Book Review*), and "luminous" (*Time* magazine). The book went on to win the 1995 Pen/Faulkner Award; and the following year, Guterson was named to *Granta's* list of Best Young American Novelists.

Far from prolific, Guterson writes slowly and with great deliberation, averaging a book every four to five years. Blessed with almost preternatural descriptive skills, he is known as a writer's writer, polishing sentences to pristine perfection and creating stories of elegiac grace. He is disarmingly candid about the difficulties of his craft, claiming that each literary endeavor brings with it a paralyzing fear of failure that slows the process even further. "It doesn't matter who you are, how many awards you've won, how popular you are, or how much critical acclaim you've had," he has said. "When it comes time to sit down and write the next book, you're deathly afraid that you're not up to the task." Fortunately for his many fans, Guterson's misgivings seem totally unfounded!



### ***The Invisible Bridge* by Julie Orringer**

*The Invisible Bridge* opens in September 1937 as Andras Lévi leaves his brother Tibor to study abroad. Andras has a scholarship at architecture school in Paris, while Tibor remains in Hungary until he too is granted entrance to medical school in Italy. At the École Spéciale, Andras is one of a small number of Jewish students. He had experienced anti-Semitism in Hungary and feels it in Paris as well, but when a new Hungarian law forbids granting scholarships to Jews studying abroad, he comes face-to-face with the tide of ethnic hatred spreading throughout Europe. A job at a theater run by a fellow Hungarian gives Andras just enough money to stay in school—and leads him to Klara Morgenstern, a beautiful and enigmatic Hungarian émigré. Despite Klara’s secretiveness about her past, their love flourishes and survives a risky return to Hungary in the late summer of 1939. Tibor, forced to leave Italy when his visa expires, returns to Hungary with his Italian wife. As a German ally, Hungary is quickly building up its military forces, and soon after the beginning of the Second World War, Andras, Tibor, and their younger brother, Mátyás, are drafted into the Hungarian Labor Service, which supports the country’s army.

As Hitler’s armies march across Europe, the brothers and their families in Budapest see their world disintegrate. Amid reports of mass killings of Jews in Eastern Europe, they grasp at the possibility of emigrating to Palestine. But their dream of escape seems to perish, first in 1942 when Andras is deported to the Ukraine and then finally in 1944 when German troops flood into Hungary and impose their virulent anti-Semitic agenda. Jews throughout the country are corralled into bleak ghettos or deported to concentration camps. Andras, Tibor, and the other Jewish men in the Hungarian Labor Service are designated prisoners of war and packed into boxcars for transport to work camps. In the turmoil that follows the Soviet advance into Hungary, the brothers lose track of one another. After months

of horror, Andras is liberated by Soviet troops and returns to Budapest to face what the war has cost his family and his beloved country.

An intricate mélange of historical events and personal dramas, *The Invisible Bridge* is a story of love, courage, and survival.

## **ARMCHAIR ADVENTURER: PARIS AND BUDAPEST**

Welcome to Armchair Adventurer, a fun feature from ReadingGroupCenter.com that explores the exciting settings of your favorite reading group books and the homelands of beloved international authors! Travel without ever leaving the comfort of your home, as Armchair Adventurer provides interesting and helpful resources that will give insight for your book club's discussions. From travel tips to walking tours, author backgrounds to historical contexts, let the Armchair Adventurer be your guide.

Julie Orringer's *The Invisible Bridge* is a tale of two cities. The first half is devoted to pre-World War II Paris, and the second, to wartime Budapest. Orringer writes with affection for both cities, giving the reader a window into two venerable European capitols, each destinations in their own right. To give you a literary lay of the land, there are book-centric Google Maps for each city on ReadingGroupCenter.com, and detailed information for a few of the book's key landmarks as you read on.

### **Paris in *The Invisible Bridge***

For a unique literary tour of Paris, visit our "*Invisible Bridge* in Paris" Google Map on ReadingGroupCenter.com! Below, a few in-depth descriptions of Andras' Parisian haunts.

### **L'École Spéciale d'Architecture**

The L'École Spéciale d'Architecture, where Andras takes up his studies, is an actual architecture school that still exists in Paris today. L'École Spéciale was founded in 1865 (72 years before Andras' enrollment) as an alternative to the École des Beaux-Arts. Teachers there included Auguste Perret and Pierre Vago, both of whom appear in fictionalized form in *The Invisible Bridge*. Vago is perhaps best known for designing the Basilica of St Pius X at Lourdes, while Perret is known for his work on Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and his reconstruction of La Havre after World War II.

### **Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt**

The Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt, where Andras finds employment, has undergone several changes in name and design since its first opening. The building was designed by Gabriel Davioud in 1860. In 1898, Sarah Bernhardt herself ran the theater, and the name was changed in her honor. During the German occupation, the theater was renamed Théâtre de la Cité; after the war it was renamed again, Théâtre des Nations. The theater shut down in the 1960s for renovations, reopening in 1968 with Davioud's original façade carefully preserved, and a new name: Theatre de la Ville. Today, the theater hosts world-class theater, dance, and music events.

### **Bois de Vincennes**

Bois de Vincennes is a large public park in eastern Paris (“bois” is French for “woods”) that was once a royal hunting ground. Inside the park, visitors will find lakes with islands, a working organic farm, a race track, a zoo (and an aquarium!), a Buddhist temple, a botanic garden, bike and bridle paths, and a theater. Bois de Vincennes is also home to the Château de Vincennes, the only fortified castle in Paris. Originally a hunting lodge (and later, a state penitentiary), it is now a national monument, and open to visitors.

### **Budapest in *The Invisible Bridge***

Check out [ReadingGroupCenter.com](http://ReadingGroupCenter.com) to visit our “*Invisible Bridge* in Budapest” Google Map! Below, some more background on the city and its landmarks.

### **Budapest's Geography and Bridges**

Though Andras and his family are from Konyár, a village in the eastern part of Hungary, Orringer begins her story in Budapest, where Andras and his older brother Tibor move as young adults. Budapest is Hungary's capitol, and its largest city. The Danube River divides the city into two halves, Buda in the east and Pest in the west, both of which were united in 1873 to form the nation's capitol. Budapest has eight bridges connecting its two halves, the most famous of which is The Chain Bridge, the first permanent stone bridge to connect Buda and Pest. The bridge was destroyed during the 1945 Siege of Budapest, and rebuilt in 1949. The bridge has a pedestrian path, offering unique views of the Parliament (when approaching Pest) and Castle Hill (when approaching Buda).

## Hungarian State Opera House

In the book's opening chapter, the Levi brothers visit The Royal Hungarian Opera House to see a performance of *Tosca*. The opera house was designed by Miklós Ybl and opened to the public in 1884.

After shutting down for renovation in the 1980s, the opera house reopened on its centennial in 1984 and currently boasts a busy schedule of opera, ballet, and concerts.

## Dohány Street Synagogue

The largest synagogue in Europe (and the second largest in the world), The Dohány Street Synagogue opened in 1859. It is located in Budapest's old Jewish quarter and was the center of the stone-walled Jewish ghetto where Jews were forced to live during World War II. In addition to being an active place of worship, the synagogue now houses the Hungarian Jewish Museum, the Raoul Wallenberg Holocaust Memorial Park, and a Jewish cemetery, where over 2,000 Jews were buried following the harsh 1944-45 winter.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Invisible Bridge* [here](#)]



## *The Things We Cherished* by Pam Jenoff

A novel that spans decades and continents, *The Things We Cherished* tells the story of Charlotte Gold and Jack Harrington, two fiercely independent attorneys who find themselves slowly falling for one another while working to defend the brother of a Holocaust hero against allegations of World War II-era war crimes.

The defendant, wealthy financier Roger Dykmans, mysteriously refuses to help in his own defense, revealing only that proof of his innocence lies within an intricate timepiece last seen in Nazi Germany. As the narrative

moves from Philadelphia to Germany, Poland, and Italy, we are given glimpses of the lives that the anniversary clock has touched over the past century, and learn about the love affair that turned a brother into a traitor. *The Things We Cherished* is a testament to true love under the worst of circumstances.

## A NOTE FROM AUTHOR PAM JENOFF

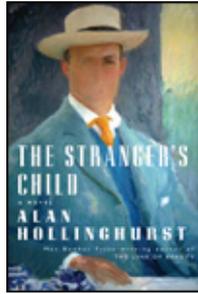
“The inspiration for *The Things We Cherished* came from a unique timepiece, known as an anniversary clock, which my husband gave me for our first wedding anniversary. I was captivated by the question of where the hundred year-old clock had been and the lives it had touched.

As I imagined its history, a tale unfolded of a couple at the turn of the century in Bavaria yearning for a better life, two brothers in Weimar Berlin wrestling with issues of Zionism and assimilation, the desperate quest of a young girl trapped behind the Iron Curtain, a forbidden love affair, and the missing antique clock that holds the truth about what really happened during the war. The clock really became a metaphor for the experience of the Jewish people and others in 20th century Europe.

Through writing this book, I came to ‘cherish’ the characters and their stories and I hope you will too.”

[Read an excerpt from *The Things We Cherished* [here](#)]

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Things We Cherished* [here](#)]



### ***The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst**

Alan Hollinghurst's first novel in seven years is a century-spanning saga about a love triangle that spawns a myth—and a family mystery—across generations.

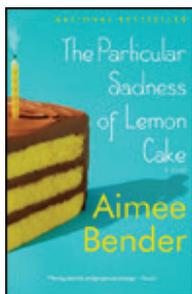
In 1913, George Sawle brings charming, handsome Cecil Valance to his family's modest home outside London for a summer weekend. George is enthralled by his Cambridge schoolmate, and soon his sixteen-year-old sister, Daphne, is equally besotted by both Cecil and the stories he tells about Corley Court, the country estate he is heir to. But what Cecil writes in Daphne's autograph album will change their and their families' lives forever: a poem that, after Cecil is killed in the Great War and his reputation burnished, will be recited by every schoolchild in England. Over time, a tragic love story is spun, even as other secrets lie buried—until, decades later, an ambitious biographer threatens to unearth them.

*The Stranger's Child* is a novel about the lingering power of desire, and about how the heart creates its own history.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alan Hollinghurst was born in 1954. He is the author of one of the most highly praised first novels to appear in the 1980s, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and was selected as one of the Best of Young British Novelists 1993. His second novel, *The Folding Star*, won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the 1994 Booker Prize. He was on the staff of the Times Literary Supplement from 1982 to 1995.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Stranger's Child* [here](#)]



### ***The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* by Aimee Bender**

On the eve of her ninth birthday, unassuming Rose Edelstein bites into her mother's homemade lemon-chocolate cake and discovers she has a magical gift: she can taste her mother's emotions in the slice. To her horror, she finds that her cheerful mother tastes of despair. Soon, she's privy to the secret knowledge that most families keep hidden: her father's detachment, her mother's transgression, her brother's increasing retreat from the world. But there are some family secrets that even her cursed taste buds can't discern.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for  
*The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* [here](#)]

### **RECIPE BY THE BOOK**

Just try reading Aimee Bender's delicious novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, without craving a big slice of, well, lemon cake. Satisfy your book club's hunger with this recipe from *The Complete Robuchon*.

#### **A Note from Joël Robuchon:**

This cake is excellent sliced and toasted. A homemade cake keeps for several days. Just wrap it in plastic wrap when it has cooled and keep it at room temperature. Cake should not be kept in the refrigerator, but you can freeze it. It will be good for several weeks.

Preparation and cooking time: 65 minutes

SERVES 6-8

### Ingredients

½ cup milk, warmed in a small saucepan

The grated zest of 1 organic lemon

10 tbsp. butter, plus a little extra for greasing the pan

2½ cups flour, plus a little extra for flouring the greased pan

2 cups confectioners' sugar, plus 1 heaping tbsp. if you decide to make  
syrup

3 large eggs

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 tbsp. lemon juice (optional)

Special equipment: round cake pan, about 10 inches

Dice the butter and melt it in the microwave at low power.

Use a pastry brush to grease the bottom and sides of the cake pan with butter. Sprinkle the pan with flour, turn it all around to spread the flour evenly, and tap out any excess.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

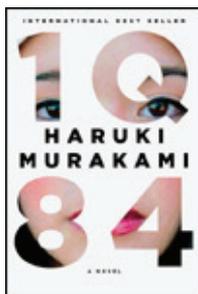
Sift the sugar into a bowl. Add the lemon zest. Mix the sugar and zest well with your fingers, then whisk in the eggs. When the eggs and sugar are thoroughly combined, whisk in the melted butter and warm milk. Add the flour and baking powder, whisking constantly throughout.

Pour the batter into the prepared cake pan and bake for 8 minutes. Lower the heat to 300°F and cook about 40 minutes more. The cake is finished when the blade of a knife inserted in its center comes out dry.

Remove the finished cake from the oven, unmold it onto a cooling rack, and let cool.

Just after cooking you can, if you like, use a pastry brush to coat the cake with syrup. Just boil 4 tablespoons water with 1 heaping tablespoon confectioners' sugar for a couple of minutes. Allow it to cool, then stir in 1 tablespoon lemon juice. Brush the syrup on the still-warm cake.

From *The Complete Robuchon* by Joël Robuchon.



### ***1Q84* by Haruki Murakami**

The year is 1984. A young woman named Aomame waits impatiently in a taxi, stuck in traffic on the elevated expressway in Tokyo. She can't be late for her appointment, so, at the driver's enigmatic suggestion, she climbs an emergency ladder down to the street. Soon after, Aomame starts noticing puzzling discrepancies in the world around her—particularly unsettling to her reclusive, regimented life—and realizes that she's now entered a parallel existence, which she calls 1Q84 (“Q is for ‘Question mark.’ A world that bears a question”).

Meanwhile, a writer named Tengo is convinced by his editor to take on a questionable project: to secretly rewrite a novel, *Air Chrysalis*, by a beautiful dyslexic 17-year-old girl, and to submit the doctored manuscript to the country's biggest literary prize.

The novel's prose is execrable, but its unique vision—a sky with two moons, a malevolent tribe of miniature spirits called “the Little People”—has a powerful hold on Tengo. He soon becomes so wrapped up with the work and its unusual author that her sudden disappearance—and reappearance—unravels his previously placid life.

As Aomame's and Tengo's narratives converge over the course of this single year, we learn of the profound and tangled connections between them: including a mysterious cult that instigated a shoot-out with the metropolitan police, a wealthy widow who runs a shelter for abused women, a hideously ugly private investigator, a mild-mannered yet ruthlessly efficient bodyguard, and a peculiarly insistent television fee-collector. A love story, a mystery, a fantasy, a novel of self-discovery, a dystopia to rival George Orwell's—*1Q84* is a feat of imagination.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto in 1949 and now lives near Tokyo. His work has been translated into forty-two languages. The most recent of his many honors is the Franz Kafka Prize.

## COVER DESIGNER CHIP KIDD DISCUSSES THE COVER FOR HARUKI MURAKAMI'S *1Q84*

“Having had the honor and pleasure of designing all of Haruki Murakami’s books in hardcover since *The Elephant Vanishes*, I was especially looking forward to working on *1Q84*, as it is his most ambitious and absorbing novel yet (and that’s saying something). Also, logistically the title is a book designer’s dream, because its unique four characters so easily adapt it to a very strong, iconic treatment. The plot follows two seemingly unconnected stories that eventually weave together. The first involves a woman named Aomame, who in the opening scene finds herself descending a service staircase off a busy elevated highway in Tokyo to escape a traffic jam. Once she gets to the bottom and out onto ground level, she eventually comes to believe that she has entered an alternate reality, one only slightly different than what she had known. She refers to this new dimension in her mind as 1Q84 (the book takes place in 1984 and in Japanese ‘Q’ sounds just like ‘9’), with the Q standing for ‘Question Mark. A world that bears a question.’ This concept becomes one of the novel’s major themes.

Upon reading the manuscript, it soon occurred to me that the duality of Aomame’s situation could be represented by an interaction of the book’s jacket with the binding/cover underneath. By using a semi-transparent vellum for the jacket, and printing the woman’s image in a positive/negative scheme with the title on the outside layer and the rest of her on the binding, once the jacket is wrapped around the book it ‘completes’ the picture of her face. But something odd is definitely going on, and before the reader even reads a word, he or she is forced to consider the idea of someone going from one plane of existence to another.

Plus, always to be considered, it looks pretty cool.”

—Chip Kidd



### ***The Widower's Tale* by Julia Glass**

Seventy-year-old Percy Darling is settling happily into retirement: reading novels, watching old movies, and swimming naked in his pond. But his routines are disrupted when he is persuaded to let a locally beloved preschool take over his barn. As Percy sees his rural refuge overrun by children, parents, and teachers, he must reexamine the solitary life he has made in the three decades since the sudden death of his wife. With equal parts affection and humor, Julia Glass spins a captivating tale about a man who can no longer remain aloof from his community, his two grown daughters, or—to his great shock—the precarious joy of falling in love.

### **LITERARY WIDOWERS**

Paul Dombey from *Dombey and Son* by Charles Dickens: An ambitious and heartless merchant whose wife dies in childbirth, leaving him to raise their fragile son, and an oft-neglected older daughter.

Thomas Stone from *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese: While they're not technically married, the love of his life dies in childbirth, leaving Thomas Stone utterly bereft and causing him to flee the Ethiopian hospital they called home and abandon their twin sons.

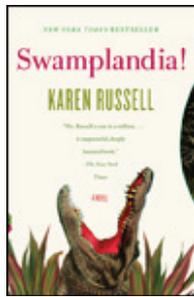
Major Ernest Pettigrew from *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson: A true English gentleman falls in love with a Pakistani shopkeeper over literature and the loss of their respective spouses.

Max Morden from *The Sea* by John Banville: After the recent loss of his wife, Max returns to the seaside town where he spent summers in his youth and where he met the Graces, a family that introduced him to both love, and death.

Garret Blake from *Message in a Bottle* by Nicholas Sparks: The author of the titular message, who throws a love letter to his lost wife into the sea, only to meet and fall for its unintentional recipient.

Mike Noonan from *Bag of Bones* by Stephen King: Suffering from grief-induced writer's block, even four years after his wife's sudden death, Mike returns to his summerhouse, the setting of increasingly frequent and vivid nightmares, to find that the town is now in the clutches of a powerful millionaire.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Widower's Tale* [here](#)]



### ***Swamplandia!* by Karen Russell**

Thirteen-year-old Ava Bigtree has lived her entire life at Swamplandia!, her family's island home and gator-wrestling theme park in the Florida Everglades. But when illness fells Ava's mother, the park's indomitable headliner, the family is plunged into chaos; her father withdraws, her sister falls in love with a spooky character known as the Dredgeman, and her brilliant big brother, Kiwi, defects to a rival park called The World of Darkness. As Ava sets out on a mission through the magical swamps to save them all, this lush and bravely imagined debut moves toward the shimmering edge of reality.

### **Q&A WITH AUTHOR KAREN RUSSELL**

**Q:** *Swamplandia!* and your story collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, are both set in a sort of enchanted, Lewis Carroll-like version of North America. What draws you to these worlds and how do you create them?

A: Well, I think I owe a big debt to Lewis Carroll himself, probably, and other folks who I read as a kid like Ray Bradbury and Peter S. Beagle and Stephen King and Madeleine L'Engle. My favorite books were always the ones where I felt like an alternate world had been created in some star cradle by the author and, in an amazing feat of compression, shrunken down into a 200-page book (or, in the case of Ray Bradbury, a three page story about a country uncle with green wings). I think I wanted to create strange but familiar snow-globe worlds almost as soon as I started reading these books.

I also think I'm drawn to imaginary places because it's an architecture that any reading consciousness can enter—as a kid I used to love talking to other readers who had visited the same nonexistent places as me—you know, Oz, Watership Down, Derry, Macondo. This kind of travel, to an invisible place created by the author, felt both exquisitely personal and also communal; anybody who could make it through the book could get from Kansas to Oz. At a time when nobody could drive and we were all child-hostages of our houses, when we could not even get to school by our own power, it made me so happy whenever I discovered that another kid and I had both gone to a wonderland or a dystopian England, and that, even more insanely, we'd done this inside of the same skin, merged with the same character. It still strikes me as an amazing thing to have in common with someone. Much better than discovering that you both bought jeans at the same GAP or ate shrimp flautas at the Chili's near the airport.

The world of *Swamplandia!* has been around since I first drafted "Ava Wrestles the Alligator" in graduate school, when I was 22. I can't pinpoint where exactly the idea came from, but it probably owes a great debt to my school's field trips to the Miccosukee Indian Village in the Everglades. I think these are still happening—a bunch of ten-year olds from "the mainland" of Miami stuff their ears with cotton balls and board an airboat; then, in my experience at least, you eat pinkish hamburgers with mayonnaise and watch a sweaty man in jeans perform a gator-wrestling demonstration. I remember feeling confused about who to root for in this battle—the man was more or less sitting on the alligator. My Ikea sofa puts up more of a fight than the alligator did that day. For reasons I can't perfectly explain, this day has become one of my favorite memories. It didn't start out that way, but it has stealthily crept up in the rankings. Now I think that gator wrestling demonstration, which I sort of snoozed through at the time, must have made a more lasting and dramatic impression than I realized.

I don't think it's a coincidence that so many authors are drawn to South Florida (Carl Hiaasen, Peter Matthiessen, Joy Williams). There

is something absolutely haunting about the swamp. If you go to the Everglades, it does feel as if you're standing in a mythic and a real space at once. I wanted to explore the extreme, alien beauty of the Everglades—and also its extreme devastation, which we've managed to accomplish in just a few generations of Floridian settlement, from the plume-hunting of the nineteenth century to the more recent dyking and drainage and Big Sugar's phosphorus pollution.

Q: Many of your narratives are seen through the eyes of children, and rather precocious ones at that. Do you believe there is something unique or meaningful about childhood, particularly the perspective and experience of youth, that makes you continuously return to them as protagonists?

A: For better or for worse, when I sit down to write I feel gravitationally pulled towards characters who are children and adolescents. I was joking with a friend that I can decide to write a story about the rabbits of the apocalypse, and it will undoubtedly be, "The world was ending. The bunny was fourteen-years old (in bunny years)."

I love the double optic that children possess—the way they can develop kid-theodicies and fantastic explanations, but also shift gears and have a nascent adult sense of the world, a more "realistic" vision. Ava, Ossie, and Kiwi are all poised at different thresholds, about to go through literal and figurative doors to reach new life stages, which is an exciting/terrifying period to get to dramatize in fiction. I heard Antonya Nelson say that all stories can be thought of as "coming of age" stories, since a character is confronted with a new event or new information that compels a change of status. And the child to adult transition—I don't think that's a one time affair. I think we're probably all struggling to suit up and be adults, every day.

Q: Speaking of Lewis Carroll, your book's epigraph is a quote from his *Through the Looking-Glass*:

*"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.*

*"I only wish that I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone.*

*"To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!"*

Why did you choose this particular quote? Does it hold special significance for you?

A: That epigraph is seared into my brain now—I think it performed a sort of lighthouse-function for me. Whenever I felt lost during the drafting process, I'd return to it. I love it because it so succinctly contains one of

the central questions of the book—how can we find one another, how can we truly “see” one another, when so much of our lives are spent straining after phantoms?

To me, this bit of dialogue is hilarious and sad, and hope-filled, too, in its wry way; it acknowledges the extreme difficulty of seeing real people—seeing yourself, seeing anybody clearly. Finding the clean lines of another person, in spite of the warped glass of need and desire and terror and projection/fantasy that can fog up our lenses.

So much of the story of *Swamplandia!* is taken up with the girls’ quest to find the ghost of their mother. Grief is a very private affair for these characters, and each member of the Bigtree family is so focused on the ghosts of the past, and their doomed, miraculous visions of the future, that they keep missing one another in the present.

It gets right to the heart of the problem; That’s why I love that epigraph.

Q: What is it like making your first big leap into novel-writing?

A: I think “leap” is the right word—I thought it was incredibly challenging, to be honest. You know, I heard Nicole Krauss recently compare novel-writing to something along the lines of, “breaking all of your bones and stitching them together again.” Which I think suggests the incredible transformations that a book can go through from conception to the final draft.

In the case of *Swamplandia!*, the book that is being published contains material as old as 2006. At one point I had 500-plus pages, most of them terrible. I had to write the book straight through once and then pretty much start fresh, with a destination now in mind. There was a lot of joy and discovery in the process, but I’d be lying if I said the leap was 100% exhilarating. I’m sure it’s a smoother transition for many authors moving from story writing to a novel, but I didn’t exactly take to the ice and skate a perfect figure-eight. I was crashing all over the ice, yelling, “What the hell is a novel, does anybody know? Is spring here yet?”

Then at a certain point I turned some corner, and the writing was joy-filled again, and I could hear Ava’s voice in my head, and I cannot describe the relief of that moment. But I have no idea how to do it again, write a novel, even though I look forward to trying. I have a respect that is huger than a Macy’s day parade float for every novelist out there. It’s such hard work and it also feels ridiculous to me sometimes, all the effort that it takes—like, why can’t you get some imaginary people to do something interesting? You invented these fools, why can’t you make them behave?

Q: Do you see any of yourself or your family in the members of the Big-tree tribe?

A: I would not want any reader to mistake the Bigtrees for my flesh-and-blood family. I keep apologizing to my siblings and my parents for this book—I know some readers will assume there is a one-to-one correspondence between, say, Ossie and my real life sister, and I feel very badly about this, because my real life sister is beautiful and sane and “as smart as a planet,” as my brother says, and nothing like Ossie Bigtree, who is a near-albino having sex with ghosts. Ditto my brother, who is not a ginger-haired dork—my brother is a genius, actually, but he would never claim to be one in the doofily aggrandizing way that Kiwi does.

I do feel that this book is much more personal than anything else I’ve written, in part because the setting of *Swamplandia!* is a tweaked version of South Florida. And it does feel emotionally autobiographical in places—but only in the loose way that you’re always creating stories out of your own set of experiences on this planet, extrapolating from these to build a character’s mind. Only a few threads are directly lifted from life. Like Ava, I find alligators transfixing (for pets, my family had two inbred and obese miniature schnauzers, no Seths). Like Kiwi, I still really bungle the pronunciation of many basic words (just yesterday I pronounced “duet” so that it rhymed with “Monet”). And, at the risk of making everybody Hallmark-nauseous, I do think that the secret engine of this book is the strong love that exists in my own odd family.

Q: You’ve been featured in *The New Yorker’s* “20 under 40 Fiction Issue”, *New York* magazine’s list of twenty-five people to watch under the age of twenty-six, *Granta’s* “Best of Young American Novelists” issue, and named a National Book Foundation “5 under 35” young writer nominee. How do you feel about all this attention and awe surrounding your talent at such a young age?

A: I feel extremely grateful and weirdly embarrassed, too. Very aware of my own mortality, thanks to all the emphasis on age. I’m buying those Oil of Olay products, ok, I have crow’s feet!! What I mean to say is that I don’t feel quite young enough to merit any fuss, and I certainly don’t feel like any kind of “Best Of” author, either, so these honors, while *greatly* appreciated, are also a little disorienting—you know, when my big writing victory of the day is deleting a louche joke about a starfish, it can be tough to feel like I’m making good on these votes of confidence from the *New Yorker* and *Granta* and the National Book Foundation.

That said, I cannot overstate how much that encouragement has meant to me, especially at this stage—it makes me want to write better,

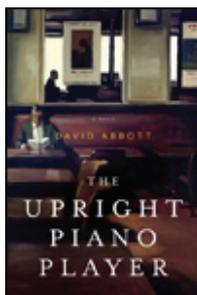
and has helped me to push on through big walls of self-doubt. I hope very much that I go on to write many more novels and stories, and that I can honor those lists. At the very least, I want to avoid the “Mistakes Were Made: 1 over 50 We Got Wrong” list!

Q: What’s next for you?

A: In what is probably a supreme over-correction for all that time I spent in the Florida swamp, I’m working on a new novel set in an imaginary town during the Dust Bowl drought. My sister was joking that it should be called “Drylandia.” Bring on that dust! No more alligators, although who knows, maybe a gator should burst out of a silo in the surprise last chapter, a la “Jaws.”

And I’m hoping to put together a new story collection by the year’s end.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Swamplandia!* [here](#)]



### ***The Upright Piano Player* by David Abbott**

Henry Cage seems to have it all: a successful career, money, a beautiful home, and a reputation for being a just and principled man. But public virtues can conceal private failings, and as Henry faces retirement, his well-ordered life begins to unravel. His ex-wife is ill, his relationship with his son is strained to the point of estrangement, and on the eve of the new millennium he is the victim of a random violent act which soon escalates into a prolonged harassment.

As his ex-wife’s illness becomes grave, it is apparent that there is little time to redress the mistakes of the past. But the man stalking Henry remains at large. Who is doing this? And why? David Abbott pulls this thread of tension ever tighter until the surprising and emotionally impactful conclusion.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR DAVID ABBOTT

**Q:** After a successful career in advertising of nearly 40 years, why did you decide to write this book?

**A:** I was a copywriter for over forty years and it kept me ludicrously busy. I know some would-be novelists sit at the kitchen table and write throughout the night, grabbing only a few hours sleep before they go off to their day jobs, but I couldn't do that, because I was already sitting at that table writing ads into the small hours. The truth is, I wanted to be a good copywriter and I didn't think I could be, if I did it only to pay the rent while my heart was really engaged with fiction. So, I waited until I retired. I had always felt that one day I would try to write something else—a novel, short stories, a screenplay, lyrics, jokes—I wasn't sure which. But first I wanted a rest from deadlines, so I didn't plunge straight into writing. I made a garden, converted a house, read a lot of books, and watched the world go by from pavement cafes in favorite cities—no writing as such, but I did start to keep a notebook. And in 1999, on the eve of the new Millennium, my wife and I actually made the homeward journey that Henry Cage makes in the book. Of course, I wasn't attacked, but that journey recorded in my notebook was the genesis of “The Upright Piano Player.”

**Q:** Why did you name the book *The Upright Piano Player*?

**A:** The title came late. Whenever I needed a break from the slog of the main narrative, I would amuse myself by filling pages of an exercise book with prospective titles. On one of these jags I wrote the word ‘Upright’—to describe Henry. It seemed made for him with its association with goodness and virtue but it is a word that also carries a nuance of “stiff” and “unbending” which is not inappropriate either. It took me a long time to make the “Upright” connection between Henry and his piano, but when I did I whooped with joy. The elation lasted a day. “Just what everyone will expect from an advertising writer”—I said to myself—“a pun, the very lowest form of wit.” When I first showed the manuscript to a publisher it had another title, but I couldn't forget “The Upright Piano Player” and I soon restored it to its rightful place. Pun or not, I love it.

**Q:** Which of the characters do you identify with the most in the novel?

**A:** I know you expect me to say Henry, and it's true I gave him some of my bookish and artistic enthusiasms and much of my geography, but the fact is I identify with all the characters in the book. How could I

not? Some play bigger roles than others, but they all have some of me in them.

Q: Which character was most fun to write? (Note: may contain spoilers)

A: It's a toss-up between Colin and Jack. Because Colin is by nature unpredictable he often took me by surprise. I had no plans for him to kill the dog when he went into the yard to puncture the tires, but he would, wouldn't he? That kind of playback is exciting for a writer (says he grandly on his first book). I enjoyed writing about Jack, too. In many ways he is the reverse of Henry; socially at ease where Henry is a loner. I like Jack's humanity and straight talking. He reminds me of several American men I know. I'm happy he was at Nessa's bedside when she died.

Q: Why did you decide to begin the book with an event in Henry's life that chronologically takes place after the rest of the book? Did you ever think about positioning the beginning of the book at the end? (Note: may contain spoilers)

A: I did this partly because it was the harder thing to do and made the book different, but mostly because I couldn't bear it to be at the end. I put myself in the position of the readers of the book. They have just read a story of a lonely man finding a way to reunite with his family after a 5-year estrangement. He has had a run of bad luck (or bad decisions) but he is feeling his way to reconciliation. In the process, he discovers a grandson and loses a wife, but he has made his peace and reorganizes his life to work and spend time with his son and his family. To then hit the reader with the catastrophe of the grandson's death seemed to me too manipulative. I feared they would feel cheated. Several people, including a couple of publishers, did suggest that I put the accident in its chronological place at the end of the book, but I couldn't. For me, the overarching tragedy at the beginning adds depth and poignancy to the story. Many readers have told me that on finishing the book they go back to Part One and read it again, hoping it isn't true. I know how they feel.

Q: What is your favorite moment in Henry's life? What is your least favorite?

A: I like Henry most when he is nice to Nessa and dislike him most when he isn't.

Q: Controlling your life's path versus falling into a premeditated destiny seems to be an underlying theme throughout the book. What do you

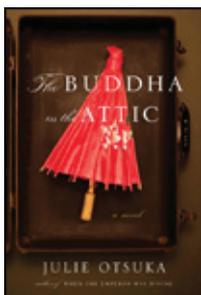
think about destiny and especially the way each of the characters transcend this theme?

A: I married an Irish girl when I was twenty-three and not wanting to be left out of any part of her life, I always went to Mass with her. Five years later I took instruction and became a Catholic myself, but to be honest I had been interested in fate and consequence long before then. Do we get what we deserve in life? Or is life just a series of random accidents? The two epigrams at the start of the book illustrate the two opposing viewpoints and so, too, in the book, do Henry and Jack. At one point, Henry blames a recent misfortune on his ‘various failings’ and Jack responds “It was wrong time, wrong place—that’s all, Henry. There’s no big finger pointing down from the sky.” As an author I remain neutral and leave the reader to blame Henry a little, a lot, or not at all. As a man, I can’t believe that people get what they deserve—bombs still fall on the innocent, disease still strikes down the kindly and the good and there is still feast and famine. But on the other hand, I kind of believe you get time off for good behavior.

Q: What is next for you?

A: I am on the lower foothills of the next novel. It’s too soon to tell you what it’s about, but I’m nervous and excited about where the story is heading.

[Read an excerpt of *The Upright Piano Player* [here](#)]



### ***Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka**

Julie Otsuka's long awaited follow-up to *When the Emperor Was Divine* tells the story of a group of young women brought over from Japan to San Francisco as 'picture brides' nearly a century ago.

In eight incantatory sections, *The Buddha in the Attic* traces their extraordinary lives, from their arduous journey by boat, where they exchange photographs of their husbands, imagining uncertain futures in an unknown land; to their arrival in San Francisco and their tremulous first nights as new wives; to their backbreaking work picking fruit in the fields and scrubbing the floors of white women; to their struggles to master a new language and a new culture; to their experiences in childbirth, and then as mothers, raising children who will ultimately reject their heritage and their history; to the deracinating arrival of war.

In language that has the force and the fury of poetry, Julie Otsuka has written a spellbinding novel about the American dream.

#### **NOTE TO THE READER FROM JULIE OTSUKA, AUTHOR OF *BUDDHA IN THE ATTIC***

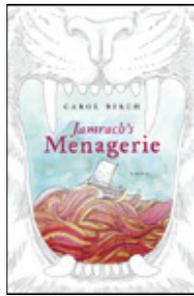
For years I had wanted to tell the story of the thousands of Japanese 'picture brides' who came to America in the early 1900s. Perhaps because I am someone who spends her days sitting in the corner of her neighborhood cafe, quietly writing, I was fascinated by their lives, which seemed so different from mine. What would it be like, I wondered, to get on a boat and sail to an unknown country to marry a man you had never met, a man you knew only by his photograph?

I struggled for months to find the right voice to tell the novel. Several times, I tried writing from the point of view of a single picture bride, but the tone felt forced and flat. I had run across so many interesting stories

during my research—stories of women whose husbands had sent photographs of themselves taken 20 years earlier, of women who had sailed to America expecting to live lives of leisure only to find themselves working as field hands and laundresses within days of their arrival, of women who had run away from their husbands and drifted into lives of prostitution, of women who had always wanted to come to America and were willing to marry a man, any man, to get there—that I wanted to tell them all.

One day, while reading over my notes for the book, I found, buried in the middle of a paragraph several pages in, a sentence I had written months earlier: “On the boat we were mostly virgins.” I knew at once that this would be the first line of my novel. There would be no main character. I would tell the story from the point of view of a group of young picture brides who sail together from Japan to America.

Once I had that first line in my head, I was able to begin writing in earnest. The entire novel is narrated in the choral ‘we’ voice, which I found both challenging and exhilarating. It’s very much a spoken voice, a voice meant to be read out loud, and it allowed me to do what I couldn’t have done otherwise: to tell the story of everyone on the boat.



### ***Jamrach's Menagerie* by Carol Birch**

A novel about a young boy lured to sea by the promise of adventure and reward, with echoes of *Great Expectations*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Voyage of the Narwhal*.

*Jamrach's Menagerie* tells the story of a nineteenth-century street urchin named Jaffy Brown. Following an incident with an escaped tiger, Jaffy goes to work for Mr. Charles Jamrach, the famed importer of exotic animals, alongside Tim, a good but sometimes spitefully competitive boy. Thus begins a long, close friendship fraught with ambiguity and rivalry.

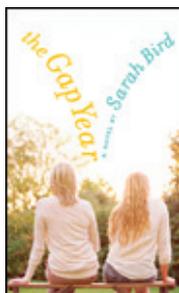
Mr. Jamrach recruits the two boys to capture a fabled dragon during the course of a three-year whaling expedition. Onboard, Jaffy and Tim enjoy

the rough brotherhood of sailors and the brutal art of whale hunting. They even succeed in catching the reptilian beast.

But when the ship's whaling venture falls short of expectations, the crew begins to regard the dragon—seething with feral power in its cage—as bad luck, a feeling that is cruelly reinforced when a violent storm sinks the ship.

Drifting across an increasingly hallucinatory ocean, the survivors, including Jaffy and Tim, are forced to confront their own place in the animal kingdom. Thundering with tension, *Jamrach's Menagerie* is a haunting novel about friendship, sacrifice, and survival.

[Read an excerpt from *Jamrach's Menagerie* [here](#)]



### ***The Gap Year* by Sarah Bird**

From the author of *The Yokota Officers Club* and *The Flamenco Academy*, a novel about a single mom and her seventeen-year-old daughter learning how to let go in that precarious moment before college empties the nest.

In *The Gap Year*, we meet Cam Lightsey, lactation consultant extraordinaire, a divorcée still secretly carrying a torch for the ex who dumped her, a suburban misfit who's given up her rebel dreams so her only child can get a good education.

We also meet Aubrey Lightsey, tired of being the dutiful, grade-grubbing band geek, ready to explode from wanting her “real” life to begin, trying to figure out love with boys weaned on Internet porn.

When Aubrey meets Tyler Moldenhauer, football idol-sex god with a dangerous past, the fuse is lit. Late-bloomer Aubrey metastasizes into Cam's worst silent, sullen teen nightmare, a girl with zero interest in college. Worse, on the sly Aubrey's in touch with her father, who left when she was two to join a celebrity-ridden nutball cult.

As the novel unfolds, the dreams of daughter, mother, and father chart an inevitable, but perhaps not fatal, collision . . .

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR SARAH BIRD

**Q:** The “gap year,” or any amount of time at the end of high school and preceding college, can be fraught for parents and their children. What made you decide to write about this time in a parent’s (and a child’s) life?

**A:** *The Gap Year* was born in the frozen food aisle at the moment when I burst into tears because our son was leaving for college and I realized that never again would I ever buy Pepperonini Pizza Hot Pockets. That sounds facetious, but it’s not. I was so blindsided by the depth of my grief for this vile snack food that, as with most of the big puzzles in my life, I would need to write a novel to begin to understand what “empty nest” truly meant to me.

**Q:** This is a novel that deals with some of the most personal relationships in life, and readers will undoubtedly think about their own families while reading. Did you draw on your own relationships while writing the book?

**A:** In 2008, our son became a member of the largest college freshman class in history. Everything about the experience surprised me. Let’s just start off with the cost. I knew that college costs had skyrocketed so we’d put aside a small fortune. We learned, however, that small wasn’t going to cut it. Instead, a great walloping fortune would be required.

The next shock was discovering that in order to even be allowed to spend these breathtaking sums I would have to take on a second job as a ratings coordinator. There are over four thousand colleges and universities in this country and each one had to be parsed because, as it turns out, the college your child goes to is, essentially, a referendum on you as a parent. Are you a five-star Ivy League parent? A small, selective liberal arts college parent? A giant, state university parent? A two-year community college parent? Being a no-college parent was so far beyond the pale that it wasn’t even ever mentioned.

So the getting-in part surprised me. But what surprised me even more was what happened once we settled on a college and the empty nest loomed as a reality. While pregnant eighteen years earlier, I had devoured every “What to Expect” book out there. As we slogged through this college experience, I wished for a whole new slew of guides to help me through this unsettling phase. For example, I wondered, was it normal to both ardently pray for the day when this grumpy stranger you’ve raised would vacate the premises and to burst into tears in the frozen food aisle?

How about Real Estate Regret? Was it normal to uncontrollably replay the different—possibly better?—childhoods my son might have had if we'd lived in a different neighborhood—a neighborhood where he could have ridden his bike! Went to a different school—a school where the arts were emphasized!

Though I chastised myself for the time I wasted on such pointless regrets, I couldn't stop Real Estate Regret any more than I could control the spontaneous bouts of time travel that I was sucked into. Perhaps because the date of our son's departure seemed like a deadline, the moment when his childhood and my active momhood would end, I kept spinning off into bouts of time travel where I'd revisit key moments in the past and hit the psychic Reset. Then, like Real Estate Regret, I'd create an entirely different childhood for my son in which, for example, his father and I had never allowed videogames. Or we had been active in the Methodist Church. Or in a Buddhist temple. Or we had owned a telescope and pursued astronomy as a family hobby. Or raised chickens. Or all made our beds every morning.

It would not stop. Obviously, I needed, probably still need, intensive therapy. Instead, I wrote *The Gap Year*.

Q: You write from both Aubrey's perspective, as she addresses her diary, and from her mother Cam's. What made you decide to structure the book this way? Did you find one perspective easier than another? Which voice came to you first?

A: I started off assuming that the entire novel would be told from Cam's, the mother's, point of view since that is my perspective and I had so much I wanted to say about the experience of a difficult separation from an only child. But, as I wrote, I was seized by the hunger that seized Cam when her daughter, Aubrey, following the natural order of things withdrew and closed her life off. As her daughter drifted farther from her, Cam was consumed by the hunger to know her offspring, to once again be so close that secrets were impossible. Cam did not have the power to satisfy her curiosity, but I did. I could plunge into Aubrey's world and answer all the questions that plagued her mother:

What happened? Why did my sweet baby girl change so utterly? What is the strange hold her loser boyfriend has over her? Is she pregnant? Has she embezzled her college fund?

It is terribly poignant to me that, again as they must, these two stories run on parallel tracks that will never fully intersect. That, like all mothers, Cam will never again know what is in her daughter's heart the way she once did.

Q: Do you hope that teenagers on their way to college will relate to Aubrey, or begin to understand Cam? What about mothers picking up the book?

A: I never had either hope, so I've been very surprised that a majority of my early readers have been mothers preparing to send daughters off to college. Even more surprising, and delighting, is that every mother has told me that she'd passed the book on to her daughter and that they'd ended up having a great discussion about unspoken fears, pressures, and the myriad ways in which moms, particularly the once most-beloved of moms, irritate their daughters.

Q: Is the religion of Next!, which Martin leaves his family for, based on Scientology or any real-life alternative followings?

A: Because so many of these groups are so litigious, I made a special effort to distance Next! from any real-life organization. Martin is based on someone who was very close to me who joined a group and left me puzzling for decades over the question of how a smart, sensitive, funny, successful person could make such a choice.

Q: One of the themes that runs through the novel is the struggle between holding on and letting go. What do you think: is it harder to hold on or to let go? What message do you hope readers will take away from *The Gap Year*?

A: Oh gosh, yes, that struggle. If only I'd known how prophetic the question that came to me in a dream I had when I was eight months pregnant, "The arrow or the anchor?," would turn out to be! I included it in my dedication since it is such an essential issue. Tiger Moms, for instance, are most definitely in the arrow camp that girds its children to do battle and achieve on a very high level in the world. Most American moms lean more toward the anchor, toward grounding their children with unconditional love.

For myself, it was not a question of whether one was harder or easier; at a certain point, I had to accept that there was nothing to hold on to. That the only control I had lay in whatever residual love my child felt for me. So, honestly, I am the last parent on earth who has a message. All I know is that I never found our experience of letting go, of the emptying nest, represented anywhere in any way that I found truly useful. So I wrote the book I wanted to read.

Maybe, my only message is the one that my mom used to give her six children if one of us ever mentioned a flaw in her childrearing tactics, like smoking through her pregnancies, or giving us Phenobarbital on long car trips: "Eh, you lived to tell the tale, didn't you?"

Q: The novel is dedicated “to the entirely beautiful mothers / of our entirely beautiful children” from the W. H. Auden poem “Lullaby” that precedes it. Why did you choose this dedication?

A: That wasn’t really an intellectual decision. It was the convergence of three “awarenesses.” That Auden is the most human of poets, so steeped in forgiveness. That this piece is entitled “Lullaby.” And that it causes me to weep every time I read it. Like right now.

## **AUTHOR SARAH BIRD, ON MOTHER-DAUGHTER READING GROUPS**

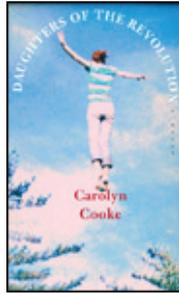
In *The Gap Year* Cam Lightsey, heartbroken about the dismal state of her relationship with her daughter, Aubrey, mourns for her lost dream: That she and Aubrey would read *The Secret Garden* together.

“I see us as we should have been. Aubrey is eleven. Lanky. All long skinny legs and bony arms. Just got braces. Her bangs hang over her eyes. We are each on our own cozy armchair, silently companionable in a sun-splashed room that faces onto an actual garden. I have set a tray of tea and cookies on the coffee table. Chamomile with lots of cream and sugar for Aubrey, Earl Grey for me. Lorna Doones for us both, just like the ones I’d eaten the first time I read *The Secret Garden*.”

Cam’s dream is coming true in all the mother-daughter book clubs springing up around the country. I was surprised to learn that *The Gap Year* had even been read by several mother-daughter friends of my own. And that some surprising discussions had ensued. About unsuspected senior-year anxieties, about letting go, and about the thousand ways that once-beloved moms can now irritate their daughters.

As the mother of a son, the idea of sharing books with a daughter is as appealing to me as it was to Cam. And, yes, in my club, we’d read *The Secret Garden* and serve Earl Grey, Lorna Doones, and chamomile tea with lots of cream and sugar.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Gap Year* [here](#)]



### ***Daughters of the Revolution* by Carolyn Cooke**

A first novel set at a disintegrating New England prep school—from the O. Henry Award-winning author of the story collection *The Bostons*—a *New York Times* Notable Book, *Los Angeles Times* Book of the Year and winner of the PEN/Robert Bingham Fellowship for Writers.

It's 1968. The prestigious but cash-strapped Goode School in the town of Cape Wilde is run by its aging, philandering headmaster, Goddard Byrd, known to both his friends and his enemies as God. With Cape Wilde engulfed by the social and political storms of integration, coeducation and the sexual revolution, God has confidently promised coeducation “over my dead body.” And then, through a clerical error, the Goode School admits its first female student: Carole Faust, a brilliant, intractable fifteen-year-old black girl.

What does it mean to be the First Girl?

*Daughters of the Revolution* explores the lives of girls and women, the complicated desperation of daughters without fathers and the erosion of paternalistic power in an elite New England town on the cusp of radical social change.

[Read an excerpt from *Daughters of the Revolution* [here](#)]

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Daughters of the Revolution* [here](#)]

### **THE SURFACE ERA: AN ESSAY FROM CAROLYN COOKE, author of *Daughters of the Revolution***

The first time I encountered the A Train in New York, circa 1980, I stood on the platform as the car before me stopped and the doors sighed open. People got off, people got on, as if they couldn't see or didn't care that

some human hand had claimed this car, appropriated its power, its sleek bullet-like quality, and turned it into a signature: IZ THE WIZ. I'd never seen anything so defiantly *made*, so insolent or spectacularly crude, so brave, so utterly urban—a work of art that was simultaneously a creation and a spectacular destruction of public property. The doors sighed shut and the train screeched away, leaving me alone on the platform, too stunned to move. I thought about this moment when I learned two years ago that Michael Martin, the artist Iz, had died of aerosol-induced kidney failure and a heart attack a few days after Michael Jackson.

Many of us born in 1958 or 1959, who turned 50 that year—including Barbie, Michael, Madonna, Iz and me—saw the rise of a generational idiom that is waning now. Let's call it the Surface Era. Born into civil rights, black power, the American Indian Movement, second wave feminism and identity politics, we rebelled in the only possible way: we defaced or displaced surface identity, blurred it; we mixed it up. At the moment of integrating MTV, Michael literally paled, deracinated; a sex symbol, he became increasingly androgynous, and whiter every year. Madonna, a high concept star who made sense only in the context of feminism and the sexual revolution, claimed her freedom to be all surface, a material girl. Michael, Madonna and I were born around the year Mattel birthed Barbie, our national plaything, who embodied the idea that we could upend racial and gender stereotypes just by changing outfits; identity was as plastic as Barbie herself. In practice, though, I never saw a Barbie doll in use who had clothes on. She is ever naked, piles of her, naked and naked, stacked up.

The Surface Era valued the “smooth”—“smooth” was high praise; we were like a polyester lacquer on which history has now been scratched, leaving marks. Fifty is still *old* in America—not for ordinary men, of course, but for working class people, for women and androgynes, gay men and celebrities. Where I grew up, on the coast of Maine, many women of 50 no longer possessed teeth or uteruses; their husbands called them unspeakable names; they had warts and wens; they could pull all the meat from a crab in eighteen seconds while smoking a cigarette and watching “As the World Turns” on TV. Nobody looked like Barbie then. Now they do.

Those of us who turned 50 that year were born with the civil rights movement, with Sputnik and the beatniks. The Cold War, embodied through our childhood by Khrushchev, then Brezhnev, Castro and the Rocky and Bullwinkle Show, was a conceptual binary as simple as, well, black and white, beatnik or “square.” The desegregation of schools in the south was soon followed by the seismic events of race riots, busing and coeducation across the country. Walter Cronkite brought us

the Vietnam War on TV; sex became less risky for a moment. Truman Capote's Holly Golightly embodied the Material Girl in New York; Philip Roth and John Updike "came out" with hetero-sexualized tales from the conformist, fifties and early sixties—*Goodbye Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* and Updike's *The Same Door* and *Pigeon Feathers*—offering erotic permission soon to be enhanced by excellent distribution of the birth control pill. The U.S. Postmaster General banned D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the mail the year I was born, but by the time I was interested in such things as "obscenity" and "pornography" my mother had a paperback copy, shelved conveniently with other useful volumes, such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, *The Sensuous Woman* by J. and the *Joy of Sex*, which depicted ancient, hairy couples in their thirties having sex in various positions, and was too repellent to be useful for anything but technical suggestions.

Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum and Warhol's soup cans looked *modern*, back when that word still meant new and radical-seeming, like the Jetsons on TV, or blond wood furniture from Denmark, or Marimekko mumuus. The radio played songs like "Volare," and "Mack the Knife"; people's parents danced the Cha Cha Cha. At five or six, I knew by heart the lyrics to Billie Holliday's "Good Morning, Heartache," which I hummed as I played with my Barbie.

My *aide-memoire*, a dog-eared copy of *The Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events* by Bernard Grun, based on Werner Stein's *Kulturfahrplan*—goes up to 1978 and among its thousands of entries, does not mention Michael Jackson or the Jackson Five, or Barbie. (Madonna and Iz the Wiz were just beginning to be active then.) Even in 1978 it was hard to know where the 1960s and 1970s were going, who would be immortal.

I remember Michael as the lead singer for the Jackson Five, out front of Tito, Marlon, Jackie and Jermaine with his fro singing "ABC" on the Sonny and Cher show in 1972. The collar on his polyester shirt looked like wings. He left the Five in '77 and went solo, right around the time I went solo, too—or, at least went to college, on my own. The cool kids didn't love Michael then, pre-"Thriller"; they were into metal, psychedelic stuff, and punk rock. But I was never one of the cool kids. Michael's face held, then, the promise of something I understood, which was already blurred or unreadable in the Stones and the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Aerosmith, Jim Morrison, Jerry Garcia and the Clash. Abstract, impertinent and androgynous, Michael embodied everything that sex, drugs and rock and roll weren't; he was sexy as opposed to sexual; he was unavailable; he was disco. In the middle of the sexual revolution (which doubled, essentially, as the end of

the sexual revolution), the communal era of damp roaches and shared body fluids, he wore a germ mask; he wore a *glove*.

The games editor of *Omni Magazine*, where I worked through much of the 1980s, introduced me to MTV. I was transfixed. Nothing had ever looked like this: It was so vivid, so expensive; it was so fake. Not a movie, not a commercial; but definitely a *product*. Michael was the first black person there. Not in a political, Angela Davis way—he'd already ditched the power fro, and really, Michael never had much to say: "I'm a lover, not a fighter!" It was as if Michael were apolitical and acolor, and so, no barrier need be acknowledged, or even broken.

What Michael and Madonna did—maybe—was to liberate popular culture from the grip of the male, and the plight of the groupie, the hysterical female follower evidenced constantly in footage of Elvis or the Beatles in concert, or Bob Dylan singing "Lay, Lady Lay," or the entire oeuvre of the Stones. The sound track of my high school years was eloquent proof that the Equal Rights Amendment would fail in 1982. It didn't matter how many of us spent winter break gazing at our cervixes through a plastic duck-bill or marched for the right to secure and consume birth control pills. We were so trained in binaries—black/white, boys/girls, us/them—that integration seemed complicated, impossible, until suddenly it didn't. An interstitial space opened up between opposing ideas—the madonna/whore dichotomy was, for example, no longer a dichotomy. A line, quite long, delineated the "spectrum" of sexuality.

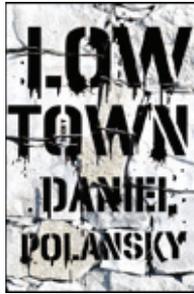
Madonna's signature lyric, "Like a Virgin" ("My fear is fading fast/Been saving it all for you/'Cause only love can last"), provided a viscid mantra for the provisional, equivocal sex popularized in the Clinton administration. Like Barbie, who reinvented herself in 108 different careers, from Candy Striper (1964), to Astronaut (1965), to Presidential candidate (1992 & ff.) Madonna is always recognizable as the blow up doll version of some fantasy person, a fundament built on a costume.

Mothers of my generation trained our daughters who somehow came into possession of a Barbie doll that we didn't hate the doll, of course not—but what would happen if we baked her in the oven? Michael Jackson, Madonna and Barbie have all been creepy avatars of a post-racist, post-feminist America—unreal, narcissistic, profligate, plastic. I can't defend them. Still, they are my people—we spent our almost endless pre-millennial youth breaking up old stereotypes, only to create new banalities.

Last year, on a trip to New York, I went down again into the subway at West Fourth Street and had a weird *déjà vu* of my first subway experience, except this time the A train was scrubbed clean as a vintage airstream trailer. The elegant defacements—the "burner top-to-bottoms" by the

“bombers” the 1980s and ‘90s had been defaced, obliterated. There were no tags anywhere. As I stood frozen in shock car after car rolled by, gleaming, naked, peeled, almost obscene. As for Iz the Wiz, it turned out he was on dialysis, and had joined the legal graffiti movement.

[This essay first appeared in *The Redwood Coast Review*.]



### ***Low Town* by Daniel Polansky**

Drug dealers, hustlers, brothels, dirty politics, corrupt cops . . . and sorcery. Welcome to Low Town.

In the forgotten back alleys and flophouses that lie in the shadows of Rigus, the finest city of the Thirteen Lands, you will find Low Town. It is an ugly place, and its champion is an ugly man. Disgraced intelligence agent. Forgotten war hero. Independent drug dealer. After a fall from grace five years ago, a man known as the Warden leads a life of crime, addicted to cheap violence and expensive drugs. Every day is a constant hustle to find new customers and protect his turf from low-life competition like Tanced the Harelip and Ling Chi, the enigmatic crime lord of the heathens.

The Warden’s life of drugged iniquity is shaken by his discovery of a murdered child down a dead-end street . . . setting him on a collision course with the life he left behind. As a former agent with Black House—the secret police—he knows better than anyone that murder in Low Town is an everyday thing, the kind of crime that doesn’t get investigated. To protect his home, he will take part in a dangerous game of deception between underworld bosses and the psychotic head of Black House, but the truth is far darker than he imagines. In Low Town, no one can be trusted.

Daniel Polansky’s debut novel *Low Town* is set in an original world of stunning imagination, and leads to a gut-wrenching, unforeseeable conclusion.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR DANIEL POLANSKY

**Q:** *Low Town* takes several noir elements—a disgraced antihero detective, a shadowy underworld rife with thugs and drugs, and a horrific murder that drives the plot—and arranges them in a fantasy/sci-fi setting. The result is a wholly unique mystery/thriller. Is it accurate to describe *Low Town* as “Tarantino meets Tolkien”?

**A:** It’s not exactly how I think of it, but it’s certainly flattering. In my mind it’s more Dan Brown meets the Old Testament.

**Q:** “Low Town” refers to a poor, drug and crime ridden district of a major city in not only a foreign land but an alternate world/universe, that is populated by a diverse and colorful array of people and cultures. Were these inventions informed by people and places in the real world?

**A:** In terms of the broader world, I read a lot of history so most of it is grounded in that. I always tried to keep in mind that however alien the world of *Low Town* may be, the characters are all human, affected by the same fundamental drives—greed, guilt, loyalty, bigotry, etc.—as we are. In terms of the characters and situations and so on, you do your best to take from your own experiences, though obviously, I’ve never knifed anyone.

**Q:** Your hometown is Baltimore, which has seen its share of crime and inner city turmoil. Did life in Charm City shape your fiction writing?

**A:** I have no idea what you’re talking about. Inner city turmoil? Baltimore is an edenic paradise, Plato’s Athens but without all the pederasty. Where are you getting this misinformation?

**Q:** The principles of good versus evil are murky in noir fiction, and *Low Town* is characteristic of the genre. Are the gray areas of character easier to portray than stark black and white?

**A:** There’s not really a clear good/evil axis to most of our decisions. People muddle through as best they can—if you are lucky enough to be in a situation where your basic needs are met, you can more easily spend energy thinking about your neighbor’s. Should society descend into anarchy, on the other hand, it all becomes more of a zero sum game. All that is to say I don’t know what a ‘stark black or white’ character would look like, so I guess in that sense it’s easier to write people with more mixed motivations.

Q: Drug dealers, hustlers, brothels, dirty politics, corrupt cops . . . and sorcery. Where did the idea for *Low Town* come from?

A: Honestly I sat down to write something a little more in line with the typical fantasy norms, but as it turns out I hate elves so I realized I needed to do something different. I guess I liked the idea of introducing a faster pace to a genre that tends to bloat a little, and *Low Town* seemed like one way to do it.

Q: What kind of research and preparation went into crafting *Low Town*? Which other fantasy/sci-fi authors influenced you, and do you have a favorite?

A: I wear my influences pretty heavy on my sleeve, Chandler and Hammett in particular. As far as fantasy goes, Gene Wolfe is a giant, deserved of far more regard than he gets. George RR Martin is probably the only person who ever wrote a good high fantasy book, cruel though it was to stand us mid-series.

Q: What do you think the main character, the Warden, would have become if the “Crane” hadn’t rescued him from life on the streets—where he ultimately returned on his own terms?

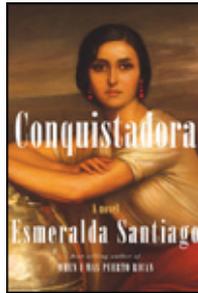
A: I’m not sure that I think of the Warden as having been saved by the Crane exactly, or having returned to the streets on his own terms. For better or for worse, I think of the Warden as fundamentally a pretty self-made man.

Q: How did you make the journey from earning a philosophy degree to becoming a novelist at the ripe old age of 25?

A: Well I’m 26 actually, but I guess that doesn’t change the question. I wish I had a better story for you, but my post-college history is pretty dull. I lived in China for a while, I went broke and came back to the US, I got a job, I wrote the first draft of *Low Town*, I quit my job, I went traveling again, I got an agent, I went broke and came back to the US, some gentleman at Random House drank too much at lunch one morning and gave me some money, and now I’m traveling again.

Q: Finally, have you sampled pixie’s breath and/or dreamvine?

A: Are you a cop? Because, honestly, that reads like the kind of question a cop would ask. If you’re a cop you have to tell me, or it’s entrapment.



### ***Conquistadora* by Esmeralda Santiago**

As a young girl growing up in Spain, Ana Larragoity Cubillas is powerfully drawn to Puerto Rico by the diaries of an ancestor who traveled there with Ponce de León. And in handsome twin brothers Ramón and Inocente—both in love with Ana—she finds a way to get there. She marries Ramón, and in 1844, just eighteen, she travels across the ocean to a remote sugar plantation the brothers have inherited on the island.

Ana faces unrelenting heat, disease and isolation, and the dangers of the untamed countryside even as she relishes the challenge of running Hacienda los Gemelos. But when the Civil War breaks out in the United States, Ana finds her livelihood, and perhaps even her life, threatened by the very people on whose backs her wealth has been built: the hacienda's slaves, whose richly drawn stories unfold alongside her own. And when at last Ana falls for a man who may be her destiny—a once-forbidden love—she will sacrifice nearly everything to keep hold of the land that has become her true home.

An epic novel of love, discovery, and adventure by the author of the best-selling memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican*.

### **Q&A WITH AUTHOR ESMERALDA SANTIAGO**

**Q:** *Conquistadora* is a sweeping story, an epic of Puerto Rico set across three decades. How did this book first start for you? What was the kernel that eventually led to *Conquistadora*?

**A:** Soon after my first memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, was published in 1993, I was helping a friend pack her things in preparation for her move from a house to an apartment. Inside a closet I found a heavy, ornate sterling candelabrum with six arms. It was unlike anything else

in her home, which was as sleek and modern as she was. She said it was brought to the United States from England by her six-times-great-grandmother and had been passed down to the eldest daughter ever since.

My own grandmother had died recently, and my connection to previous generations on her side had vanished with her. Over the next few days I pondered the lack of information about my family. Asking my mother didn't yield much beyond what she remembered about her close relatives. She is fair skinned, my father much darker, and I knew that, at least on his side, there must have been black great-grandparents, possibly slaves. I tried to imagine who they might have been, what life in Puerto Rico could have been like before Mami and Papi were born.

I began to read about the early twentieth century, and each new fact sent me to previous years until I was immersed in the Puerto Rican nineteenth century. I was particularly interested in what work people might have performed, what their lives might have been like. With no information about my real ancestors, I started to invent a family history based on my research. From the first, I sensed my imaginary ancestors jostling for my attention. I had to listen. The quieter I was, the louder and more loquacious they became.

While researching and listening to my imaginary ancestors, I wrote three memoirs, translated two books, coedited two anthologies, adapted one of my memoirs into a film for *Masterpiece Theatre*, cowrote and performed a radio play, and had essays appear in various publications and as NPR commentary. But regardless of what I was working on, *mi gente*—my people—filled the silences between other work, other worlds, other words.

My friend's candelabrum inspired the one that Ana places on the dining table in *El Destino* the night she decides to become the woman Severo has dreamed about.

**Q:** You were born in Puerto Rico and you've written about Puerto Rico before—perhaps most notably in your memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* (hailed as “a welcome new voice, full of passion and authority,” by the *Washington Post*). What research did you do in the course of writing this novel?

**A:** I researched *Conquistadora* backward. That is, I didn't start with a year and read forward. I read about my parents' generations, then about my grandparents, then kept going back until one day I envisioned Ana Larragoity Cubillas reading her conquistador ancestor's journals, dreaming about Puerto Rico. Imagining what she might have read led me to earlier documents about the conquista, and the differences between how

the Spanish conquered Puerto Rico as opposed to, say, Peru. But the more I read about the three hundred years before she was born, the more curious I became about Ana's particular time in history.

The mid-nineteenth century was a period of technological advances, political turmoil around the world, and, as another character in *Conquistadora* notices, the beginnings of a distinct Puerto Rican identity different from a *colono*, the word the españoles used to describe the native-born. The midcentury was also the apogee of King Sugar in Puerto Rico. I read books and academic papers by Professors Sidney Mintz, Francisco Scarano, Luis A. Figueroa, and others, to get a sense of how the industry developed in Puerto Rico, as well as other places like Cuba, Jamaica, and Louisiana.

I've read countless histories, letters, journals, financial records, and all manner of curious little-known facts, and learned as much as I could about cholera and other common diseases of the time and about the remedies and attempts to relieve the symptoms. I loved Salvador Brau's history of Puerto Rico, published in 1892, and learned from him about the secret abolitionist societies. Along the way, I rekindled my admiration for the work of Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances, the ophthalmologist, poet, writer—and political activist—who so inspires Ana's son, Miguel Argoso Larragoity.

I traveled to Puerto Rico frequently, to walk through miles upon miles of sugarcane in various stages of cultivation. I stepped upon the cobblestones of Trinidad, Cuba, a nineteenth century town built from sugar production, its center so well preserved that it has been named a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. I've spent hours along the narrow streets of Old San Juan to feel what Miguel's world could have been like, and made as many forays into el campo, the Puerto Rican countryside that so inspired Ana.

I thought I knew the island where I was born, but placing myself in a different time with my invented ancestors gave me a fuller understanding of my own history.

Q: What new stories about the island did you discover?

A: I was surprised by how much we don't know here and on the island about Puerto Rico preinvasion by the United States in 1898. I was surprised by how many estadounidenses like Mr. Worthy lived there in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Reading Alejandro O'Reilly, George Flinter, Bartolomé de las Casas, and others gave me a sense of how Europeans viewed Puerto Ricans and how the island and its people ignited many imaginations. I learned that the cholera epidemic between 1854 and 1857 was part of a worldwide pandemic. While

they are not included in *Conquistadora*, the mutinies by Spanish soldiers because their salaries and stipends were chronically late or not delivered at all, fascinated me. In one of these mutinies, in 1855, the soldiers turned the cannons designed to repel invasions in the direction of the city. Sanjuaneros panicked, and people died fleeing the soldiers who were supposed to protect them. I was surprised to learn that Samuel Morse spent time on the island, where his daughter lived, and that he installed the first telegraph in Puerto Rico between his daughter's home and her husband's office in the hacienda they owned.

Q: Does the Spanish settling of the country still echo in Puerto Rico today? And what were the difficulties—and what was liberating—about setting the story 150 years in the past?

A: The Spanish influence in Puerto Rico echoes throughout the culture to this day. We, of course, consider Spanish our mother tongue, even as we still bear scars, five hundred years later, of the genocide of the *ta'nos*. The United States invaded the island in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. In 1917, Puerto Ricans were granted limited American citizenship. Today we live in a peculiar ambivalence as our culture is becoming less Spanish-centric and more *estadounidense*. Do we identify more with the conquerors and colonizers of four hundred years of our history, or with the more recent invaders/colonizers of 1898?

The biggest difficulties in setting *Conquistadora* in the nineteenth century was collecting enough information about the island for me to feel as if I'd lived there then. I needed to know everything about how my imaginary ancestors lived. What did they look like? What did they wear? What did they eat? How did they move from one place to another? What did they hear, see, smell, touch? Most of the original sources have disappeared, and it was hard to find the details I sought. I often appealed to the characters to help me. For example, Nena la Lavandera—the laundress in the novel—told me that the *patrones* used perfumed linens to wipe their bottoms. I was not sure whether this made-up detail would end up in the final version of the novel. Months after writing that passage, I read that, in fact, some wealthy people took care of this necessary function the way I'd described it. After that, I trusted my characters' voices even more.

I was also inspired by the research itself, by the process of learning about the past and this particular time in the history of Puerto Rico and the Spanish settling of the island. When I read about the Bando Negro—a law designed to control the movements and behavior of non-white residents, free or enslaved—I was outraged and knew that I had to show how people were affected by those shameful laws. When I read

that two-thirds of the deaths during the cholera epidemic came from the *gente de color* and slaves, it became clear that it had to be a crucial event in the novel. I wanted to find out how the abolition of slaves in the United States, the subsequent Civil War, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln could have direct consequences on the people of Puerto Rico. My goal was to personalize historical events, to show that we don't live in a vacuum, that while it seems so long ago, history was somebody's present.

Q: At the heart of *Conquistadora* is Ana—a young girl living a privileged life in nineteenth century Spain, who becomes enchanted by the journals of an ancestor who traveled to Puerto Rico with Ponce de León. Ana is the driving force of the story and literally the force that brings her family to Puerto Rico. Tell us a bit about how Ana came to be. And why or how is she a “conquistadora”?

A: I imagined Ana bent over don Hernán's journals and drawings. There she was, a petite, smart, feisty, courageous, ambitious girl seeking a better fate than the one before her. Her intense focus on the yellowing pages, the way she fingered the splotchy ink on the parchments, the way she studied every line of don Hernán's sketches told me that here was a woman I could identify with. We both knew that the right words on a page can change a life.

The more I thought about Ana, the more I admired her for refusing to be whom others expected her to be, and this resonated with my own story and with my own life. I loved that she saw her options clearly: If she didn't take her life into her own hands, she might end up, as she and her father worried, dependent on her relatives. I remember myself at the same age, poor, with a load of expectations and burdens I didn't want to carry but equally weighted by ambition. While Ana had more resources than I had, we both had to create our own freedom. The irony, of course, is that freedom for one person always comes at the expense of someone else's.

Christopher Columbus and subsequent conquistadores were not seeking a new world. They were merchants looking for a product that would enrich them and keep them independent. A great many of the conquistadores were the illegitimate sons of great, or at least, wealthy men whose riches would be inherited by legitimate heirs. In that sense, Ana was like them. As a woman, she could not inherit the riches her ancestors had amassed. Like the conquistadores, Ana does whatever she has to do to achieve her goals, even if it means that others suffer. She manipulates the Argosos, uses her son as leverage, marries Severo because if she refused, him he'd leave, and she needed him as

the mayordomo. One of the reasons the conquistadores were able to subdue entire populations was their force of character, their insistence that their way was the only way to do things, even if it meant erasing populations and centuries of tradition and custom. Like the conquistadores, Ana used the men and women who made her rich in the service of her own goals, needs, and ideals.

**Q:** Ana is an incredibly strong and willful woman, and she's not conventionally pretty. What do you think attracts the men in the novel—Ana's husband, Ramón and his twin brother, Inocente; as well as Severo Fuentes, whom they hire to manage their plantation—to Ana? Were there any women like Ana living and working in Puerto Rico in the 1800s—women who, liberated from the constrictions of European society, became the masters of their own destinies?

**A:** At first, Ramón, Inocente, and Severo were dazzled by Ana's position as the only daughter of a socially prominent family. Later, Ramón and Inocente were seduced by her adventurous nature and by her ability to convince them that they, like her, were destined for greater things. A woman does not need to be conventionally beautiful to be alluring. When we fall in love, we fall in love with the image we have created of ourselves in the others' eyes. Ana knew how to play to Ramón's and Inocente's fantasies of themselves until they fell in love with the image she created. Severo fell in love with her because he knew that, in a vertical society like Spain's, the best way to advance was to marry into it.

I didn't look for, or find, a character like Ana in Puerto Rican history of the nineteenth century, or anywhere else. She came to me. At first, I worried that I was creating a character who would have been impossible in that time and that place. But the more I read and thought about it, the more I realized that women like Ana have existed throughout time. We just don't necessarily hear about them. History has ignored and condemned unconventional women, but they have lived and worked and built dynasties. We simply could not have reached this stage of human development without women like Ana.

**Q:** One aspect of the reality of life in Puerto Rico that comes as a shock to Ana—and may surprise many readers as well—is that the country's economy in the mid-1800s relied almost entirely on slave labor. *Conquistadora* tells the stories of the slaves who work on the plantation Ana and her husband own: indigenous people from the island as well as African men and women kidnapped by the Spanish. What were the challenges of depicting slavery, the daily lives and the struggles? How did you approach this obviously weighty subject?

A: Long after I'd delivered the final manuscript of *Conquistadora*, one of my readers researched my genealogy. The earliest link she found was to a Juan Santiago, dated 1848, the same year as the Bando Negro. I asked my father whether he remembered this ancestor, and he recalled that his paternal grandmother talked about her grandfather Juan, who was "un indio salvaje." He was black and spoke another language. I think that Juan Santiago was not a savage Indian like my great-grandmother said, but rather an African slave.

It was a poignant moment for me to imagine Juan Santiago, my great-great-great-grandfather, probably working in the fields of some hacienda in a foreign land perhaps like the enslaved Flora, Siña Damita and Jacobo, holding on to the memory of their other lives.

It was challenging to find information about the slaves in Puerto Rico because they left no written record. What we know about them is figures on ledgers, sometimes their names and their ages and whether they were born in Puerto Rico or elsewhere. To try to get closer to them, I read slave narratives from other islands and from the United States, and imagined how things might have been different in the Puerto Rican archipelago. Puerto Rican scholars and historians have written about the practices and regulations on the island compared with other places. Details about what the slaves ate, how they were dressed, and how their work was structured came from diverse sources, each providing pieces of information that I then compiled and combined to create human beings who might have lived, loved, worked, died in Hacienda los Gemelos.

While writing *Conquistadora*, I knew that the novel was not only about Ana and Severo, Ramón and Inocente. I wanted to create an entire world, not just an aspect of it. Because it was so hard to find information about Puerto Rican slaves, I felt a special obligation to bring the slaves to life. I didn't want to deify or mythologize them. My goal was for them to be as human and flawed as the blancos.

Q: You've created a rich, fully realized cast of characters—some chapters are almost like minibiographies, the stories of why and how particular people came to Puerto Rico. Do you have a favorite among your characters? Anyone you can no longer abide?

A: It's painful to have to choose one character over another because they're all *mi familia*, and I love them passionately. Even don Luis, whom everyone in the novel dislikes, had positive qualities—his hospitality, for example, toward the elder Argosos. I did enjoy writing certain sections more than others, though. It was painful to write Nena's story, but it flowed as if she were whispering it into my ear. Ramón's walk around

the hacienda the night his parents arrive came in the middle of one of my own sleepless nights.

Severo's chapter when he rides to see Consuelo the first time we meet her came when I was cocooned at home during a blizzard in Upstate New York. José's monument to suffering was written in a hotel in Miami while I sobbed over my laptop. I cried a lot when I was writing *Conquistadora*.

My readers often talk about the humor in my books, and though there isn't that much humor in this story, I must admit that I enjoyed writing Mr. Worthy, and did laugh out loud when I reread what I'd written.

**Q:** The country of Puerto Rico itself—which you describe in all its beauty and cruelty—must be recognized as one of the main characters in the book. It's a land that deeply affects many of the characters, including Ana and Severo, who has also emigrated from Spain, and who has clawed his way out of the lower classes to become a landowner and perhaps even a gentleman. What is it that draws these two characters of very different backgrounds to Puerto Rico? What grabs them so thoroughly as to pit them against family and, sometimes it seems, against reason?

**A:** Many years ago I read William Carlos Williams's poem "Adam," about his English father who moved to Barbados as a child. One of the verses—quoted at the beginning of *Conquistadora*—struck me particularly, and kept me thinking: the "darker whispering that death invents especially for northern men whom the tropics have come to hold." The conquistadores were changed by those darker whisperings of the tropics, by the brown and black skins of the natives and the Africans, by the deep shadows caused by the blazing sun, by the darker thoughts and actions allowed when you hold power over others. Ana and Severo wanted to control their own destinies, but that requires a particular kind of confidence and ruthlessness, and the ability to go to those dark places in your mind and in your heart. To live in the tropics, the first thing that Ana and Severo had to do was to banish guilt—if they ever had it. Once you banish guilt, you can be like the gods.

**Q:** Can you tell us a bit about the refrain that runs throughout the book: "We're all a bit of a poet, a bit a musician, a bit mad."

**A:** This is one of my favorite Spanish sayings. I heard it for the first time from my father, who was all three things. It is a refrain in my life, the sense that madness and art are intertwined. You need to be a little bit crazy to give yourself entirely to create anything new, let alone art.

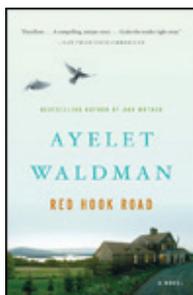
Severo, who can easily kill a man, can also design a beautiful hilltop mansion and handle silk as he imagines it melting under his work-worn fingers. Ana is mad to believe that she can not only duplicate her ancestor's exploits, but triumph where he failed. There is poetry in her actions and in her belief that life and history are a continuum, and that to build a future, it's first necessary to connect to the past.

During the writing of *Conquistadora*, I was painfully aware that only the *blancos* wrote, corresponded, entered into contracts, left records. My paternal grandparents, like 80 percent of Puerto Ricans at the turn of the twentieth century, were illiterate. So were three of my aunts, although my father and his brothers could read and write and sign their names. I'm a writer who, like the bards of old, seeks poetry and music in humanity, but I seek the unheroic, unheralded lives. Maybe I'm mad.

Q: What are you working on next?

A: Ana, Severo, and the residents of Hacienda los Gemelos and El Destino continue to whisper and call to me. I'm listening.

[Read an excerpt from *Conquistadora* [here](#)]



### ***Red Hook Road* by Ayelet Waldman**

In the aftermath of a devastating wedding day, two families, the Tetherlys and the Copakens, find their lives unraveled by unthinkable loss. Over the course of the next four summers in Red Hook, Maine, they struggle to bridge differences of class and background to honor the memory of the couple, Becca and John. As Waldman explores the unique and personal ways in which each character responds to the tragedy—from the budding romance between the two surviving children, Ruthie and Matt, to the

struggling marriage between Iris, a high strung professor in New York, and her husband Daniel—she creates a powerful family portrait and a beautiful reminder of the joys of life.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Red Hook Road* [here](#)]

## AUTHOR ESSAY

*Ayelet Waldman, author of Red Hook Road, tells us which time-honored piece of writing advice she prefers to disregard and explains why her favorite characters are the ones most unlike her.*

There's an old bit of literary wisdom that writing students learn by heart as soon as they first put pen to paper (or turn on their laptops): write what you know. Even my second grader received this instruction for his weekly writing assignments. But whether it's because he shares his father's elaborate imagination or my own inherent perversity, my son refuses on principal to follow this rule. When asked to write about how he spent his weekend, he submits a paragraph about his field work among the Tharks, a tribe of four-armed, green nomads who inhabit the planet Mars. For an assignment about why he loves his parents, he crafted a poem about his father's skill at poker and his mother's divinely inspired fried chicken. My husband doesn't gamble, I've never fried a drumstick in my life, and as far as I know, the kid's never been to Mars.

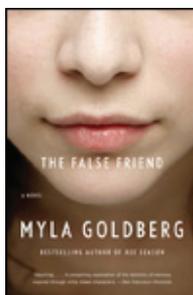
Irate notes from the teacher notwithstanding, I have to admit I understand where my son is coming from. When writers only write what they know, we end up with lots of short stories and novels about young people falling in love for the first time, often in Iowa (the site of the nation's pre-eminent writing program). All well and good, but at some point even the most beautifully crafted sentences begin to grow tiresome if they describe people we've read about a hundred times before.

All this is by way of explaining why *Red Hook Road* is full of things like classical music, boxing, wooden boat building, and inter-racial adoption. Before I began research for the novel, the only thing I knew about Beethoven was that he was deaf, and about Mozart was that he'd been murdered by a fellow composer (What? That wasn't a documentary? Are you sure?). I started a crash course that began with the *Idiot's Guide to Classical Music* and worked its way up to *Classical Music for Dummies* (and a little beyond). I'd never even watched a boxing match, but by the time I finished the novel, I was able to provide color commentary for the De La Hoya v. Manny Pacquiao bout. And though nobody with an ounce of sense would ever go out in a boat with me as passenger, let alone captain, I no longer

vomit at the mere sight of a sea-going vessel. (I can go a whole ten minutes on the water before losing my lunch over the side).

It's for this reason, I think, that my favorite characters in *Red Hook Road* aren't those who are arguably more like me, the prickly Jewish mother Iris Copaken or her daughter Ruthie, or even Jane Tetherly, the other mother in the story. My two favorite characters are Samantha, a young violin prodigy, adopted as a toddler from Cambodia, and her mentor, Mr. Emil Kimmelbrod, Iris's father, himself a prodigy on the violin, though Parkinson's disease has stolen from him his ability to play. I love the relationship between these two people, who have nothing in common besides a love of music and a remarkable gift. I love the way Samantha's plain-spoken honesty and need inspires Mr. Kimmelbrod to plumb emotional depths he otherwise resists. These two were a pleasure to write, in part because it was so difficult to imagine how people so different from me would think, feel and act.

To be allowed to inhabit the mind and heart of someone else, to find a way to express their thoughts with some modicum of authenticity, this is both the challenge and delight of writing fiction.



### ***The False Friend* by Myla Goldberg**

From the bestselling author of *Bee Season* comes a complex psychological drama with a simple setup: two eleven-year-old girls, best friends and fierce rivals, go into the woods. Only one comes out . . .

Leaders of a mercurial clique of girls, Celia and Djuna reigned mercilessly over their three followers. One afternoon, they decided to walk home along a forbidden road. Djuna disappeared, and for twenty years Celia blocked out how it happened.

The lie Celia told to conceal her misdeed became the accepted truth: everyone assumed Djuna had been abducted, though neither she nor her abductor was ever found. Celia's unconscious avoidance of this has meant

that while she and her longtime boyfriend, Huck, are professionally successful, they've been unable to move forward, their relationship falling into a rut that threatens to bury them both.

Celia returns to her hometown to confess the truth, but her family and childhood friends don't believe her. Huck wants to be supportive, but his love can't blind him to all that contradicts Celia's version of the past.

Celia's desperate search to understand what happened to Djuna has powerful consequences. *The False Friend* explores the adults that children become—leading us to question the truths that we accept or reject, as well as the lies to which we succumb.

## FAMOUS LITERARY FRENEMIES

*The Little Girls* by Elizabeth Bowen—Dinah, Clare, and Sheila

Former childhood best friends reunite in old age to uncover a long lost chest only to discover they are no longer the friends they used to be.

*The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton—Lily Bart and Bertha Dorset

Lily accepts an invitation from Bertha to join her and her husband on a cruise. All starts well but ends badly when Bertha accuses Lily of sleeping with her husband to cover up her own infidelity. As a result Lily is disinherited and, ultimately, ruined.

*Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro—Kathy and Ruth

The two both fall for their fellow classmate, Tommy. Ruth, the stronger personality of the two dates Tommy for years, despite knowing that he and Kathy are truly in love. Her reason for keeping them apart? She didn't want to be left out.

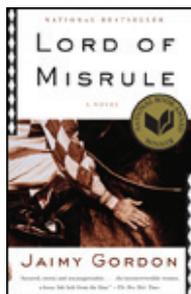
*Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood—Elaine and Cordelia

Elaine reflects on her childhood, during which she was both tortured and beloved by Cordelia. Their strange friend-enemy relationship has profound effects on her future relationships.

*Something Borrowed* by Emily Giffin—Rachel and Darcy

Friends since they were four, Rachel and Darcy had been one-upping each other their whole lives. But when Rachel sleeps with Darcy's fiancé, the competition is taken to a whole new level.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The False Friend* [here](#)]



### ***Lord of Misrule* by Jaimy Gordon**

The winner of the 2010 National Book Award, *Lord of Misrule* is an excursion into the lives of small-time schemers and big-time dreamers—men and women whose passions, perfidy, and obsessions are as highly charged and unpredictable as the horse races at the center of their world.

Jaimy Gordon transforms Indian Mound Downs, a dilapidated racetrack in West Virginia, into a theater of grand drama and quirky comedy featuring a remarkable cast of characters both human and equine. Maggie Koderer, an eager newcomer to the racing scene, arrives at the Mound with four gifted but pitiful-looking horses owned by her lover, Tommy Hansel. Hansel plans to run the horses before anyone knows how good they are, cash in his bets, and quickly move on. Medicine Ed, an aging groom and longtime practitioner of arcane magic and spells, takes Maggie under his wing. Maggie also has a secret guardian—the loan shark Two-Tie, who would fit right into a Damon Runyon story, has a very personal reason for protecting her. Over the course of the racing season, the characters pursue private desires and plans, but it is the horses that ultimately determine their fates. And, as Gordon makes clear, every horse racing at the Mound has a will and a personality all its own.

### **AUTHOR ESSAY**

*In this exclusive essay, Jaimy Gordon explains how her family background influenced the writing of her National Book Award-winning novel, Lord of Misrule.*

More than I was allowed to know when I was a girl, I am the product of two usually warring ways of looking at the world—and so, I think, is my novel, *Lord of Misrule*.

Both my parents were Jewish, the children of immigrants who arrived in America shortly before the turn of the century, but my father was prep

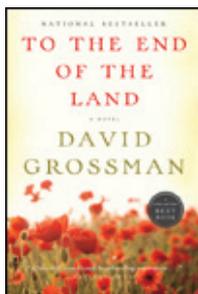
school, military school and Ivy educated. His mother, having made a fortune from two elegant hat shops by the time she was thirty, left filthy trade behind her and never worked again, went to lectures and concerts and museums and so at least mimicked the life of the cultured upper class in New York City, where she lived for the rest of her life. She obliterated all trace of a Yiddish accent, if she ever had one. She was literary (in accordance with her will, her funeral consisted of a reading of Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar"), indomitably formal, a kind of nun of aesthetic aspiration and a Germanophile. She got rid of her husband early.

My mother's mother was a garment worker who, like my father's mother, made hats, but on the factory end, not management. She too parted from her husband early. (She later remarried an alcoholic with a flourishing window-washing business that landed many contracts with the city—a sure sign of corruption, though that never occurred to me when I was young.) My mother was raised by her grandparents on Patterson Park Avenue in East Baltimore, among seven aunts and uncles, none of whom, as far as I know, ever read a book, in a horseplaying household where shabbos ended in a poker game and a number of shady enterprises were tolerated, so that two uncles went to jail and one was eventually murdered. My mother put all this behind her and graduated from Goucher College in 1941, already married to my father who had gone to Hopkins and then Columbia Law. We didn't see much of her family, except at an occasional seder or bar mitzvah.

I had an excellent education, and never wanted to be anything but a writer. All the same, I was drawn to a wild-eyed horsetrainer and the racetrack where he ran his horses, in Charles Town, West Virginia, in my twenties. *Lord of Misrule* is a novel about the seediest possible racetrack, created by a writer (me) who has the highest possible literary aspirations, and my language surely shows it. The characters in *Lord of Misrule* (especially the loan shark Two Tie) talk like my Baltimore uncles, except for the ancient groom Medicine Ed, who, being from South Carolina like most poor black folk I knew in Baltimore when I was growing up, talks like my great grandparents' neighbors on Patterson Park Avenue in the fifties, after most white families had departed.

And that's the consummately hybrid world of *Lord of Misrule*.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Lord of Misrule* [here](#)]



### ***To the End of the Land* by David Grossman**

From one of Israel's most acclaimed writers comes a rich imagining of a family in love and crisis.

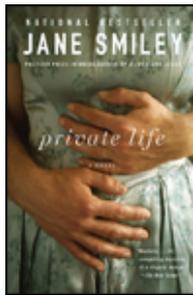
Ora, a middle-aged Israeli mother, is on the verge of celebrating her son Ofer's release from army service when he returns to the front for a major offensive. In a fit of preemptive grief and magical thinking, she sets out for a hike in the Galilee, leaving no forwarding information for the "notifiers" who might darken her door with the worst possible news. Recently estranged from her husband, Ilan, she drags along an unlikely companion: their former best friend and her former lover Avram, once a brilliant artistic spirit. Avram served in the army alongside Ilan when they were young, but their lives were forever changed one weekend when the two jokingly had Ora draw lots to see which of them would get the few days' leave being offered by their commander—a chance act that sent Avram into Egypt and the Yom Kippur War, where he was brutally tortured as POW. In the aftermath, a virtual hermit, he refused to keep in touch with the family and has never met the boy. Now, as Ora and Avram sleep out in the hills, ford rivers, and cross valleys, avoiding all news from the front, she gives him the gift of Ofer, word by word; she supplies the whole story of her motherhood, a retelling that keeps Ofer very much alive, and opens Avram to human bonds undreamed of in his broken world. Their walk has a "war and peace" rhythm, as their conversation places the most hideous trials of war next to the joys and anguish of raising children. *To the End of the Land* explores the reality and surreality of daily life in Israel, the currents of ambivalence about war within one household, and the burdens that fall on each generation anew.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

“I began writing this book in May 2003, six months before the end of my oldest son, Yonatan’s, military service, and a year and a half before his younger brother, Uri, enlisted. . . . At the time, I had the feeling—or rather, a wish—that the book I was writing would protect him. On Aug. 12, 2006, in the final hours of the Second Lebanon War, Uri was killed in Southern Lebanon. . . . He was two weeks short of his twenty-first birthday and three months from the end of his Army service. He had planned on traveling around the world, then studying to be an actor. . . . By that time, most of this book was already written. What changed, above all, was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written.”

—David Grossman

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *To the End of the Land* [here](#)]



### *Private Life* by Jane Smiley

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Thousand Acres*: the story of one woman’s life, from post Civil-War Missouri to California in the midst of World War II.

When Margaret Mayfield marries Captain Andrew Jackson Jefferson Early at the age of twenty-seven, she narrowly avoids condemning herself to life as an old maid. Instead, knowing little about marriage and even less about her husband, she moves with Andrew to his naval base in California. Margaret stands by Andrew during tragedies both historical and personal, but as World War II approaches and the secrets of her husband’s scientific and academic past begin to surface, she is forced to reconsider the life she had so carefully constructed.

*Private Life* reveals the mysteries of intimacy and the anonymity that endures even in lives lived side by side.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR JANE SMILEY

**Q:** Some of the characters in *Private Life* are based in part on members of your own family—your main character Margaret Mayfield on your great aunt, Frances See and Andrew Early on her infamous scientist husband Thomas Jefferson Jackson See, a naval astronomer whose increasingly implausible theories made him an outcast in the scientific community. Did you ever meet them?

**A:** I didn't know my aunt at all, or her husband. She died when I was about two or three. She was my grandfather's much older sister—he was the youngest of ten children and she was number two or three. But my mother and her siblings were quite fond of her. As for her husband, they thought he was just an eccentric family uncle, and I don't think they realized how infamous he was in the physics establishment.

**Q:** How much of Margaret and Andrew draw from your aunt and uncle's actual experience and how much is purely fictional?

**A:** There were only a few family stories that revealed personal details about them—for example that she drove an elderly Franklin and had a good sense of humor. My mother had visited her in the nineteen-forties, I think, and she remembered that my aunt loved Oriental art (a trait she shares with my character Margaret Mayfield). But almost everything else about Margaret is made up. I could not seem to get her sense of humor into the novel—the material was just too dark for me. My uncle is more famous, and there were plenty of stories about him—almost all of them revealing him as appallingly egomaniacal and obsessed. There was an article about him in a physics journal which described him, essentially, as the kind of scientist you were not supposed to be.

The important thing to remember is that Margaret and Andrew take some of their inspiration from these real people, but the story about them—that is, the plot of the novel—is entirely made up by me. All of the other characters and all of the events of the novel are fictional. For me, the center of the idea was in wondering what it would be like to be married to someone like Andrew, but there was no family evidence to say how my great-aunt felt about it. Just as one example, I had to prune both Margaret's and Andrew's family trees—both had countless brothers and sisters that would overwhelm a 300-page novel. I also had

to concoct a fascinating mother for Andrew—but Mrs. Early is a theory on my part, not a portrait of anyone related to Thomas Jefferson Jackson See. While I was working on the novel, I thought of Henry James, and his fear of “developments”—that the inspiring material would proliferate and get out of control.

I was also interested in the idea of Missouri and St. Louis at the end of the 19th century, after the Civil War and around the time of the World’s Fair. St. Louis is a beautiful but strange city. Because of climate and epidemics of disease, in the mid-19th century, it was considered one of the worst places in the U.S. to live, but it was actually very cosmopolitan and self-satisfied, with beautiful architecture and thriving commerce. Right in the center of things for some decades.

Q: Did you have to do any research into their lives? Into the science and astronomy that Andrew studies? Or the historical events this novel spans?

A: I visited their house in Vallejo and also Mare Island, where the U.S. Navy had a base and a ship-building yard from about 1850 through the Second World War, twice, and I also read about See. His Moon Capture theory was included in a book about the moon that was published a few years ago. He is a presence on the Web, but he is still considered too “Newtonian” to be respected for anything. The scandals in Dr. Andrew Early’s life are somewhat similar to the scandals in Dr. See’s life. The key for me was in trying to see things through his point of view—to make a logic system that made sense to him even though it didn’t make sense to anyone else. I think that it is easy for a novelist to understand a conspiracy theorist—the story gets bigger and bigger, and it all just fits together in one’s mind. The person creating the story simply cannot understand why it doesn’t make sense to others. I think the most telling article for me was a piece See published in the *San Francisco Examiner* called “The Ether Exists and I Have Seen It.” The article was from about 1925, and included six pointed figures See had drawn. Even to an English major like me, this was absurd. However, I think that if he were still alive, he would insist that he had predicted the discovery of Dark Matter.

Q: This novel spans a large period of time (from 1883 to 1942, so from post-Civil War Missouri to mid-twentieth century California) and is filled with the rather epic, and public, transformative events of the last century. Why did you decide to title it *Private Life*?

A: The events are important, but what I was interested in was how a person lives through them and experiences them—how she interacts with them, and what they feel like and mean to her. The other important

thing is how they open her up. As I have gotten older, I think that public events have gone deeper for me and had more meaning. For Margaret, the dangers of various public events open her up in a way that she doesn't quite understand. I think one part of the movement of the book is how she comes to understand a pivotal public event she experienced in her early years.

**Q:** The great San Francisco earthquake features prominently in this novel. Why did you decide to include that event and make it loom so large in the lives of your characters?

**A:** I had to include it because it was there—Margaret and Andrew move to Mare Island, and they could not have lived there and not experienced the earthquake, so I was obliged to put it in. But that's a thing I love about writing novels—you start out with a fairly small idea and then life intrudes, and you have to accommodate it and make something of it. You don't exactly know what you are doing, so you do something, and it feels right or wrong. In this case, the loss of a main character in the earthquake felt right—and how that loss affects Margaret and Andrew together is a telling aspect of their relationship.

**Q:** You have described this novel as “A parable of American life.” What do you mean by that?

**A:** Andrew is a famous man and a genius. His town is proud to have produced him, and he is very conscious of his Americanness—he is the new man from the new world in the new century. And then he isn't. But he never loses that sense of entitlement. Margaret seems to me like many well-meaning Americans who are caught up in the schemes of our more grandiose and overbearing citizens. What are they doing? How should we feel about it? Should we stop them? Can we stop them? If we can't stop them, then what? When the people around you consider themselves visionaries, then you are in part responsible for their actions. That's what I mean by her marriage being a parable of American life.

**Q:** You open the novel with the following quote from Rose Wilder Lane, “In those days all stories ended with the wedding.” Why this quote?

**A:** Rose Wilder Lane wrote a book about growing up in 19th century Missouri called *Old Home Town*. She was an interesting woman in many ways—she was the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and a very busy, well traveled, and prolific newspaperwoman, beginning in about 1900. Some people think that she ghost-wrote the *Little House* series—if not, then she certainly helped write it. She later became a libertarian, and one of the originators of modern Libertarianism. If you look at her

picture, she has a plain but interesting face. I used her as the inspiration for the character of Dora and adopted her into the rich side of my St. Louis family, and set her up in a house by Forest Park, and sent her to Europe. I am very fond of Dora, and I think she represents a certain type of liberated woman of her day.

The essential question of the book, I think, is “what does marriage mean?” In those days, the choices were pretty stark, and so there are several different marriages in the novel. Margaret’s sisters are desirable—Beatrice because she has a claim to a large property and Elizabeth because she is young and charming and has good connections. Dora and Margaret are less desirable, and so the one has a subtly arranged marriage, and the other takes advantage of Progressivism to not get married at all. But the previous generation suffers, too—Dora’s mother is held in contempt by her husband and Margaret’s mother is widowed early and suffers considerable hardship both married and as a widow. So the real theme of the novel is marriage—who do you marry, how is the marriage to be lived through, what does it feel like to, more or less, place a bet and then live with the consequences?

Actually, most women’s stories BEGIN with the wedding, but that’s not the story most novels that Margaret might have been reading addressed. Even now, the novels that continue to be most beloved, like *Pride and Prejudice*, end with the wedding. For Margaret, reading does not offer her a way to think about her life as it changes or the problems that the 20th century presents. I don’t think these issues have disappeared, either. Marriage is more of a choice now, but the issue of how do you co-exist for a long time with someone who may be very idiosyncratic is still a big one.

Q: In *Private Life* you capture how men’s lives have a way of taking over women’s and then you give us Dora Bell, Margaret’s brother-in-law’s sister who is such a wonderful character and in many ways Margaret’s opposite. She is a writer who bucks convention, always speaks her mind, travels the world, doesn’t marry. Did you want to offer a flip side to Margaret’s married life?

A: Dora is a girl her mother despairs of, who is simply too unorthodox and plain to find a regular husband. What is she going to do? Well, one thing she is going to do is have a sense of style. Another thing she is going to do is see the world, and still another is not be told what to do. I think one thing that happens to everyone that is fascinating is that we see the lives of our friends diverging from and contrasting to our own lives, and we contemplate the contrasts, and what they say about our friends and about ourselves. The counterpart of Dora is Pete, a

somewhat suspicious character she brings into Margaret's life. He is Russian and has gained and lost several fortunes. I wanted Pete and Dora to represent another side of life as it was being lived a hundred years ago—dangerous, exciting, and dramatic.

Q: Can you tell us a little about the Kimuras and the role they come to play in Margaret's life?

A: My great Aunt loved moving from Missouri to California, and one of the reasons was that she came to love Japanese and Chinese art. I share her fascination with those paintings and prints. To me they are much more mysterious and grand than European art—not in size, but in concept. For Margaret, her interest in Japanese art is a way of possessing something, but because Andrew considers her his possession, it backfires as the war approaches. There was a small neighborhood in Vallejo known as Japantown, and the Japanese presence in San Francisco and in California as a whole has always been very important culturally, as well as politically charged. I tried to imagine a set of characters that would be realistically alluring for someone like Margaret, who would serve as a contrast to her life, but also have their own story. What actually happens between Margaret, Pete, Andrew, and the Kimuras is entirely made up, since I knew nothing about my aunt's love for Japanese and Chinese art other than that it existed.

Q: Andrew has all sorts of paranoid theories but he has a particular obsession with Albert Einstein who he believes is a fraud and also believes has come to California to spy on him (and on America). Why is he so fixated on Einstein?

A: I think if someone feels himself to be a great genius, then he is ready to joust with the one whom he considers his most dangerous rival. No one in Andrew's life considers Andrew and Einstein to be on a par—except, of course, for Andrew. He becomes fixated on Einstein because he simply cannot accept Einstein's ideas and can't figure out how to stop them. He sees himself as a Lone Ranger type, preserving the truth from the encroachments of idiocy. There are so many novels and non-fiction works about geniuses who were right in the end. But what if the genius is not right in the end? There are more of those and Andrew is in that camp for certain.

Q: Margaret has a hazy memory of being taken, as a child age five, by her brother to a public hanging. The hanging, which she claims not to recall in any detail, is mentioned in passing several times during this novel and then comes to feature prominently at the novel's end. What about this

formative event in her life made you want to return to it as a kind of bookend to her story?

A: I think the hanging stands for all the traumas of Margaret's not very unusual Missouri childhood that she had to endure without really processing. She has no way to process it, really, except to sort of avoid trouble. And it's not only the hanging itself, which is traumatic, but a moment during the hanging that only happened by chance that is in some sense the most traumatic. But she is expected to deal with it and go on—everyone else does, don't they?

Q: Having grown up in Missouri, like Margaret, and eventually settling in Northern California, do you feel a particular affinity for the places in this novel? How has this particular geography shaped your own life?

A: Missouri is a strange and beautiful state, and has produced some interesting writers—Twain, of course, T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Kate Chopin, Evan S. Connell. Tennessee Williams grew up there. There are lots of us. Missouri is where the East and the West and the South bang together, and co-exist in a beautiful landscape. Missouri is always a little behind the times and a little ahead of the times—your sense of being cosmopolitan comes from history.

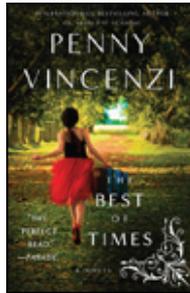
I love California. It is far far away and right in the center of things all at once. California is in some ways incomprehensible, but I love having the opportunity to think about it. At one point, Margaret reads *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. In that account, California is utterly mysterious and remote, and twenty years later, it had been entered and settled. I still feel that sense of the wild and the known when I look out my windows.

Q: Even with all their flaws do you feel a certain affection for Margaret and Andrew?

A: I am fond of Margaret, and I sympathize with her from beginning to end—I think she is a tragic figure. She is generous and kind and well-intentioned, and as her friends say, a good person. She's also intelligent. She reads newspapers and books and tries to do the right thing. But she is never equipped by the standard wisdom of her day (given to her by relatives and friends) to understand either her husband or herself. I think this is true, in fact, of us, too. It is part of the human condition to be always trying to put two and two together when in fact the numbers, unbeknownst to you, are three and four, not two and two, and just when you've come up with the answer, you realize that it's wrong. Can a normal woman be a tragic figure in literature, and not merely a "poor

thing”? I would like to think so. But the one I really, and somewhat surprisingly came around to understanding better was Andrew. He is appalling in his way, but, while I don’t agree with him, and would run the other direction if he came into the room, I see his point of view. How can he not engage in his passion? How can he not attempt, over and over, to take lemons and make lemonade? His mind is always working, but his ego is always working, too. That’s the sad thing.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Private Life* [here](#)]



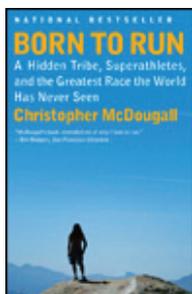
***The Best of Times* by Penny Vincenzi**

Everything can change in the blink of an eye . . .

On an ordinary London afternoon, a truck swerves across five lanes of traffic and creates a tangle of chaos and confusion. As loved ones wait to hear news and the hospital prepares to receive the injured, a dozen lives hang in the balance. A doctor is torn between helping the injured and hiding his young mistress; a bridegroom hopes to get to the church on time; a widow waiting to reunite with a lost love ponders whether she’ll ever see him again; and the mysterious hitchhiker, the only person who knows what really happened, is nowhere to be found.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Best of Times* [here](#)]

## New and Favorite Nonfiction



### ***Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall**

“A tale so mind-blowing as to be the stuff of legend.”

—The Denver Post

An epic adventure that began with one simple question: Why does my foot hurt?

Isolated by Mexico’s deadly Copper Canyons, the blissful Tarahumara Indians have honed the ability to run hundreds of miles without rest or injury. In a riveting narrative, award-winning journalist and often-injured runner Christopher McDougall sets out to discover their secrets. In the process, he takes his readers from science labs at Harvard to the sun-baked valleys and freezing peaks across North America, where ever-growing numbers of ultra-runners are pushing their bodies to the limit, and, finally, to a climactic race in the Copper Canyons that pits America’s best ultra-runners against the tribe. McDougall’s incredible story will not only engage your mind but inspire your body when you realize that you, indeed all of us, were born to run.

### **Q&A WITH AUTHOR CHRISTOPHER MCDUGALL**

**Q:** *Born to Run* explores the life and running habits of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico’s Copper Canyon, arguably the greatest distance runners in the world. What are some of the secrets you learned from them?

**A:** The key secret hit me like a thunderbolt. It was so simple, yet such a jolt. It was this: everything I’d been taught about running was wrong. We

treat running in the modern world the same way we treat childbirth—it's going to hurt, and requires special exercises and equipment, and the best you can hope for is to get it over with quickly with minimal damage.

Then I meet the Tarahumara, and they're having a blast. They remember what it's like to love running, and it lets them blaze through the canyons like dolphins rocketing through waves. For them, running isn't work. It isn't a punishment for eating. It's fine art, like it was for our ancestors. Way before we were scratching pictures on caves or beating rhythms on hollow trees, we were perfecting the art of combining our breath and mind and muscles into fluid self-propulsion over wild terrain. And when our ancestors finally did make their first cave paintings, what were the first designs? A downward slash, lightning bolts through the bottom and middle—behold, the Running Man.

The Tarahumara have a saying: "Children run before they can walk." Watch any four-year-old—they do everything at full speed, and it's all about fun. That's the most important thing I picked up from my time in the Copper Canyons, the understanding that running can be fast and fun and spontaneous, and when it is, you feel like you can go forever. But all of that begins with your feet. Strange as it sounds, the Tarahumara taught me to change my relationship with the ground. Instead of hammering down on my heels, the way I'd been taught all my life, I learned to run lightly and gently on the balls of my feet. The day I mastered it was the last day I was ever injured.

**Q:** You trained for your first ultramarathon—a race organized by the mysterious gringo expat Caballo Blanco between the Tarahumara and some of America's top ultrarunners—while researching and writing this book. What was your training like?

**A:** It really started as kind of a dare. Just by chance, I'd met an adventure-sports coach from Jackson Hole, Wyoming named Eric Orton. Eric's specialty is tearing endurance sports down to their basic components and looking for transferable skills. He studies rock climbing to find shoulder techniques for kayakers, and applies Nordic skiing's smooth propulsion to mountain biking. What he's looking for are basic engineering principles, because he's convinced that the next big leap forward in fitness won't come from strength or technology, but plain, simple durability. With some 70% of all runners getting hurt every year, the athlete who can stay healthy and avoid injury will leave the competition behind.

So naturally, Eric idolized the Tarahumara. Any tribe that has 90-year-old men running across mountaintops obviously has a few training tips up its sleeve. But since Eric had never actually met the

Tarahumara, he had to deduce their methods by pure reasoning. His starting point was uncertainty; he assumed that the Tarahumara step into the unknown every time they leave their caves, because they never know how fast they'll have to sprint after a rabbit or how tricky the climbing will be if they're caught in a storm. They never even know how long a race will be until they step up to the starting line—the distance is only determined in a last-minute bout of negotiating and could stretch anywhere from 50 miles to 200-plus.

Eric figured shock and awe was the best way for me to build durability and mimic Tarahumara-style running. He'd throw something new at me every day—hopping drills, lunges, mile intervals—and lots and lots of hills. There was no such thing, really, as long, slow distance—he'd have me mix lots of hill repeats and short bursts of speed into every mega-long run.

I didn't think I could do it without breaking down, and I told Eric that from the start. I basically defied him to turn me into a runner. And by the end of nine months, I was cranking out four hour runs without a problem.

**Q:** You're a six foot four inches tall, 200-plus pound guy—not anyone's typical vision of a distance runner, yet you've completed ultra marathons and are training for more. Is there a body type for running, as many of us assume, or are all humans built to run?

**A:** Yeah, I'm a big'un. But isn't it sad that's even a reasonable question? I bought into that bull for a loooong time. Why wouldn't I? I was constantly being told by people who should know better that "some bodies aren't designed for running." One of the best sports medicine physicians in the country told me exactly that—that the reason I was constantly getting hurt is because I was too big to handle the impact shock from my feet hitting the ground. Just recently, I interviewed a nationally-known sports podiatrist who said, "You know, we didn't ALL evolve to run away from saber-toothed tigers." Meaning, what? That anyone who isn't sleek as a Kenyan marathoner should be extinct? It's such illogical blather—all kinds of body types exist today, so obviously they DID evolve to move quickly on their feet. It's really awful that so many doctors are reinforcing this learned helplessness, this idea that you have to be some kind of elite being to handle such a basic, universal movement.

**Q:** If humans are born to run, as you argue, what's your advice for a runner who is looking to make the leap from shorter road races to marathons, or marathons to ultramarathons? Is running really for everyone?

A: I think ultrarunning is America's hope for the future. Honestly. The ultrarunners have got a hold of some powerful wisdom. You can see it at the starting line of any ultra race. I showed up at the Leadville Trail 100 expecting to see a bunch of hollow-eyed Skeletors, and instead it was, "Whoah! Get a load of the hotties!" Ultra runners tend to be amazingly healthy, youthful and—believe it or not—good looking. I couldn't figure out why, until one runner explained that throughout history, the four basic ingredients for optimal health have been clean air, good food, fresh water and low stress. And that, to a T, describes the daily life of an ultrarunner. They're out in the woods for hours at a time, breathing pine-scented breezes, eating small bursts of digestible food, downing water by the gallons, and feeling their stress melt away with the miles. But here's the real key to that kingdom: you have to relax and enjoy the run. No one cares how fast you run 50 miles, so ultrarunners don't really stress about times. They're out to enjoy the run and finish strong, not shave a few inconsequential seconds off a personal best. And that's the best way to transition up to big mileage races: as coach Eric told me, "If it feels like work, you're working too hard."

Q: You write that distance running is the great equalizer of age and gender. Can you explain?

A: Okay, I'll answer that question with a question: Starting at age nineteen, runners get faster every year until they hit their peak at twenty-seven. After twenty-seven, they start to decline. So if it takes you eight year to reach your peak, how many years does it take for you to regress back to the same speed you were running at nineteen?

Go ahead, guess all you want. No one I've asked has ever come close. It's in the book, so I won't give it away, but I guarantee when you hear the answer, you'll say, "No way. THAT old?" Now, factor in this: ultra races are the only sport in the world in which women can go toe-to-toe with men and hand them their heads. Ann Trason and Krissy Moehl often beat every man in the field in some ultraraces, while Emily Baer recently finished in the Top 10 at the Hardrock 100 while stopping to breastfeed her baby at the water stations.

So how's that possible? According to a new body of research, it's because humans are the greatest distance runners on earth. We may not be fast, but we're born with such remarkable natural endurance that humans are fully capable of outrunning horses, cheetahs and antelopes. That's because we once hunted in packs and on foot; all of us, men and women alike, young and old together.

**Q:** In *Born to Run*, you ask the question: If humans are born to run, why do so many of us hate it?

**A:** Because our brains are crafty. They're schemers. The brain's job is to figure out the most fuel efficient way to run the machines, so it's always looking for ways to rest and store up energy. For about two million years, that was a great strategy—our brains convinced us to only run when we absolutely had to, which meant we'd always have fuel on hand in an emergency. But now that we've created a lifestyle that almost never forces us to rely on leg-power, that lingering fuel efficient function of our brains could be the downfall of our species. We're literally lazing ourselves to death.

**Q:** One of the fascinating parts of *Born to Run* is your report on how the ultrarunners eat—salad for breakfast, wraps with hummus mid-run, or pizza and beer the night before a run. As a runner with a lot of miles behind him, what are your thoughts on nutrition for running?

**A:** Live every day like you're on the lam. If you've got to be ready to pick up and haul butt at a moment's notice, you're not going to be loading up on gut-busting meals. I thought I'd have to go on some kind of prison-camp diet to get ready for an ultra, but the best advice I got came from coach Eric, who told me to just worry about the running and the eating would take care of itself. And he was right, sort of. I instinctively began eating smaller, more digestible meals as my miles increased, but then I went behind his back and consulted with the great Dr. Ruth Heidrich, an Ironman triathlete who lives on a vegan diet. She's the one who gave me the idea of having salad for breakfast, and it's a fantastic tip. The truth is, many of the greatest endurance athletes of all time lived on fruits and vegetables. You can get away with garbage for a while, but you pay for it in the long haul. In the book, I describe how Jenn Shelton and Billy "Bonehead" Barnett like to chow pizza and Mountain Dew in the middle of 100-mile races, but Jenn is also a vegetarian who most days lives on veggie burgers and grapes.

**Q:** As you report in *Born to Run*, Dr. Dan Lieberman is a scientist at Harvard who is currently studying the effects of barefoot running. What exactly is barefoot running and the theories behind it?

**A:** The logic almost smacks you in the face. We've accepted this notion that running requires specialized, protective footwear, but Dr. Lieberman points out the absurdity of that idea. For nearly 2 million years, we got along just fine with bare feet. So why, all of a sudden, do we need foam under our feet? And it's not because of asphalt—hard surfaces have

been around forever. The Tarahumara still run mega-miles on stony canyon trails. Dr. Lieberman is convinced that running shoes aren't just useless, but dangerous—he believes they cause many of the injuries they're supposed to be preventing.

**Q:** You take a pretty strong stand against the traditional running shoe companies in *Born to Run*, and are currently running “barefoot” in Vibram FiveFingers. Can you tell me a little more about what the shoe companies are doing to our bodies?

**A:** Here's a story I don't tell in the book. While I was writing it, I was mortified to suddenly come down with a case of plantar fasciitis, a nagging heel pain that's the vampire bite of running injuries. Once you get it, you never get rid of it. I knew the problem couldn't be my running style, because I was sure I'd already perfected Tarahumara-style technique. I saw a series of top podiatrists, therapists and sports-medicine doctors and nothing helped. This went on for more than a year. Then I visited a barefoot-style running coach who cured me in three minutes. True story. Three minutes. He videotaped me running, showed me what I was doing wrong, and the pain vanished. It wasn't an inflammation, as every doctor had told me. It was an imbalance, caused by running shoes. I'd tried to split the difference between barefoot and shod by wearing a neutral running shoe, but even that amount of cushioning had caused me to lose my feel for the ground. I'd regressed back to my sloppy old style. The second I lost the shoes, the plantar fasciitis vanished.

That's my argument against shoes. I'd love to hear the argument in favor of them. Do you know there is not a single study that shows that running shoes do anything to prevent injuries? Not one. They've been around for 40 years, and as far as anyone can tell, they do nothing except look cool and lighten your wallet.

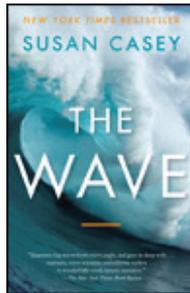
**Q:** Logistically, how did you organize your research and experiences while writing *Born to Run*?

**A:** Trial and error, heavy on the error. I wrote nearly half the book before realizing I hadn't even gotten to the Tarahumara yet. I shredded that draft and started over. This time, I was halfway in before my agent pointed out that I was writing about the wrong race, in the wrong country, in the wrong century. I'd gotten totally absorbed in the history of Leadville, Colorado, home to one of the wildest ultraraces on earth, not to mention a tradition that exists today of miners running marathons over mountain passes alongside packmules. Back to the shredder, back to the beginning. The problem with writing about running is also the delight—dig into the history a little, and you'll find a fantastic amount

of lost lore and incredible characters. Choosing and organizing was a bear. In the end, I managed to navigate by three key elements I wanted to get across: the joy of Tarahumara running; the evidence that we were all born to not only run, but love it; and the unreal drama that explodes when you turn a pack of ultrarunners loose on virgin trail.

**Q:** In this difficult financial time, we're experiencing yet another surge in the popularity of running. Can you explain this?

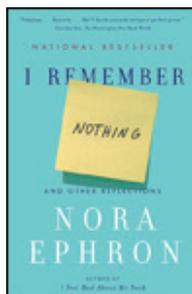
**A:** When things look worst, we run the most. Three times, America has seen distance-running skyrocket and it's always in the midst of a national crisis. The first boom came during the Great Depression; the next was in the '70s, when we were struggling to recover from a recession, race riots, assassinations, a criminal President and an awful war. And the third boom? One year after the Sept. 11 attacks, trailrunning suddenly became the fastest-growing outdoor sport in the country. I think there's a trigger in the human psyche that activates our first and greatest survival skill whenever we see the shadow of approaching raptors.



### ***The Wave* by Susan Casey**

For legendary surfer Laird Hamilton, hundred foot waves represent the ultimate challenge. As Susan Casey travels the globe, hunting these monsters of the ocean with Hamilton's crew, she witnesses first-hand the life or death stakes, the glory, and the mystery of impossibly mammoth waves. Yet for the scientists who study them, these waves represent something truly scary brewing in the planet's waters. With inexorable verve, *The Wave* observes human beings confronting nature at its most ferocious.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Wave* [here](#)]

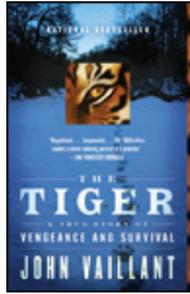


### ***I Remember Nothing* by Nora Ephron**

Nora Ephron returns with her first book since *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, taking a cool, hard, hilarious look at the past, the present, and the future, bemoaning the vicissitudes of modern life, and recalling with her signature clarity and wisdom everything she hasn't (yet) forgotten.

Ephron writes about falling hard for a way of life in “Journalism: A Love Story” and about breaking up even harder with the men in her life in “The D Word.” In her essay “Twenty-five Things People Have a Shocking Capacity to Be Surprised by Over and Over Again,” she reminds us of facts like “you can never know the truth of anyone’s marriage, including your own” and “Cary Grant was Jewish.” And almost a decade after she wrote and directed *You’ve Got Mail*, she reveals the alarming evolution of her relationship with her e-mail inbox, in “The Six Stages of E-Mail.” All the while, Ephron gives a candid, edgy voice to everything women who have reached a certain age have been thinking . . . but rarely acknowledging.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *I Remember Nothing* [here](#)]

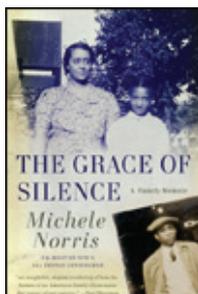


### ***The Tiger* by John Vaillant**

A gripping story of man pitted against nature's most fearsome and efficient predator.

Outside a remote village in Russia's Far East a man-eating tiger is on the prowl. The tiger isn't just killing people, it's murdering them, almost as if it has a vendetta. A team of trackers is dispatched to hunt down the tiger before it strikes again. They know the creature is cunning, injured, and starving, making it even more dangerous. As John Vaillant re-creates these extraordinary events, he gives us an unforgettable and masterful work that combines a portrait of a stark and mysterious region of the world and its people, with the natural history of nature's most deadly predator.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Tiger* [here](#)]



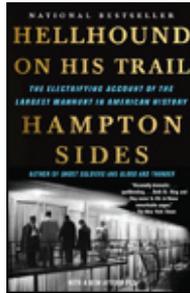
### ***The Grace of Silence* by Michele Norris**

In the wake of talk of a “postracial” America upon Barack Obama’s ascension as president of the United States, Michele Norris, cohost of National Public Radio’s flagship program *All Things Considered*, set out to write, through original reporting, a book about “the hidden conversation” on race that is unfolding nationwide. She would, she thought, base her book on the frank disclosures of others on the subject, but she was soon disabused of her presumption when forced to confront the fact that “the conversation” in her own family had not been forthright.

Norris unearthed painful family secrets that compelled her to question her own self-understanding: from her father’s shooting by a Birmingham police officer weeks after his discharge from the navy at the conclusion of World War II to her maternal grandmother’s peddling pancake mix as an itinerant Aunt Jemima to white farm women in the Midwest. In what became a profoundly personal and bracing journey into her family’s past, Norris traveled from her childhood home in Minneapolis to her ancestral roots in the Deep South to explore the reasons for the “things left unsaid” by her father and mother when she was growing up, the better to come to terms with her own identity. Along the way she discovered how her character was forged by both revelation and silence.

*The Grace of Silence* is informed by rigorous research and scores of interviews with ordinary folk, with wise observations about evolving attitudes, at once encouraging and disturbing, toward race in America today.

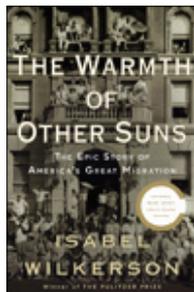
[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Grace of Silence* [here](#)]



### ***Hellhound on His Trail* by Hampton Sides**

On April 4, 1968, James Earl Ray shot Martin Luther King at the Lorraine Motel. The nation was shocked, enraged, and saddened. As chaos erupted across the country and mourners gathered at King's funeral, investigators launched a sixty-five day search for King's assassin that would lead them across two continents. With a blistering narrative that draws on a wealth of unpublished documents, Hampton Sides, bestselling author of *Ghost Soldiers*, delivers a non-fiction thriller in the tradition of William Manchester's *The Death of a President* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. With *Hellhound on His Trail*, Sides shines a light on the largest manhunt in American history and brings it to life.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Hellhound on His Trail* [here](#)]



### ***The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson**

In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern

and western cities, in search of a better life. From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America. She interviewed more than a thousand people, and gained access to new data and official records, to write this definitive account of how these American journeys unfolded, altering our country.

Wilkerson tells this story through the lives of three unique individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, who in 1937 left sharecropping and prejudice in Mississippi for Chicago, where she achieved quiet blue-collar success and, in old age, voted for Barack Obama when he ran for an Illinois Senate seat; sharp and quick-tempered George Starling, who in 1945 fled Florida for Harlem, where he endangered his job fighting for civil rights, saw his family fall, and finally found peace in God; and Robert Foster, who left Louisiana in 1953 to pursue a medical career, the personal physician to Ray Charles as part of a glitteringly successful career, which allowed him to purchase a grand home where he often threw exuberant parties.

Wilkerson captures their exhausting cross-country trips by car and train and their new lives in colonies that grew into ghettos, as well as how they changed these cities with southern food, faith, and culture and improved them with discipline, drive, and hard work. *The Warmth of Other Suns* is a superb account of an “unrecognized immigration” within our own land.

## Q&A WITH AUTHOR ISABEL WILKERSON

Q: What is the meaning and origin of the title, *The Warmth of Other Suns*?

A: I was reading the footnotes of the Richard Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*, one day, and discovered a particularly moving passage on page 496, a passage which is a story unto itself.

When Wright wrote his 1945 autobiography, the Book of the Month Club insisted that he cut the second half (about the North) and change the title from *American Hunger* to *Black Boy*. He wanted the book published so he conceded to their request. But that left the book without the ending it needed so he hastily came up with an alternative passage. Because he was forced to write quickly and succinctly, the passage summarized in a way he had not achieved in the text itself the longing and loss of anyone who has ever left the only place they ever knew for what they hoped would be a better life on alien soil.

As soon as I saw it, I knew I wanted to excavate it. I felt it was poetry, beautifully rendered but invisible, buried as it was in the footnotes. When it came time to submit the manuscript, I pulled out the most moving phrase for the title, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. It was a working title at

best because my editor and I were still not convinced it was the one. At a meeting of executives at Random House, however, the question came up again and someone remembered this same passage and settled on the very phrase, I had originally identified. My mother, who migrated from Georgia to Washington, D.C. during the Great Migration, and knew what it meant to leave your own sun for another, believed from the moment she heard it that it should be the title.

The question of the title set me on a course of trying to understand just what the sun means to us, what it gives us and what it takes to defy the gravitational pull of your own solar system and take off for another far away. Richard Wright consciously chose to call the cold North the place of warmer suns. It showed how determined he and millions of others like him were to leave a place that had shunned them for a place they hoped would sustain them, the need of any human being and the gift of any sun.

**Q:** How widespread is the Great Migration? How many people experienced it? Can most African-American families in cities like Chicago, LA and New York trace their origins back to similar places in the South?

**A:** Some six million black Americans left the South for all points North and West during the decades of the Great Migration, which lasted, statistically, from World War I to the 1970's. At the start of the twentieth century, ninety percent of all black Americans were living in the South. By the end of the Great Migration, some forty-seven percent were living *outside* the South.

The children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of these migrants make up the majority of African-Americans in the North and West. Most African-American families in cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Oakland and elsewhere can trace their origins back to the South.

Vast as it was, however, the Great Migration is not purely about the numbers but about the lasting effects of so many people uprooting themselves and transporting their culture from an isolated region of the country to the big cities of the North and West. They brought the music and folkways of the South with them and created a hybrid that has become woven into American life as a whole.

**Q:** How did you find Ida Mae, George, and Robert, and why did you choose to focus on them instead of others you interviewed? Tell us a bit about your research, and why these three people stood out to you.

**A:** It took eighteen months of interviews with more than 1,200 people to find the three protagonists in the book. I interviewed seniors at

quilting clubs in Brooklyn, senior centers in Chicago, on bus trips to Las Vegas with seniors from Los Angeles. I scouted for people at union meetings of retired postal workers and bus drivers and at AARP meetings on the South Side of Chicago. I went to Sunday mass in Los Angeles and Baptist churches in Brooklyn. I went to funerals, libraries, senior dances and the southern state clubs in Los Angeles and Chicago. Essentially, I went everywhere I could think of that would attract large numbers of black seniors who might have migrated from the South.

I went to some of these places enough times that people began to recognize me. I kept running into this one woman at Creole events and at Sunday mass in Los Angeles. The woman had migrated from Monroe, Louisiana. She heard the kinds of questions I was asking, and she came up to me and said, "I know the perfect person for you." She gave me Robert's name and number.

At a meeting of retired transit workers in Chicago, a woman signed an information sheet I had passed around to gather names of people who had come from Mississippi and Arkansas. The woman wasn't signing for herself. She was signing for her mother who had never been a transit worker but had come up from Mississippi. Her mother was Ida Mae. George, the third protagonist, introduced himself after Sunday service at a Baptist Church in Harlem and immediately began telling his story.

The goal of the search was to find one person for each of the three streams of the Migration (East Coast, Midwest and West Coast) through whom to tell the larger story of the entire phenomenon. They each represent not only different migration streams but different backgrounds, different motivations for leaving, different outcomes and different ways of adjusting to the New World. Together, their lives tell a more complete story of the Migration than has ever been told before.

**Q:** In the process of telling their stories, what did you discover about why some people thrived in their new circumstances, while others did not?

**A:** As the stories unfold, many lessons emerge. One is insight into longevity and what it takes to survive the harshest of lives and come out whole. Another is a redefinition of success and accomplishment. A third is the varying ways migrants adjust to their circumstances, how they learn to make peace with the past, or not and how that adjustment affects their happiness. Each of the three protagonists adjusted to their circumstances in completely different ways. One turned his back on the South and created a new identity for himself, going as far as to change his name. He never fully found peace. Another moved between worlds,

never fully reconciling one with the other. A third, Ida Mae, took the best of both worlds, never changed from who she was, and was the happiest and lived the longest of all.

**Q:** Could you give us a few examples of well-known people whose lives would have been different, and perhaps would not have been possible, had it not been for the courage of those who left the South?

**A:** Many famous Americans were products of the Great Migration, and there's no way to know what their lives might have been like or if their achievements would have been possible had it not been for the courage of the parents or grandparents who left the South. Some might never have existed because their parents met in the North. Among the children of the Migration are: Toni Morrison, Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, Magic Johnson, Bill Cosby, Nat King Cole, Michael Jackson, Prince, Tupac Shakur, Whitney Houston, Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, Oprah Winfrey, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the broadcaster Bryant Gumbel, the astronaut Mae Jemison, the producer Sean "Puffy" Combs, the leading neurosurgeon Benjamin Carson, the artist Romare Bearden, the playwright August Wilson and many others.

Each of them grew up to become among the best in their fields, changed them, really. They were among the first generation of blacks in this country to grow up free and unfettered because of the actions of parents or grandparents who knew it was too late for themselves to truly benefit from the advantages of the north but knew it was not too late for their children.

One such parent, an ambitious sharecropper wife in Alabama, convinced her husband that their family should migrate to Cleveland in the 1920's. The father was so worried that, as they were packing, he had to steady himself on the shoulders of his nine-year-old son. The boy felt the father's hands shaking and only then realized the gravity of their situation. The boy's first day at school in the North, when the teacher asked his name, he told her it was J.C., which was short for James Cleveland. The teacher couldn't understand his southern accent and just called him Jesse instead. From that day forward he was known, not by his birth name, but by the one he had mistakenly acquired—Jesse Owens. He went on to win four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Hitler's Berlin becoming the first American in the history of track and field to do so in a single Olympics and disproving the Aryan notions of his Nazi hosts.

**Q:** Do most of the children who are products of The Great Migration know about their parents', or grandparents' experience leaving the

South? If not, why do you think there is a kind of reluctance to talk about the “old country”?

A: Most children of the Great Migration know the basic facts of where their parents came from. But one reason the larger story of the Migration hasn’t been fully told is because many families haven’t talked about it much.

When the parents or grandparents left, many left for good. They didn’t look back—it was just too painful. Some had experienced or witnessed violence. Many endured persecution. All had suffered the indignities of caste. Some felt shame or embarrassment over being southern and rural now that they were living in big, sophisticated cities.

Like immigrants who change their names or choose not to teach their children the language of the old country, some migrants created new northern identities for themselves and didn’t pass along their stories to their children and grandchildren or take their children back to their homeland.

Others, however, surrounded themselves with people from back home and never left the South in spirit. So, children of the Migration grew up with differing connections to the South depending on their parents’ connection to it and their parents’ ability to make peace with their southern past, or not.

Q: How did this influx of southerners to Northern and Western cities affect the urban landscape of America, and American culture as we know it?

A: It would be hard to imagine cultural life in America had the Great Migration not occurred. American music as we know it was one of the gifts of the Great Migration. Modern music grew out of the music the migrants brought with them, shaped by their exposure to life in the northern cities and, ultimately, the music their children and grandchildren created.

The three most influential musicians in jazz—Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane—were all children of the Great Migration, their music and their collaboration informed by their southern roots and migration experiences. Davis was born in Alton, Illinois, after his family migrated from Arkansas. Monk migrated with his family from North Carolina when he was five. Coltrane left High Point, North Carolina, for Philadelphia in 1943, when he was sixteen. Coltrane had never owned a saxophone before his mother bought him a used alto sax once he got north.

Motown simply would not have existed without the Great Migration. The parents of Berry Gordy, the company’s founder, migrated

from Georgia to Detroit during the migration. Gordy was born and raised in Detroit, where he later recruited other children of the Great Migration as talent for his new recording company, Motown records.

**Q:** What was the cost to the South of this enormous migration? In what ways was this domestic migration similar to the immigration of foreigners to the U.S.? In what ways was it different?

**A:** The South lost vast numbers of its most ambitious workers to the Great Migration. In some cases, entire plantations were left empty of workers. Southern authorities responded swiftly to stem the outflow of its cheap labor. The South reenacted anti-enticement laws from the time of slavery to keep blacks from leaving. The authorities imposed fines of up to \$25,000 to anyone caught recruiting black workers north or helping them to get out. Police arrested blacks from railroad platforms, shut down ticket counters to blacks trying to get out, and when those things failed, simply wouldn't let trains stop at stations where large contingents of blacks were waiting to board.

The accomplishments of well-known migrants, such as B.B. King, Richard Wright, Louis Armstrong, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, along with the exponentially larger corps of influential children of the Migration show the cost the South paid as a result of the Great Migration. To this day, the South lags the North in many economic indices, such as wage scales, life expectancy, property values, cost of living and cultural influence in this country. These are complicated economic issues that result from many internal and external forces. But the loss of so much intellectual and creative talent and the fact that those who left comprise the bulk of the success stories of African-American life in this country can only hint at the unknowable price paid by the South as a result of the loss of so much talent and manpower.

This domestic migration was similar to most any other immigration experience in that the people had to make the hard choice to leave the only place they had ever known for a place they had never seen, just as any other immigrant must do. The interior sense of loss and longing, of being torn between worlds, never quite fitting in, making sacrifices for the next generation are all universal to the human experience of migration.

The Great Migration differs and is, in fact, tragic because these people were already citizens. In a just world, they shouldn't have had to uproot themselves to experience the full rights of citizenship. Birth in this country alone should have assured that for them. The realities of race and caste in the South forced them to leave to claim their citizenship. But once in the North and West, they ran into resistance and

hostility and had to work even harder to prove themselves, often being pitted against immigrants from other countries, who, in fact, had more in common with them, as landless serfs themselves, than many of them truly realized.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Warmth of Other Suns* [here](#)]

## Thriller Corner



### *The Snowman* by Jo Nesbo

Internationally acclaimed crime writer Jo Nesbo's antihero police investigator, Harry Hole, is back: in a bone-chilling thriller that will take Hole to the brink of insanity.

Oslo in November. The first snow of the season has fallen. A boy named Jonas wakes in the night to find his mother gone. Out his window, in the cold moonlight, he sees the snowman that inexplicably appeared in the yard earlier in the day. Around its neck is his mother's pink scarf.

Hole suspects a link between a menacing letter he's received and the disappearance of Jonas's mother—and of perhaps a dozen other women, all of whom went missing on the day of a first snowfall. As his investigation deepens, something else emerges: he is becoming a pawn in an increasingly terrifying game whose rules are devised—and constantly revised—by the killer.

## JO NESBO ON THE IDEA FOR *THE SNOWMAN*

“The idea for the book came while brainstorming the title for a film some people I knew were making. My suggestion was *The Snowman*, but it was rejected. Fair enough as there wasn’t a snowman in the film. But this started me thinking about a snowman standing in the garden of a private house and a mother coming home and praising her son and husband for the wonderful snowman they had made. The son and the husband look at her in surprise and tell her they haven’t made any snowman . . .”

—Jo Nesbo

[Read an excerpt from *The Snowman* [here](#)]

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Nesbo, musician, economist and author of the best-selling series featuring Detective Harry Hole, has won many prizes for his novels, including the Glass Key, the Riverton Prize and the Norwegian Bookclub prize for best ever Norwegian crime novel. His first novel to be published in English was *The Devil’s Star* and the second, *The Redbreast*, was shortlisted for the CWA Duncan Lawrie International Dagger. He lives in Oslo.

## A POTTED AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY JO NESBO (excerpted from [JoNesbo.com](#))

I come from a family of readers and storytellers. My mother was a librarian and my father used to sit in the living room reading every afternoon. And he told stories. Long stories we had heard before, but in such a way that we wanted to hear them again. When I was seven I pulled *Lord of the Flies* off the bookshelf and asked my father to read it to me. Not so much because I had good taste, but because on the cover there was a picture of a pig’s bloodstained head impaled on a pole. My father read it and I thought I could have made the story more exciting myself. I had already begun to impress friends my age, and some older children, with my gruesome ghost stories.

But my greatest passion was soccer. I made my first appearance for Molde, a Premier League team in Norway, at the age of seventeen and I was sure I would go on to play professionally in England for the Tottenham Hotspurs. So I started skipping school and I think that, if you asked

the teachers at my high school, my very existence came to be shrouded in mystery. My grades tanked, but so what? I was going to be a pro athlete . . .

Then I blew out the cruciate ligaments in my knees. Probably no loss for Tottenham, but my world came crashing down. School was over and when I got my grades I realized they just weren't good enough to do the things I had wanted to do. A number of career paths were no longer open to me. So I took a deep breath and signed up to do military service in the far north of Norway. For the three years I was there, I shut myself in every night and every weekend and bulldozed my way through the high school syllabus. And read quite a bit of Hamsun and Hemingway, too. Until then I had always trusted my talent and taken it for granted, and followed the path of least resistance, but now I discovered a new side of myself: self-discipline. When I finally held my high school diploma in my hands that spring, with top-notch grades, I experienced a deep, heartfelt satisfaction I had never felt before, and perhaps not since either. Now I could get into pretty much any school or any program I wanted. The problem was that I didn't know what I wanted to study. So I enrolled at the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration in Bergen, a school with a long, illustrious tradition and a prestigious name. I figured it had to be good.

One day in the cafeteria this guy came up to me and said someone told him I played guitar. That wasn't exactly true: I knew three chords. But I didn't contradict him since he was trying to get a band together. And so I became the guitarist for *De Tusen Hjem* which played the kind of industrial noise rock you get when you're really bad at playing, have plenty of electricity, big amps and practice in a basement. We sounded so awful our vocalists quit one after another. Eventually somebody pushed me up to the microphone. And since I thought the lyrics for the cover songs we were playing stank and that we might as well be playing actual melodies instead of just angry strings of chords, I started writing songs. *De Tusen Hjem* never achieved world domination, but we did release a single, which was played frequently on local radio, at least once on national radio, and sold 25 copies.

When I finished university, I had an economics degree and the glimmering of a notion that I might like to write pop songs. I moved to Oslo and started working in finance, got bored and wrote songs. One night a young jazz bass player I knew listened to some of my songs. The next day we started a band, *Di Derre*. A year later we were touring. Two years later we had a recording contract. Our second album became the best selling album in Norway in years. Our concerts sold out in hours. And suddenly we were pop stars.

However, I had seen what happened to other musicians who turned their hobby into a job, and I knew it would demand too many compromises

as far as my music, and my life, were concerned. So I hung onto my day job as a stockbroker while we continued playing gigs. I also studied to become a financial analyst. When I got headhunted by DnB Markets, the largest brokerage firm in Norway, to build up their options division, I had to commit to two years with them. In other words, I had more than enough to do. I performed at night and worked during the day. After one year I was so burned out that I hated everything and everyone I worked with, including myself. I told my band and my boss that I needed six months off. Then I hopped on a plane to Australia, to get as far away from Norway as I could. But I took my laptop with me.

The reason I brought my laptop was that a woman from a publishing company had proposed I write a book describing life on the road with the band. That engendered a whole new way of thinking and I realized I was ready to take the leap and write a novel. It was just a question of getting started. But it had to be a story about what Aksel Sandemose claimed were the only two things worth writing about: murder and love.

(For the rest of Jo Nesbo's potted autobiography, check out [JoNesbo.com](http://JoNesbo.com))



### ***The Troubled Man* by Henning Mankell**

The much-anticipated return of Henning Mankell's brilliant, brooding detective, Kurt Wallander.

On a winter day in 2008, Håkan von Enke, a retired high-ranking naval officer, vanishes during his daily walk in a forest near Stockholm. The investigation into his disappearance falls under the jurisdiction of the Stockholm police. It has nothing to do with Wallander—officially. But von Enke is his daughter's future father-in-law. And so, with his inimitable disregard for normal procedure, Wallander is soon interfering in matters that are not his responsibility, making promises he won't keep, telling lies when

it suits him—and getting results. But the results hint at elaborate Cold War espionage activities that seem inextricably confounding, even to Wallander, who, in any case, is troubled in more personal ways as well. Negligent of his health, he's become convinced that, having turned sixty, he is on the threshold of senility. Desperate to live up to the hope that a new granddaughter represents, he is continually haunted by his past. And looking toward the future with profound uncertainty, he will have no choice but to come face-to-face with his most intractable adversary: himself.

[Read an excerpt from *The Troubled Man* [here](#)]

## HENNING MANKELL ON CREATING KURT WALLANDER

I wanted to write about how difficult it is to be a good police officer. Police officers often tell me they know things are changing quicker than they can deal with, that society's outracing them. But Wallander's never cynical. He never says, "I don't care about that." Naturally that damages him, but he takes responsibility, and that's what I love. He feels tired because the work is too much. But if he didn't do the work, he'd feel worse, he would leave a big black hole in himself . . . I think a lot of people are struggling to manage now—feeling they are running for a bus they'll never catch. In that sense, he's a very common man. In Sweden, people write to him as if he's alive, and can help them.

(*The Guardian*, January 12, 2002)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Internationally acclaimed author Henning Mankell has written nine Kurt Wallander mysteries. The books have been published in thirty-three countries and consistently top the bestseller lists in Europe, receiving major literary prizes (including the UK's Golden Dagger for *Sidetracked*) and generating numerous international film and television adaptations. He has also published many other novels for children, teens, and adults. In addition, he is one of Sweden's most popular dramatists.

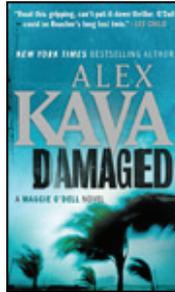
Born in 1948, Mankell grew up in the Swedish village Svege. He now divides his time between Sweden and Maputo, Mozambique, where he works as a director at Teatro Avenida. He has spent many years in Africa, where a number of his novels are set.



***Fragile* by Lisa Unger**

Maggie and Jones live with their teenage son, Rick, in The Hollows, a small town outside of New York City. The cozy intimacy of the town is broken when Rick's girlfriend, Charlene, mysteriously disappears. The investigation has Jones, the lead detective on the case, acting strangely and Rick, already a brooding teenager, becomes even more withdrawn. Maggie finds herself drawn in both as a trained psychologist and as a mother, walking a tightrope that threatens the stability of her family. Determined to uncover the truth, Maggie pursues her own leads into Charlene's disappearance and exposes a long-buried town secret—one that could destroy everything she holds dear.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Fragile* [here](#)]



### ***Damaged by Alex Kava***

While the Coast Guard is preparing Pensacola Beach for a severe hurricane, they find an oversized fishing cooler filled with body parts tightly wrapped in plastic floating offshore. Special Agent Maggie O'Dell is sent to investigate, despite the fact that she is putting herself in the projected path of the hurricane. She's able to trace the torso in the cooler back to a man who mysteriously disappeared weeks earlier after a hurricane hit the Atlantic coast of Florida. How did his body end up six hundred miles away in the Gulf of Mexico? Using her signature keen instincts and fearless investigating, O'Dell discovers Florida's seedy underworld and the shady characters who inhabit it.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Damaged* [here](#)]

With the many suggestions offered here, you may already have a list compiled of future reading group choices. Continue to read on for more suggestions on starting a reading group and picking the books.

## Out of Ideas?

If you're having trouble making your selection, there are plenty of helpful places to turn after *The Reading Group Insider*. For personal recommendations, you can ask your local librarian or bookseller for his or her suggestions. Read one of the many publications in print or online that cover new releases and review books, like the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Shelf Awareness*, and many others. Subscribe to a bookstore's newsletter or to a publication geared specifically to reading groups, like the newsletter from [ReadingGroupCenter.com](http://ReadingGroupCenter.com).

Online communities are also full of suggestions and reviews, like at [Goodreads.com](http://Goodreads.com), Facebook and Twitter. The "FridayReads" community on Twitter and Facebook is a great example of people all across the world sharing their current reading selections on a weekly basis. There are also a seemingly infinite number of book lovers with their own blogs and tumblr accounts, where they share their reviews of books regularly. Here are some great book recommendation websites you can peruse online:

[BookBrowse.com](http://BookBrowse.com)  
[ReadingGroupGuides.com](http://ReadingGroupGuides.com)  
[BookClubCookBook.com](http://BookClubCookBook.com)  
[ReadingGroupChoices.com](http://ReadingGroupChoices.com)  
[BookPage.com](http://BookPage.com)  
[GoOnGirl.org](http://GoOnGirl.org)  
[BookClubGirl.com](http://BookClubGirl.com)  
[BeautyandtheBook.com](http://BeautyandtheBook.com)  
[BookGroupExpo.com](http://BookGroupExpo.com)

Lastly, some of the best recommendations come from just asking around. What books have your friends, family or co-workers read recently that they enjoyed?

## Timing

There are no rules and groups can do what works best for them. Be flexible based on the needs and availability of your group. Titles should be chosen with enough time to allow all members to read the book and come up with questions for discussion. Some groups plan out their titles a year in advance; others simply plan a few weeks or months ahead; and some at each meeting. If it's your turn to lead the group, consider distributing some supplemental material and discussion questions before the meeting, to allow members time to formulate their thoughts and opinions.

# Setting up the Meeting

You've chosen your reading selection, so now what? Here are a few simple ideas that will help your discussion run more smoothly:

## **Choose a discussion leader**

While a leader is not necessary, many groups find that having one provides focus to the discussion and helps to make transitions from one member's comment to another's. Often the person who suggested the book becomes the discussion leader, but your group can also rotate leaders, appoint a permanent group leader, or invite guest speakers—local teachers, librarians, booksellers, etc.—to lead discussions. There are even professional book group leaders for hire. Margot B. of Greenwich, Connecticut offers another perspective too, sharing a tip from her book club: “We have found that not having a leader not only keeps everyone in the group invested and involved, but also keeps everyone on equal footing and equally responsible for keeping things lively and moving.”

## **Set a meeting time**

Most groups meet every 4 to 6 weeks, and discussion tends to last 2 to 3 hours. You may find it helpful to designate a certain amount of time for socializing—either at the beginning or the end of the meeting—so that your discussion of the book can proceed uninterrupted. Of course, finding a day and time that works for everyone may be difficult—consider setting regular meeting days and times to allow members to plan ahead. But, do be flexible and don't try to accommodate everyone's schedule every time. Some groups are content as long as the majority of the members attend. Other groups have a meeting regardless of how many members can make it. Keep in mind that you can make your own rules and even discuss a book from a previous meeting.

## **Pick a place**

A popular meeting place for many reading groups is a member's house. Often members take turns hosting the meeting to alleviate the pressure on one person. But there are plenty of other options as well. Your local bookstore or library may have a space that you can reserve free of charge for your meeting, as may your places of worship, community centers, or work places. If you are meeting with people you do not know, it may be best to choose one of these informal, public spaces—or a coffee shop, restaurant or bar—for your meetings until you feel more comfortable.

## **Come prepared**

Ask each member to bring at least one question to the meeting to help generate discussion. Suggest that members mark up their books as they read—making notes of favorite passages, key scenes, and questions that arise. Background information can be equally helpful to have at hand during your discussion—author biographies, interviews, reviews, historical background, cultural information, etc. It is usually the group leader's responsibility to provide these materials, as well as a list of potential discussion questions. Or delegate so that everyone is involved and shares the fun and responsibility of discovering information. Reading group guides, like those found at the end of the Reading Group Insider and at [ReadingGroupCenter.com](http://ReadingGroupCenter.com), often include everything you need to get started. Your local library and the internet are also good resources for this kind of information.

## **Set the tone**

The atmosphere of your group meeting is entirely up to you. The more creative you are, the livelier the discussion will be, and the more enjoyment you'll get out of the experience. Does your group prefer to meet for a social hour before discussion starts? Would you like to meet more casually over dinner? Can you bring some of the cultural aspects of the book to your meeting? Consider the music, food, and customs described in the book and try to re-create some of that for your group. If you are reading a historical novel set in England, try meeting for high tea. If your book is full of references to a certain artist or composer, bring a sample of that person's work and share it with your group. Experiment with new kinds of foods, sample a new restaurant, or take a field trip to a place that has some relation to

the book you just read. Better yet, ask your local bookstore for a schedule of authors who will be in town in the coming months and plan to read one of their new books before their arrival. Then attend the event with your group. Most importantly, relax and enjoy the discussion.

# Tips for Meetings

The most important part of a reading group is, of course, the books. But no matter how good the book, it can be hard sometimes to get a great discussion started. Whether you're a first-time group leader looking for general tips on what to talk about or an established group looking for ways to liven up your discussions, we've compiled a set of tried and true suggestions to help.

## Do Research

Look for materials that will supplement your reading. For example, try looking for interviews in newspapers, magazines, and websites to see if what the author has to say about his or her work provides additional insights into the book. Does any of it seem autobiographical? Are there any cultural or historical aspects that you can research to supplement the discussion? If you find them, bring both positive and negative book reviews to the meeting so that you and the other members can discuss whether you agree or disagree with reviewers' assessments of the book.

## **Attend a Reading or Chat with the Author**

One of the easiest—and most rewarding—things you can do with your group is to read a book and then attend a reading by the author at your local bookstore. Many stores will even arrange for the author to meet personally with groups registered with the store who have read the book in advance of the appearance. Ask your local bookstore for a schedule of authors who will be in town in the coming months, or sign up for e-mail announcements from your local bookstore and favorite publishers to be aware of upcoming titles, readings and author tour details. Following your favorite authors on Facebook and Twitter will also keep you aware of upcoming events. Margot B. of Greenwich, Connecticut says of her reading group: “Whenever our schedules allow, we go to author meetings and book signings. Great ideas for discussion come right from the author.” If your group is unable to attend a reading, many authors also conduct chats via phone or Skype with reading groups, and websites like Goodreads.com offer author chats online as well. You’ll be amazed at how enriching the experience of connecting with an author can be!

# Take a Trip

At first, this may seem like an impossible idea, but in fact, many reading groups enjoy combining their reading with travel, from meals at ethnic restaurants to day trips to local museums or historical sites to extended vacations to foreign countries! It's up to you to set your limits and to be creative. Are you reading a book that is set in India? Have lunch together at an Indian restaurant. Are you reading a book that's set in the Renaissance? You could take a trip to your local art museum to view its collection of Renaissance art, or you could organize a trip to Florence to get a more multifaceted, firsthand experience.

# Read Authors In-Depth

Consider focusing on a specific author's books over a series of meetings, tracing his or her progression as an author, the changing themes in the various works, and the effects of biographical events on the writing. You may want to include a biography as part of your list to provide your group with a better understanding of the author's life and times. Sandi G. of Pottstown, Pennsylvania says: "We have a small group of five. About once a year we choose an author and each member reads one of her books. We've done Virginia Woolf, Anne Tyler, Jane Smiley, and plan on doing Willa Cather. These are fun and informative." Another book club member, Dorothy I. of Port Townsend, Washington, takes a chronological approach: "If we choose one author, we usually assign different titles and discuss the writing in order of the copyright dates."

One author whose work is perfectly suited to reading in depth is William Faulkner. So why not start by reading something of his? Since his works are numerous, as you'll see when you read on, we have handpicked three ideal starters.

## Author Spotlight: William Faulkner

"Read, read, read. Read everything—trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write. If it is good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out the window."

—*William Faulkner*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Faulkner was born in New Albany, Mississippi, on September 25, 1897. His family was rooted in local history: his great-grandfather, a Confederate colonel and state politician, was assassinated by a former partner in 1889, and his grandfather was a wealthy lawyer who owned a railroad. When Faulkner was five his parents moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where he received a desultory education in local schools, dropping out of high school in 1915. Rejected for pilot training in the U.S. Army,

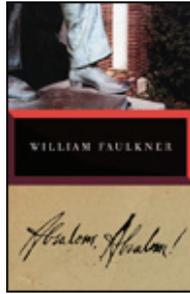
he passed himself off as British and joined the Canadian Royal Air Force in 1918, but the war ended before he saw any service. After the war, he took some classes at the University of Mississippi and worked for a time at the university post office. Mostly, however, he educated himself by reading promiscuously.

Faulkner had begun writing poems when he was a schoolboy, and in 1924 he published a poetry collection, *The Marble Faun*, at his own expense. His literary aspirations were fueled by his close friendship with Sherwood Anderson, whom he met during a stay in New Orleans. Faulkner's first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, was published in 1926, followed a year later by *Mosquitoes*, a literary satire. His next book, *Flags in the Dust*, was heavily cut and rearranged at the publisher's insistence and appeared finally as *Sartoris* in 1929. In the meantime he had completed *The Sound and the Fury*, and when it appeared at the end of 1929 he had finished *Sanctuary* and was ready to begin writing *As I Lay Dying*. That same year he married Estelle Oldham, whom he had courted a decade earlier.

Although Faulkner gained literary acclaim from these and subsequent novels—*Light in August* (1932), *Pylon* (1935), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Unvanquished* (1938), *The Wild Palms* (1939), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942)—and continued to publish stories regularly in magazines, he was unable to support himself solely by writing fiction. He worked as a screenwriter for MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Brothers, forming a close relationship with director Howard Hawks, with whom he worked on “To Have and Have Not,” “The Big Sleep,” and “Land of the Pharaohs,” among other films. In 1944 all but one of Faulkner's novels were out of print, and his personal life was at low ebb due in part to his chronic heavy drinking. During the war he had been discovered by Sartre and Camus and others in the French literary world. In the postwar period his reputation rebounded, as Malcolm Cowley's anthology *The Portable Faulkner* brought him fresh attention in America, and the immense esteem in which he was held in Europe consolidated his worldwide stature.

Faulkner wrote seventeen books set in the mythical Yoknapatawpha County, home of the Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury*. “No land in all fiction lives more vividly in its physical presence than this county of Faulkner's imagination,” Robert Penn Warren wrote in an essay on Cowley's anthology. “The descendants of the old families, the descendants of bushwhackers and carpetbaggers, the swamp rats, the Negro cooks and farm hands, the bootleggers and gangsters, tenant farmers, college boys, county-seat lawyers, country storekeepers, peddlers—all are here in their fullness of life and their complicated interrelations.” In 1950, Faulkner traveled to Sweden to accept the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature. In later books—*Intruder in the Dust* (1948), *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), *A Fable* (1954),

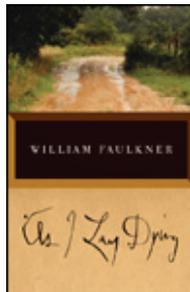
*The Town* (1957), *The Mansion* (1959), and *The Reivers* (1962)—he continued to explore what he had called “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself,” but did so in the context of Yoknapatawpha’s increasing connection with the modern world. He died of a heart attack on July 6, 1962.



### ***Absalom, Absalom!***

*Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner’s epic tale of Thomas Sutpen, an enigmatic stranger who comes to Jefferson, Mississippi, in the early 1830s to wrest his mansion out of the muddy bottoms of the north Mississippi wilderness. He was a man, Faulkner said, “who wanted sons and the sons destroyed him.”

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Absalom, Absalom!* [here](#)]



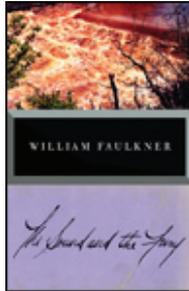
### ***As I Lay Dying***

“I set out deliberately to write a tour-de-force. Before I ever put pen to paper and set down the first word I knew what the last word would be and almost where the last period would fall.”

—William Faulkner on *As I Lay Dying*

*As I Lay Dying* is Faulkner’s harrowing account of the Bundren family’s odyssey across the Mississippi countryside to bury Addie, their wife and mother. Narrated in turn by each of the family members—including Addie herself—as well as others the novel ranges in mood, from dark comedy to the deepest pathos.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *As I Lay Dying* [here](#)]



### ***The Sound and the Fury***

“I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire. . . . I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all of your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”

—from *The Sound and the Fury*

*The Sound and the Fury* is the tragedy of the Compson family, featuring some of the most memorable characters in literature: beautiful, rebellious Caddy; the manchild Benjy; haunted, neurotic Quentin; Jason, the brutal cynic; and Dilsey, their black servant. Their lives fragmented and harrowed by history and legacy, the character’s voices and actions mesh to create what is arguably Faulkner’s masterpiece and one of the greatest novels of the twentieth century.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Sound and the Fury* [here](#)]

[Get a Reading Group Guide comparing William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *The Sound and the Fury* [here](#)]

## RECIPE BY THE BOOK

### William Faulkner Southern Specialties

Mississippi was not only William Faulkner's home state, but also the setting for many of his novels. To get your book club in a more southern state of mind, check out these recipes for Barbecue Deviled Eggs and Spicy Fried Chicken from *Down Home with the Neelys: A Southern Family Cookbook*.

#### **Barbecue Deviled Eggs**

MAKES 24 EGGS

- 1 dozen large eggs
- 3 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons barbecue sauce
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon prepared yellow mustard
- Generous pinch kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Dash or two hot sauce
- 2 scallions, very thinly sliced
- Paprika, for garnish

Bring a medium saucepan of water to a lively simmer. Using a slotted spoon, gently lower the eggs into the water and simmer for 9 minutes. Reduce the heat if the simmer becomes too lively (so the eggs don't crack). Drain the water from the saucepan, and run cold water over the eggs until they are cool enough to handle. Peel the eggs, and cut them in half. Carefully remove the yolks (they should be slightly creamy) and place them in a small bowl. Add the mayonnaise, barbecue sauce, mustard, salt, pepper, and hot sauce, and whisk until the mixture is smooth. Use a small spoon to scoop the yolk mixture back into the whites (if you want to get fancy, you can use a pastry bag to pipe the yolks back into their whites). Garnish the tops with thinly sliced scallions and a dash of paprika.

NOTE: Deviled eggs are one exception to the "fresh is best" rule. When you boil fresh eggs, the whites have a tendency to cling to the shell. This complicates a simple task, but there's an easy way around it: let your eggs sit in the fridge for a week before you put them in the pot to boil. This will make peeling a snap.

## Spicy Fried Chicken

SERVES 4 TO 6

Two 3-4-pound chickens, each cut into 8 pieces  
 3 tablespoons hot sauce  
 ¼ cup barbecue seasoning  
 1 ¼ teaspoons salt  
 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
 ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper  
 ¼ teaspoon white pepper  
 ½ teaspoon garlic powder  
 2 cups well-shaken buttermilk  
 4 cups all-purpose flour  
 Peanut oil, for frying

Place the chicken pieces in a large bowl. Pour the hot sauce over the chicken. In a small bowl, whisk together 2 tablespoons of the barbecue seasoning with the salt, black pepper, cayenne, white pepper, and garlic powder. Add the spice mixture to the chicken and massage all the ingredients into the pieces with your hands. Cover the chicken with plastic wrap and marinate for at least 1 hour, or for up to 1 day in the refrigerator (the longer the better, to allow the seasonings to permeate the chicken).

Pour the buttermilk over the chicken pieces and toss to coat.

Pour the flour into a large bowl.

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven or a large cast-iron skillet to 350 degrees F, or until a pinch of flour sizzles when it is dropped in the fat. As the oil heats, remove the chicken pieces from the buttermilk, allowing the excess buttermilk to drip off.

Transfer the chicken, several pieces at a time, to the bowl with the flour. Toss to coat. Remove the chicken pieces from the flour, shaking off any excess, and place the chicken, one piece at a time, into the Dutch oven. Fry the chicken in several batches. For the crispiest results, do not overcrowd the Dutch oven. One of the secrets to deep-frying is maintaining a constant cooking temperature (the oil in the oven or skillet should be somewhat lively, having a mellow sizzle but not a raging boil). Fry the chicken for 16 to 18 minutes, using tongs as necessary to turn the pieces. When the chicken bobs, it's done. That's right (another Neely secret): your chicken will float to the top of the Dutch oven when she's done!

Once you've conquered the classics of William Faulkner (and the tasty recipes that correspond with them), you can move on to reading another author in depth: Alexander McCall Smith!

## Author Spotlight: Alexander McCall Smith

“A life without stories would be no life at all. And stories bound us, did they not, one to another, the living to the dead, people to animals, people to the land?”

—Alexander McCall Smith, *In the Company of Cheerful Ladies*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander McCall Smith is the charming and much beloved author of more than 60 books, including fiction, specialist academic titles, short story collections, and a number of immensely popular children’s books. Referred to as our new P.G. Wodehouse, he is best known for his internationally acclaimed No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series, which rapidly rose to the top of the bestseller lists throughout the world. The fifth novel in the series, *The Full Cupboard of Life*, received the Saga Award for Wit. The series has now been translated into 45 languages and has sold over 20 million copies worldwide. The first episode of a film adaptation, directed by Anthony Minghella, and produced by the Weinstein Company, premiered on HBO in March 2009.

McCall Smith’s Isabel Dalhousie series begins with *The Sunday Philosophy Club* which immediately leapt onto national bestseller lists at its debut in 2004, as did sequels, *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate*, *The Right Attitude to Rain*, *The Careful Use of Compliments*, and *The Comfort of a Muddy Saturday*. McCall Smith’s serial novel, *44 Scotland Street*, was published in book form to great acclaim in 2005, followed by *Espresso Tales* and *Love Over Scotland*, and then by *The World According to Bertie* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Scones*. In late 2008, the serial novel, *Corduroy Mansions*, depicting the lives of the inhabitants of a large Pimlico house, began to be published and podcasted in 100 daily web episodes by the UK’s *Daily Telegraph* prior to its hardcover release in 2009. Alexander McCall Smith also published a solo novel, *La’s Orchestra Saves the World*, in December 2009.

In addition, McCall Smith’s delightful German professor series, *Portuguese Irregular Verbs*, *The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs*, and *At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances* were published in the US in January 2005. He is also the author of several children’s books, including the Akimbo series, about a boy in Africa, the Harriet Bean series, the Max & Maddy series and *The Perfect Hamburger and other Delicious Stories*. Pantheon has published Alexander McCall Smith’s collection of African folktales, *The Girl Who Married a Lion*. McCall Smith is also the author of *Dream Angus: The Celtic God of*

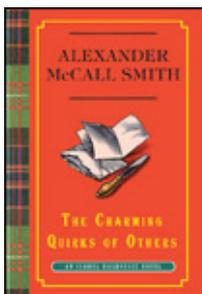
*Dreams*, a contemporary reworking of a beloved Celtic myth and *Heavenly Date and Other Flirtations*, a collection of short stories examining the mysteries of dating and courtship.

McCall Smith was born in what is now Zimbabwe and was educated there and in Scotland. He became a law professor in Scotland, and it was in this role that he first returned to Africa to work in Botswana, where he helped to set up a new law school at the University of Botswana. For many years he was Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh, and has been a visiting professor at a number of other universities elsewhere, including ones in Italy and the United States. He is now a Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh.

In addition to his university work, McCall Smith was for four years the vice-chairman of the Human Genetics Commission of the UK, the chairman of the British Medical Journal Ethics Committee, and a member of the International Bioethics Commission of UNESCO. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including The Crime Writers' Association's Dagger in the Library Award, the United Kingdom's Author of The Year Award in 2004 and Sweden's Martin Beck Award. In 2007 he was made a CBE for his services to literature in the Queen's New Year's Honor List. He holds honorary doctorates from 10 universities, most recently from Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

It is clear from Alexander McCall Smith's biography alone that his works are numerous, widespread and span many categories. Here are descriptions and reading group guides for the latest from each of the following series: the Isabel Dalhousie series, the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, and the Corduroy Mansions series.

First up is the Isabel Dalhousie series, which the *New York Times* calls "the literary equivalent of herbal tea and a cozy fire. . . . McCall Smith's Scotland [is] well worth future visits." Not only will you fall in love with Scotland, but you will also be charmed by the philosophies of Isabel Dalhousie, a woman who "simply found it intellectually exciting to be involved. . . . She wanted to know why people did the things they did. She was curious. And what, she wondered, was wrong with that."



### *The Charming Quirks of Others*

In this latest addition to the Isabel Dalhousie series, our inquisitive heroine comes to see that there are very few of us who are not flawed . . . herself included.

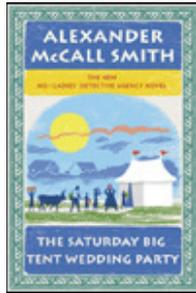
Isabel has been asked for her help in a rather tricky situation: A successor is being sought for the headmaster at a local boys' school. The board has three final candidates but has received an anonymous letter alleging that one of them has a very serious skeleton in the closet. Could Isabel discreetly look into it? And so she does. What she discovers about all the candidates is surprising, but what she discovers about herself and about Jamie, the father of her young son, turns out to be equally revealing.

Isabel's investigation will have her exploring issues of ambition, as well as of charity, forgiveness, and humility, as she moves nearer and nearer to some of the most hidden precincts of the heart.

Here is Isabel Dalhousie at her beguiling best: intelligent, insightful, and with a unique understanding of the quirks of human nature.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for  
*The Charming Quirks of Others* [here](#)]

Once you have become acquainted with Isabel Dalhousie, we recommend meeting the colorful cast of characters in Alexander McCall Smith's No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series. Mma Ramotswe, creator and proprietor of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency in Botswana, navigates the mysteries in her cases and in her life with charm, wisdom, and a healthy dose of humor.



### ***Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party***

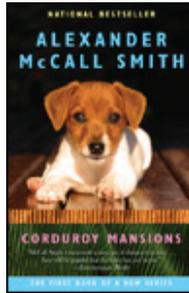
The latest installment in the beloved and best-selling No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series is a profoundly touching tale of the human heart.

At a remote cattle post south of Gaborone two cows have been killed, and Precious Ramotswe, Botswana's No. 1 Lady Detective, is asked to investigate by a rather frightened and furtive gentleman. It is an intriguing problem with plenty of suspects—including, surprisingly, her own client.

To complicate matters, Mma Ramotswe is haunted by a vision of her dear old white van, and Grace Makutsi witnesses it as well. Is it the ghost of her old friend, or has it risen from the junkyard? In the meantime, one of Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni's apprentices may have gotten a girl pregnant and, under pressure to marry her, has run away. Naturally, it is up to Precious to help sort things out. Add to the mix Violet Sephotho's newly launched run for the Botswana Parliament and a pair of perfect wedding shoes—will wedding bells finally ring for Phuti Radiphuti and Grace Makutsi?—and we have a delightful tale in the charming style of Alexander McCall Smith.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for  
*The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party* [here](#)]

Now that you've gotten a taste of the Isabel Dalhousie and No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, try out Alexander McCall Smith's newest series: Corduroy Mansions.



### *Corduroy Mansions*

A delightful new setting—London—a wonderful new cast of characters and one incredibly clever dog.

Corduroy Mansions is the affectionate nickname given to a genteel, crumbling mansion block in London’s vibrant Pimlico neighborhood and the home turf of a captivating collection of quirky and altogether McCall-Smithian characters. There’s the middle-aged wine merchant William, who’s trying to convince his reluctant twenty-four-year-old son, Eddie, to leave the nest; and Marcia, the boutique caterer who has her sights set on William. There’s also the (justifiably) much-loathed Member of Parliament Oedipus Snark; his mother, Berthea, who’s writing his biography and hating every minute of it; and his long-suffering girlfriend, Barbara, a literary agent who would like to be his wife (but, then, she’d like to be almost anyone’s wife). There’s the vitamin evangelist, the psychoanalyst, the art student with a puzzling boyfriend and Freddie de la Hay, the Pimlico terrier who insists on wearing a seat belt and is almost certainly the only avowed vegetarian canine in London.

Filled with the ins and outs of neighborliness in all its unexpected variations, *Corduroy Mansions* showcases the life, laughter and humanity that have become the hallmarks of Alexander McCall Smith’s work.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *Corduroy Mansions* [here](#)]

## AUTHOR ESSAY

### “The Rules of Tea” by Alexander McCall Smith

The making of tea must be taken very seriously—not perhaps as seriously as in an eastern tea ceremony, but it is still something not to be undertaken lightly. Here are some rules.

Rule number one: use good tea. This does not mean the ordinary stuff you buy in the supermarket: it means a good leaf tea or tea-bags made by a reputable tea maker. You can’t go wrong with any of the teas made by the Republic of Tea—but there will be others too.

Rule number two: use a tea pot, which should be heated with hot water before inserting the tea.

Rule number three: don’t use too much, or too little, and don’t let it stew in the pot for too long (that can make it taste very sharp).

Rule number four: appoint one person to pour the tea while the others wait. Don’t all try to pour at once. The pourer may be self-appointed: the correct form of words in such circumstances is to say: “I’ll be mother!” and to seize the teapot.

Rule number five: don’t make any strange gurgling noises while drinking tea. This distracts others and prevents them from enjoying their tea to the full.

Rule number six: Always be grateful that we have tea. Tea is a great gift.

Now that you have two ideas for an author focus for your group—William Faulkner and Alexander McCall Smith—read on for even more tips for meetings.

## Focus on a Theme

Choosing titles on a specific theme, such as love and war, or a subject, such as current events or history, is a great way to compare and contrast books with each other. Marf S. of Greenwood, South Carolina shares: “I am getting more interested in linking and comparing books that have a common theme. I’m one of the few in the group who prefers nonfiction, but if we do read fiction, I like to compare it to a nonfiction book on a related topic.” Another great themed discussion suggestion comes from Diana L. of Brighton, Massachusetts: “We try to discuss current events issues, politics, and other books that are relevant to the book being reviewed. This was very successful, for example, with *Snow Falling on Cedars*. We talked about discrimination then and now, and its impact on ourselves.”

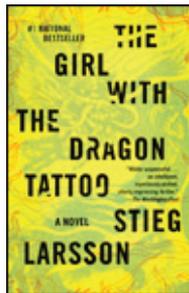
# Explore a Different Culture

One of the most rewarding aspects of reading is the opportunity it provides to expose you and your group to new cultures and civilizations. Think about your current selection. Can you bring some of the cultural aspects of the book to your meeting? Consider the music, food, and customs described in the book and try to re-create some of that for your group. If you are reading a novel set in Japan such as Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, consider including the tea ceremony in your meeting. Find a book with instructions for the ceremony—or a particularly descriptive passage in the novel—and give it a try. If your book is full of references to a certain artist or composer, bring a sample of that person's work and share it with your group. Or if you're reading fiction like *The Great Man* by Kate Christensen which has a philandering artist at its center, look at the works of Picasso and compare how the many women in his life impacted his art. Experiment with new kinds of foods, or sample a restaurant that specializes in the cuisine of your chosen culture. Judy R. of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says that exploring different cultures through books has given her reading group new perspectives and insight: "We try to select books that have multicultural points of view, and we have benefited greatly. . . . We've read authors like Edwidge Danticat, Julia Alvarez, Amy Tan, and Sandra Cisneros."

# Consider Movies and Theatrical Tie-ins

Reading a book and then going to see the movie is a popular idea for reading groups because it provides instant comparisons—and often, lively debate. Reading a play and then going to see the live performance is another great way of comparing the ways a story is treated in two artistic mediums. Check your local listings for events in your area—on-screen or onstage—that you can pair with a book your group can read.

Here are three recommendations of must-read books that have recently been turned into movies . . .



## ***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson**

An international publishing sensation, Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* combines murder mystery, family saga, love story, and financial intrigue into one satisfyingly complex and entertainingly atmospheric novel.

Harriet Vanger, a scion of one of Sweden's wealthiest families disappeared over forty years ago. All these years later, her aged uncle continues to seek the truth. He hires Mikael Blomkvist, a crusading journalist recently trapped by a libel conviction, to investigate. He is aided by the pierced and tattooed punk prodigy Lisbeth Salander. Together they tap into a vein of unfathomable iniquity and astonishing corruption.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* [here](#)]

## RECIPE BY THE BOOK

### Millennium Trilogy Cocktails

Here are a few Stieg Larsson-themed libations to keep the reading group party going. They tie in perfectly to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl who Played with Fire*, and *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, and they would be perfect to enjoy before screening the movie adaptation with your reading group. Enjoy!

#### Vodka Vanger

4 oz. orange juice; 1 oz. vodka; 1 oz. lemonade

First mix together the orange juice and vodka and shake. Then pour the lemonade in, and stir. Garnish with a lime twist. You may substitute any carbonated lime beverage for the lemonade. Strain and serve in a highball glass, unless you've used a carbonated beverage, in which case it ought to be served in a Collins glass.

#### The Bloody Berger

Clamato juice; 1 jigger of vodka; 1 splash of Worcestershire sauce;  
1 splash of Tabasco sauce;  $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp. horseradish; 1 lime slice;  
1 scallion

Put 4 or 5 ice cubes in a large old-fashioned glass and fill  $\frac{3}{4}$  full with Clamato juice. (Clamato may be mixed half-and-half with any other favorite tomato or veggie juice.) Add the vodka, Worcestershire, Tabasco, and Horseradish and stir thoroughly with a spoon or swizzle. Twist the lime slice over the glass edge and stick a scallion in as a stirrer and delicious finish to the drink.

#### The Wasp

1 oz. Smirnoff No. 21 Vodka; 1 oz. grapefruit juice; 1 tsp. salt

In a shaker, add Smirnoff No. 21 Vodka and grapefruit juice. Stir and serve over ice in salt-rimmed glass.

#### The Blomkvist

1 oz. Jim Beam bourbon whiskey; 6 oz. cream soda

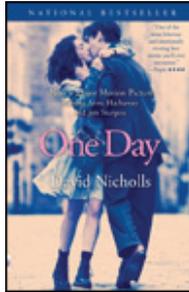
Pour the Jim Beam bourbon whiskey into a highball glass almost filled with ice cubes. Add the cream soda, stir and serve.

#### The Hornet's Nest

1 bottle vodka; 2 cups club soda; 2 qts. cranberry juice (or lingonberry juice!); 2 cups ginger ale

Chill ingredients before starting.

Add vodka and cranberry juice to a punch bowl with a block of ice. Stir well, then add ginger ale and carbonated water. Serve in cups.



### ***One Day* by David Nicholls**

Emma Morley and Dexter Mayhew, casual acquaintances during their university years, spend graduation night together. It's July 15, 1988, and their futures are up in the air. Dexter, the handsome, confident son of a well-to-do family, knows only that he wants “to be successful. . . . to live life to the extreme, but without any mess or complications.” Emma is determined to stay true to her left-leaning passions and ideals though she has little idea of how she'll do it. They part the next day with vague promises to keep in touch as Dexter sets off to travel the world and Emma returns to her working-class family in Leeds to figure out what she'll do next. Over the next twenty years, they'll think about each other, sometimes to meet and reignite a relationship that neither can give up nor explain.

*One Day* revisits Dexter and Emma every year on the anniversary of their first night together. Each July 15th becomes a snapshot of a particular time and place, offering an irresistible and often hilarious chronicle of the lovers they acquire, the careers they pursue, the culture that influences them, and the opportunities they embrace or squander. As their stories unfold, David Nicholls explores the interplay of character and fate that shape our lives.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *One Day* [here](#)]

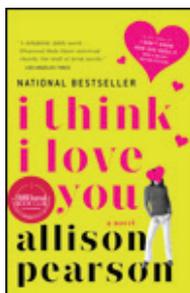


### ***I Don't Know How She Does It* by Allison Pearson**

Hedge-fund manager, wife, and mother of two, Kate Reddy manages to juggle nine currencies in five time zones and keep in step with the Teletubbies. But when she finds herself awake at 1:37 a.m. in a panic over the need to produce a *homemade* pie for her daughter's school, she has to admit her life has become unrecognizable. Once described as “the national anthem for working mothers,” *I Don't Know How She Does It* dramatizes the dilemma of every working mom with panache, wisdom, and uproarious wit.

[Get the Reading Group Guide for *I Don't Know How She Does It* [here](#)]

Once you have read the book and seen the movie of *I Don't Know How She Does It*, check out Allison's Pearson's newest novel, *I Think I Love You*:



The new novel from the best-selling author of *I Don't Know How She Does It* takes us on an unforgettable journey into first love, and reminds us of how the ardor of our youth can ignite our adult lives.

Wales, 1974. Petra and Sharon, two thirteen-year-old girls, are obsessed with David Cassidy. His fan magazine is their Bible, and some days his

letters are the only things that keep them going as they struggle through the humiliating daily rituals of adolescence—confronting their bewildering new bodies, fighting with mothers who don't understand them at all. Together they tackle the Ultimate David Cassidy Quiz, a contest whose winners will be flown to America to meet Cassidy in person.

London, 1998. Petra is pushing forty, on the brink of divorce, and fighting with her own thirteen-year-old daughter when she discovers a dusty letter in her mother's closet declaring her the winner of the contest she and Sharon had labored over with such hope and determination. More than twenty years later, twenty pounds heavier, bruised by grief and the disappointments of middle age, Petra reunites with Sharon for an all-expenses-paid trip to Las Vegas to meet their teen idol at last, and finds her life utterly transformed.

Full of observations about the awakenings of both youth and middle age, Allison Pearson's long-awaited new novel will speak to mothers, daughters, and women of all ages.

[Read an excerpt of *I Think I Love You* [here](#)]

Now that you have a few ideas for book and movie tie-ins, read on for more reading group tips for meetings.

# Plan Questions and Discussion Topics Ahead of Time

Your reading group's discussion will be enhanced if you have questions or discussion topics prepared ahead of time. Read on to browse our generic discussion resource questions and use them as a launching point to turn any book into a reading group selection!

Some reading group members across North America have some wonderful ideas of their own to share. Nancy H. of Champaign, Illinois, suggests: "Have members make note of questions and observations on an index card while they are reading the book." Debi A. of Brighton, Michigan says of her reading group: "We do not focus on whether we like a book or not. It's about whether you got something out of it. We go around the room when we start and have everyone answer a question to get the conversation started. It guarantees that everyone gets an opportunity to speak." From Indianapolis, Indiana, Mary F. advises: "I think it is a good idea to stress the importance of marking passages and taking notes as you read the book—hopefully with the discussion questions already in mind. It is easy to forget things about the book if you haven't taken notes. Also, it's fun to hear other people's favorite passages—how they responded to them and why." Jane C. of Collingwood, Ontario suggests: "Handing out the questions prior to reading the book and the discussion is most helpful in promoting more thoughtful, insightful discussion."

# **Track Your Reading List**

Keep a book log to record which books your group has read for reference, and if you like to, record the reactions of different members in your group to each selection.

## **Seasonal Reading**

Whether your group is reading love stories around Valentine's Day, romance novels on the beach during the summer, or mysteries and thrillers around Halloween, try drawing inspiration from the season when it comes to choosing a book with your group. Erin B. of Rock Island, Illinois shares a holiday tradition from her reading group: "At Christmas we draw names and buy a book for that person that we think they would enjoy but not buy for themselves. Then we report on our books in January. It's fun, and we find great books we might not have found!"

## **Author Chats**

Have you ever wished you could get an author's take on some of your unanswered questions? Author chats connect readers and writers and give your group the opportunity to talk to select authors so you can pose those questions yourself. For example, [ReadingGroupCenter.com](http://ReadingGroupCenter.com) always has a list of authors available for chats with reading groups, and these can be done over the telephone or Skype. If geography is working in your favor, some authors are willing to visit groups for a meeting.

# Cooking Tie-Ins

Connecting food and drink with your book club reading is a great way to spice up a meeting. Mary E. of Saunderstown, Rhode Island shares from her reading group: “We pick one book each year that can be associated with a type of food (*Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes, *A Year in Provence* by Peter Mayle) and have a dinner with that theme. Each member brings part of the dinner.” Food themes are obvious when there is food in the book but sometimes it is just the culture or setting that brings food to the table. Your group could even choose a cookbook as your read for the month and have everyone make one recipe from it for your meeting.

We shared these recipes earlier with their corresponding titles, and we have rounded them up here for your cooking and baking ease. Enjoy these fun and delicious recipes while pairing them up with some of our favorite reading group books!

## **Lemon Cake (and the Particular Joy of Baking It)**

Just try reading Aimee Bender’s delicious novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, without craving a big slice of, well, lemon cake. Satisfy your book club’s hunger with this recipe from *The Complete Robuchon*.

### **A Note from Joël Robuchon:**

This cake is excellent sliced and toasted. A homemade cake keeps for several days. Just wrap it in plastic wrap when it has cooled and keep it at room temperature. Cake should not be kept in the refrigerator, but you can freeze it. It will be good for several weeks.

Preparation and cooking time: 65 minutes

SERVES 6-8

½ cup milk, warmed in a small saucepan

The grated zest of 1 organic lemon

10 tbsp. butter, plus a little extra for greasing the pan

2½ cups flour, plus a little extra for flouring the greased pan

2 cups confectioners' sugar, plus 1 heaping tbsp. if you decide to make  
syrup

3 large eggs

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 tbsp. lemon juice (optional)

Special equipment: round cake pan, about 10 inches

1. Dice the butter and melt it in the microwave at low power.
2. Use a pastry brush to grease the bottom and sides of the cake pan with butter. Sprinkle the pan with flour, turn it all around to spread the flour evenly, and tap out any excess.
3. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
4. Sift the sugar into a bowl. Add the lemon zest. Mix the sugar and zest well with your fingers, then whisk in the eggs. When the eggs and sugar are thoroughly combined, whisk in the melted butter and warm milk. Add the flour and baking powder, whisking constantly throughout.
5. Pour the batter into the prepared cake pan and bake for 8 minutes. Lower the heat to 300°F and cook about 40 minutes more. The cake is finished when the blade of a knife inserted in its center comes out dry.
6. Remove the finished cake from the oven, unmold it onto a cooling rack, and let cool.
7. Just after cooking you can, if you like, use a pastry brush to coat the cake with syrup. Just boil 4 tablespoons water with 1 heaping tablespoon confectioners' sugar for a couple of minutes. Allow it to cool, then stir in 1 tablespoon lemon juice. Brush the syrup on the still-warm cake.

Excerpted from *The Complete Robuchon* by Joël Robuchon;  
Translated by Robin H. R. Bellinger.

## Millennium Trilogy Cocktails

Here are a few Stieg Larsson-themed libations to keep the reading group party going. They tie in perfectly to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl who Played with Fire*, and *The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*. Enjoy!

### Vodka Vanger

4 oz. orange juice; 1 oz. vodka; 1 oz. lemonade

First mix together the orange juice and vodka and shake. Then pour the lemonade in, and stir. Garnish with a lime twist. You may substitute any carbonated lime beverage for the lemonade. Strain and serve in a highball glass, unless you've used a carbonated beverage, in which case it ought to be served in a Collins glass.

### The Bloody Berger

Clamato juice; 1 jigger of vodka; 1 splash of Worcestershire sauce;  
1 splash of Tabasco sauce;  $\frac{1}{8}$  tsp. horseradish; 1 lime slice;  
1 scallion

Put 4 or 5 ice cubes in a large old-fashioned glass and fill  $\frac{3}{4}$  full with Clamato juice. (Clamato may be mixed half-and-half with any other favorite tomato or veggie juice.) Add the vodka, Worcestershire, Tabasco, and Horseradish and stir thoroughly with a spoon or swizzle. Twist the lime slice over the glass edge and stick a scallion in as a stirrer and delicious finish to the drink.

### The Wasp

1 oz. Smirnoff No. 21 Vodka; 1 oz. grapefruit juice; 1 tsp. salt

In a shaker, add Smirnoff No. 21 Vodka and grapefruit juice. Stir and serve over ice in salt-rimmed glass.

### The Blomkvist

1 oz. Jim Beam bourbon whiskey; 6 oz. cream soda

Pour the Jim Beam bourbon whiskey into a highball glass almost filled with ice cubes. Add the cream soda, stir and serve.

### The Hornet's Nest

1 bottle vodka; 2 cups club soda; 2 qts. cranberry juice (or lingonberry juice!); 2 cups ginger ale

Chill ingredients before starting.

Add vodka and cranberry juice to a punch bowl with a block of ice. Stir well, then add ginger ale and carbonated water. Serve in cups.

## Le Cirque des Rêves Caramel Popcorn Recipe

This caramel popcorn recipe, courtesy of allrecipes.com, is a tasty treat to pair with your reading of Erin Morgenstern's *Night Circus*.

Total prep and cook time: 1 Hour 30 Min

SERVES 20

1 cup butter

2 cups brown sugar

½ cup corn syrup

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

5 quarts popped popcorn

1. Preheat oven to 250 degrees F (95 degrees C). Place popcorn in a very large bowl.
2. Melt butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Stir in brown sugar, corn syrup, and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Then, boil without stirring for 4 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda and vanilla. Pour in a thin stream over popcorn.
3. Place in two large shallow baking dishes and bake in preheated oven, stirring every 15 minutes, for 1 hour. Remove from oven and let cool completely before breaking into pieces.

## William Faulkner Southern Specialties

Mississippi was not only William Faulkner's home state, but also the setting for many of his novels. To get your book club in a more southern state of mind, check out these recipes for Barbecue Deviled Eggs and Spicy Fried Chicken from *Down Home with the Neelys: A Southern Family Cookbook*.

### Barbecue Deviled Eggs

MAKES 24 EGGS

1 dozen large eggs

3 tablespoons mayonnaise

2 tablespoons barbecue sauce

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon prepared yellow mustard

Generous pinch kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Dash or two hot sauce  
 2 scallions, very thinly sliced  
 Paprika, for garnish

Bring a medium saucepan of water to a lively simmer. Using a slotted spoon, gently lower the eggs into the water and simmer for 9 minutes. Reduce the heat if the simmer becomes too lively (so the eggs don't crack). Drain the water from the saucepan, and run cold water over the eggs until they are cool enough to handle. Peel the eggs, and cut them in half. Carefully remove the yolks (they should be slightly creamy) and place them in a small bowl. Add the mayonnaise, barbecue sauce, mustard, salt, pepper, and hot sauce, and whisk until the mixture is smooth. Use a small spoon to scoop the yolk mixture back into the whites (if you want to get fancy, you can use a pastry bag to pipe the yolks back into their whites). Garnish the tops with thinly sliced scallions and a dash of paprika.

NOTE: Deviled eggs are one exception to the "fresh is best" rule. When you boil fresh eggs, the whites have a tendency to cling to the shell. This complicates a simple task, but there's an easy way around it: let your eggs sit in the fridge for a week before you put them in the pot to boil. This will make peeling a snap.

### **Spicy Fried Chicken**

SERVES 4 TO 6

Two 3-4-pound chickens, each cut into 8 pieces  
 3 tablespoons hot sauce  
 ¼ cup barbecue seasoning  
 1 ¼ teaspoons salt  
 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
 ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper  
 ¼ teaspoon white pepper  
 ½ teaspoon garlic powder  
 2 cups well-shaken buttermilk  
 4 cups all-purpose flour  
 Peanut oil, for frying

Place the chicken pieces in a large bowl. Pour the hot sauce over the chicken. In a small bowl, whisk together 2 tablespoons of the barbecue seasoning with the salt, black pepper, cayenne, white pepper, and garlic powder. Add the spice mixture to the chicken and massage all the ingredients into the pieces with your hands. Cover the chicken with plastic wrap and marinate for at least 1 hour, or for up to 1 day in the refrigerator (the longer the better, to allow the seasonings to permeate the chicken).

Pour the buttermilk over the chicken pieces and toss to coat.

Pour the flour into a large bowl.

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven or a large cast-iron skillet to 350 degrees F, or until a pinch of flour sizzles when it is dropped in the fat. As the oil heats, remove the chicken pieces from the buttermilk, allowing the excess buttermilk to drip off.

Transfer the chicken, several pieces at a time, to the bowl with the flour. Toss to coat. Remove the chicken pieces from the flour, shaking off any excess, and place the chicken, one piece at a time, into the Dutch oven. Fry the chicken in several batches. For the crispiest results, do not overcrowd the Dutch oven. One of the secrets to deep-frying is maintaining a constant cooking temperature (the oil in the oven or skillet should be somewhat lively, having a mellow sizzle but not a raging boil). Fry the chicken for 16 to 18 minutes, using tongs as necessary to turn the pieces. When the chicken bobs, it's done. That's right (another Neely secret): your chicken will float to the top of the Dutch oven when she's done!

### *Gulab jamun*

As mentioned earlier, these *Gulab jamun* would be a perfect match to Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* for any reading group meeting.

This is a simple, very sweet dessert which can be served warm or at room temperature. It is made with dried milk. You could call it "fried milk balls in syrup."

SERVES 6-8

4 cups granulated sugar

3 cardamom pods, slightly crushed

2 cups powdered milk

½ cup all-purpose white flour

½ cup melted vegetable oil

½ cup milk

Vegetable oil for deep frying, enough to have 3 inches in pot

First make the syrup. In a 4-quart pot, combine 4 cups water, the sugar, and the cardamom. Lower heat. Simmer 2 to 3 minutes, or until all the sugar has been dissolved. Do not stir.

Pour half the syrup into a serving bowl (about a 3-quart size). Leave the other half in the pot, with the cardamom pods.

Combine the powdered milk, flour, oil, and milk in a bowl. Make a soft dough. Make small, smooth balls out of the dough, each about 1 inch in diameter. You should be able to make more than 2 dozen *jamuns*.

Heat oil for deep frying in wok, *karhai*, or any heavy-bottomed wide pot. You should have at least 3 inches of oil. Keep on *low* flame. The *jamuns* need to be fried *slowly*.

Put a *jamun* into the oil as a test. If it begins to brown immediately, your heat is too high. Each *jamun* should take 4 to 5 minutes to get a reddish brown color on all sides. If the first *jamun* does not turn out right, correct the heat. It is better to take this precaution than have a whole batch burn outside and stay raw inside.

Now put in 6 *jamuns* at a time. Turn them over as they turn reddish brown on one side. As they get fried, put them into the syrup in the pot. Bring this syrup to a boil. Let each batch simmer in the syrup for 5 minutes. When the *jamuns* are “syruped,” lift them out with a slotted spoon and place them in the fresh syrup in the serving bowl. Keep frying and “syruping” a batch at a time—as one batch fries, another can “syrup” until they are all done. When cool, cover serving bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate. The syrup in the pot can now be discarded.

To serve: *Gulab janzuns* can be served cold, at room temperature, or slightly warmed. Remember, you serve yourself only the *gulab jamun*, not the syrup in the bowl!

Adapted from *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, Knopf, 2011



# More Discussion Resources . . .

## . . . for Books into Film

One of the most rewarding experiences for a book club can be to read a great book and then see it translated onto the big (or small) screen. Whether or not you think the film adaptation does the book justice, there's always plenty to talk about—from scenes that were added or deleted to the actors chosen to portray the characters. So grab some popcorn and channel your inner critic!

1. Is the plot unchanged, or has it been simplified or otherwise altered for the film? If it has been changed, in what ways? Which elements of the story have been heightened, and which diminished? Why do you suppose the changes were made, and what is the overall effect of the revision?
2. Did the book's author have a role in the screenplay, either as writer or advisor? If yes, is the author's viewpoint evident and how does it affect the film? If no, is the author's viewpoint successfully or unsuccessfully conveyed?
3. Have any characters been cut or added? If the main characters are essentially unaltered, how do the actors playing the main characters interpret their roles? Do the actors bring a different kind of meaning to the role than you had seen when you read the book? Does the physical appearance of the actors seem right for the characters?
4. Different kinds of dialogue work better either on the page or on the screen. Are there any examples where exchanges are more vivid or memorable when read or, conversely, when seen?
5. How does the film handle challenging moments when characters are thinking but not speaking? Is the film effective in conveying the feelings and thoughts of the characters?
6. Is the film set in the same location(s) as the book? How do the scenic aspects of the film compare with how you imagined the setting when

you read the book? Does the film's cinematography heighten your understanding of the original?

7. Does the camera sometimes assume a different point of view from that of the narrator in the book? What can one medium do that the other can't?
8. Does the film open new ways of thinking about the book? Or, on the other hand, does the film seem insignificant or trivial, compared with your experience of the book?
9. Increasingly, especially with popular novels and plays, more than one film version exists. What can you learn by comparing the versions and interpretations? How does a film version date itself where the book appears to be timeless?
10. How would you have conceived, written, or directed the film differently?
11. In the case where you've seen the film first, the focus of the previous questions can be turned around for a different kind of comparison where you're comparing how the book stands up to the movie experience. What is your experience of the book after having seen the movie first? Has the book made clearer any aspects of the film? Did the film convey certain things better?

## **. . . for Fiction**

Begin by thinking about what in particular you liked or disliked about the book or which parts incited reaction—sadness, anger, joy, etc.—and which did not. What did the other members of your group think? Consider choosing a few favorite passages that illustrate your point to get the discussion going. You can further develop your ideas by focusing on the main aspects of the book, which can be divided into the following general categories.

1. **Subject:** What is the book about? Why might the author have chosen this subject?
2. **Plot:** What happens? Is the plot simple or complicated? Does the story have a happy outcome, or the opposite? Were there major conflicts in the book, and were they resolved in a convincing manner? What is the time frame of the story—does it happen over a few days or many years?
3. **Characters:** Does the book focus on a single main character, a few characters, or a large array of characters? Which characters are the most important? How fully does the author develop the characters' external and internal lives? Did you leave the book wanting to know more about them? What sort of personality traits has the author used to define each character?
4. **Point of View:** Think about the way the story was told. How did the narrator's voice in the book affect your reading of it? Was it written in the first person (related by a main character in the book) or third person (related by an independent and objective observer)? Did the voice draw you in, or did it distance you from the story? How did the narrative point of view influence the tone of the story?
5. **Setting:** Where and when does the story take place? How important is the physical setting to the story being told? Does the novel project a strong sense of place or evoke a specific time period? Does the author attempt to make the story extremely?
6. **Themes:** Are there one or more general themes that are established in the book? What major issues and ideas is the author trying to convey and explore? Love? Coming-of-age? Disillusionment? Can you draw any thematic comparisons between this book and another that your

group has read? Do any of the themes relate to topics or events in the news?

7. **Style:** How would you describe the author's writing style? Is it spare, lyrical, descriptive, objective, or ironic? Does the author make use of symbolism and imagery? Do these devices add power to the overall effect of the book, or are they distracting or forced?
8. **Also consider:** Does the book appeal more to your emotions or your intellect? How and why? Did you find the book funny or serious? What makes you laugh in this novel? What makes you feel uncomfortable? Did the author make choices that you strongly disagree with? How satisfying is the novel's ending?

## . . . for Memoir

Memoirs are perhaps the most commonly read works of nonfiction. And they are undoubtedly some of the most popular choices among reading groups today. Sometimes harrowing and heartbreaking but always enlightening, these are books that lend themselves to great discussion on a variety of topics.

1. Many of the most popular memoirs relate the story of the author's experience growing up in a troubled or even tragic family situation—for example Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*. What is most compelling about memoirs as a genre of nonfiction? Are true-life stories potentially more powerful than fictional ones? Why or why not?
2. Memoirs and fiction can be quite similar. Consider novels—such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*—that center on characters who tell their own stories in first-person narration. How are the choices a writer makes in writing autobiography different from those made in writing fiction? Do writers themselves become characters, exactly as they would create a character in a work of fiction? How important to the reading experience is the idea that this really happened? How do we know that the memoir writer is telling the truth?
3. Consider the structure of the memoir. What decisions has the author made in shaping the story of his life? What is emphasized? What is left out? How is the passage of time presented? What is the relationship between the past and the present of the writer's life, and does the structure of the book depend upon moving between past and present?
4. Do you find the writer's voice appealing or unappealing? Which aspects of the writer's character do you identify with most and least? How does your reaction to the writer affect your experience of the book?
5. How does the author approach his own story? With a sense of irony, sympathy, distance, comedy, or something else entirely?
6. What is the role of fate and what is the role of desire in this life story? Does the author present himself as the main force in shaping life's

events? Or is there a strong sense that the author is a victim of circumstances over which he has little control? Do characters in the story come across as active or passive? How much does the central character change over the course of the memoir?

7. Many book reviewers and culture commentators claim that in the past several years we have witnessed a “memoir explosion.” Why has this genre has become so popular with readers and writers alike? What are the benefits and drawbacks of writers sharing an intimate view of their lives with the general public?
8. What is the story’s impact on you? How does the memoir you have just read change the way you think about your own life story?

## **. . . for Mystery, Thriller and Crime Fiction**

With such a rich and diverse tradition, the genre of mystery and crime fiction offers wonderful opportunities to Reading Groups looking for a break from the norm. From the work of pioneers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler to modern masters such as Henning Mankell and Ruth Rendell, there are thrills and suspense to be found on every page.

**Plot:** In crime fiction, the reader's experience depends to a large degree upon the interest and ingenuity of the plot and the suspense it produces.

1. What puzzle needs to be worked out for the mystery or crime to be solved?
2. Is the plot simple or complex?
3. Is there more than one plotline proceeding through the novel, and if so are the plots related to each other or separate?
4. Does the plot have red herrings or false leads?
5. Are you able to solve the mystery? (Some mysteries can be solved by the reader according to the given clues, while in others a crucial piece of the puzzle is withheld until the end.)
6. How quickly or slowly do events proceed, and what is the level of suspense?
7. Is there a criminal to be caught, and if so how dangerous is the pursuit?
8. Is the resolution of the plot convincing? Are there loose ends left hanging?
9. What are the effects of the plot on you as a reader—how evil, scary, or gruesome are the scenes you read, and how are these effects achieved?

**Character:**

1. Does the book focus on a single main character, a few characters, or a large array of characters?
2. Who is the protagonist?

3. What is the profession of the protagonist, and how does that profession influence the gathering and interpretation of evidence?
4. Does the author have a trademark character (often a detective or police Inspector) that appears in a series of books, like Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford, or Michael Dibdin's Aurelio Zen?
5. What personality traits does the author use to define the central character?
6. How complex are the main characters and what are their motivations?
7. Are some of the characters stereotypes?
8. What is the private life of the central character like, and how does it influence his or her work?
9. Does the main character's private life seem to suffer from the evil to which he or she is exposed as with Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander who suffers from depression and unease from what he sees on the job or Ian Rankin's John Rebus who confronts his own demons by delving into the criminal underworld?
10. How many suspicious characters are presented, and what, if any, hints are given as to who is the most likely suspect?
11. To what degree is the novel driven by the author's interest in the psychology of his or her characters (as in Ruth Rendell and Patricia Highsmith)? What kinds of psychological issues are presented, and how do they affect the plot and its outcome?

Point of View:

1. Who is the narrator? Is the story narrated in first-person by the detective (as in Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer stories), by the killer (as in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*), or by an anonymous third-person narrator?
2. From whose perspective is the story told, and how does this affect the experience of reading? (Even when using a third-person narrator, authors often create a narrative that concentrates on one character's perspective or thought process.)
3. How does the narrator's voice affect the overall tone of the novel (is it sardonic, cynical, tough, matter-of-fact, chilling, sexist, lurid, etc.)?

Setting:

1. Where and when does the story take place?
2. How important is the physical setting to the story being told?
3. How realistic are the details of the setting?

4. Does the novel project a strong sense of place? (Consider Dashiell Hammett's San Francisco, P. D. James's London, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles, or Patricia Highsmith's international Ripley novels.)
5. Does the novel evoke a specific time period?
6. What is the social context of the novel?
7. Does it address particular social problems (like Andrew Vachss's interest in child abuse, Henning Mankell's focus on violence against immigrants in *Faceless Killers*, or Ruth Rendell's focus on domestic abuse in *Harm Done*)?

Style:

1. What are the defining aspects of the author's writing style? Choose and discuss a few sentences that reveal the author's individual style.
2. What potent details or descriptions do you notice in the prose?
3. Does the author make use of recurring symbols or images?
4. Is the use of dialogue a significant stylistic feature? How do characters speak to each other?

Genre: There are several subtypes within the mystery genre, each with their own characteristic approaches to style, setting, and structure. Think about where your novel fits in. Some favorite types include:

1. The hard-boiled style, created by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler; which features a private eye with a cynical, tough-guy attitude; witty and often sarcastic dialogue; at least one femme fatale; and a dark vision of sex, crime, and corruption.
2. The classic English detective novel, a popular tradition going back at least as far as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories.
3. The whodunit, which focuses on plot and allows the reader to figure out the solution through deduction, along with the sleuth.
4. The police procedural in which the protagonist is a police investigator (as in Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö's *The Laughing Policeman*).
5. The psychological thriller in which criminal psychopathology is underscored (as in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*).
6. The political thriller in which the protagonist is caught up in a thick plot of international intrigue, assassination, espionage, drugs, or other dangers (as in Eric Ambler's *A Coffin for Dimitrios*).
7. The "caper" novel in which the tone is light-hearted and the protagonist, like Gregory Mcdonald's Fletch, is not entirely above criminal mischief himself.

Also consider: What is the source of pleasure in reading about crime? How unsettling is the effect of the story, or how satisfying? How dark is the author's vision with regard to human evil and psychopathology? Does the book make playful reference to mysteries by other writers? How does the novel compare to others you have read by the same author?

## **. . . for Nonfiction**

While fiction has long been the most popular genre with reading groups, works of nonfiction can bring quite a different set of objectives and intellectual experiences to the group and spark lively discussions as well. Reading nonfiction is a great way for readers to expand their knowledge and to gain familiarity with a wide array of subjects such as history, biography, science and technology, parenting, social issues, politics, travel, and exploration. Although nonfiction is a vast category in today's publishing world, the following general questions can help your group get a discussion going.

1. How well does the author relate the content of the book? Does the author provide enough background material on the subject to allow readers to get involved? How is the book organized? Is it chronological, thematic, topical, or arranged in some other format? Are there parts you wish had been developed further or more clearly?
2. If you are reading a history, a biography, or a travel book, how vividly does the author re-create a historical period, a life, or a journey? What draws you in? What, if anything, seems too dry or unnecessarily detailed?
3. Think about nonfiction and its relationship to truth. Does the nonfiction writer have an obligation to be truthful above all, or is bias acceptable in certain cases? Does the author attempt to remain objective about the subject at hand? Is the book objective and balanced or deeply personal and strongly biased? Is there a political or a polemical agenda behind the book?
4. Does the book attempt to change or shape public opinion? How does it change the way you think about a person or event? Does it give you new perspective on a historical event or topic of interest?
5. What is the author's attitude toward his subject? What is the author trying to persuade you to think or do? How do you think the author was changed by the experience of writing the book? (You can often find a direct response to this question in the book's foreword or introduction, or in interviews with the author.) Were you persuaded by the author's arguments?
6. What is original about this book? How does it distinguish itself from other books you have read on a similar topic?

## . . . for Poetry

Great poetry can be just as thought provoking as great novels or biographies, and it can be an excellent choice for reading groups as well. Devote your discussion to poetry for one meeting, or focus on it as a part of several meetings.

1. Consider choosing one poet and have your group read a selection of his work. Discuss major recurrent themes and stylistic devices. Can you see a clear progression or change in style or tone from the poet's early work to the later poems? Consider reading a book of poetry in conjunction with a biography of the poet. Can you tie a particular theme or tone to any significant events in the poet's life?
2. If you prefer to focus on a variety of poets, choose a group from a particular period or country—the Romantics, the Beat poets, American poets, Irish poets—and read a selection of verse from that group. What are the stylistic or thematic similarities and differences? By which characteristics can you classify the group as a whole? Do you prefer the work of one poet to that of others in the group? Why?
3. If discussing entire works of poetry does not appeal to your group, consider having interested group members read a favorite poem each month at the beginning or end of each meeting. You may find that those who are hesitant to read poetry will discover how accessible it is.

Now the time has come to wrap up the recommendations and allow you to get to the important part of being in a reading group: reading! If you didn't read the special excerpts and reading group guides that have been interspersed throughout *The Reading Group Insider*, then you can find them all right here.

Happy reading, meeting and discussing!

# Excerpts

## *Maine*

J. Courtney Sullivan

### EXCERPT

Alice decided to take a break from packing. She lit a cigarette, leaning back in one of the wicker chairs that were always slightly damp from the sea breeze. She glanced around at the cardboard boxes filled with her family's belongings, each glass and saltshaker and picture frame wrapped carefully in newspaper. There were at least a couple of boxes in every room of the house. She needed to make sure she had taken them all to Goodwill by the time the children arrived. This had been their summer home for sixty years, and it amazed her how many objects they had accumulated. She didn't want anyone to be burdened by the mess once she was gone.

She could tell by the heavy clouds that it was about to rain. In Cape Neddick, Maine, that May, you were likely to see a thunderstorm every afternoon. This didn't bother her. She never went down to the beach anymore. After lunch she usually sat out on the screen porch for hours, reading novels that her daughter-in-law, Ann Marie, had lent her during the winter, drinking red wine, and watching the waves crash against the rocks until it was time to make supper. She never felt the urge she once did to put on a swimsuit and take a dip or muss her pedicure by walking in the sand. She preferred to watch it all from a distance, letting the scene pass through her like a ghost.

Her life here was ruled by routine. Each day, she was up by six to clean the house and tend her garden. She drank a cup of Tetley, leaving the tea bag on a dish in the fridge so she could use it once more before lunch. At nine thirty on the nose, she drove to St. Michael's by the Sea for ten o'clock Mass.

The surrounding area had changed so much since their first summer in Maine, all those years ago. Huge houses had gone up along the coast, and the towns were now full of gift shops and fashionable restaurants and gourmet grocery stores. The fishermen were still around, but back in the seventies many of them had started catering to tourists, with their breakfast cruises and their whale watches and such.

Some things remained. Ruby's Market and the pharmacy were still dark by six. Alice still left her keys in the car at all times. She never locked the house either—no one up here did. The beach had stayed untouched, and every one of the massive pine trees dotting the road from her door to the church looked as if it had been there for centuries.

The church itself was a constant. St. Michael's was an old-fashioned country chapel made of stone, with red velvet cushions in the pews and brilliant stained-glass windows that burst with color in the morning sun. It had been built at the top of a hill off Shore Road so that its rooftop cross might be visible to sailors at sea.

Alice always sat in the third row to the right of the altar. She tried to remember the best bits of wisdom from Father Donnelly's sermons to pass along to the child or grandchild who needed them most, not that they paid her any attention. She listened intently, singing out the familiar songs, reciting the prayers she had recited since she was a girl. She closed her eyes and asked God for the same things she had asked for all those years ago: to help her be good, to make her do better. For the most part, she believed He heard.

After Mass on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the St. Michael's Legion of Mary met in the church basement and said the rosary for ailing members of the parish, for the hungry and needy around the world, for the sanctity of life in all its stages. They recited Hail Holy Queen and drank decaf and chatted. Mary Fallon reminded them whose turn it was to bring muffins next time and who would accompany Father Donnelly on his weekly trip to the homes of the infirm, where he prayed for a recovery that usually never came. Though it was terribly sad, watching strangers her own age dying, Alice enjoyed her afternoons with Father Donnelly. He brought such comfort to everyone he visited. He was a young man, only thirty-four, with dark hair and a warm smile that reminded her of crooners from the fifties. He had chosen a vocation from another era, and he was thoughtful in a way she didn't know young people could be anymore.

Alice felt a sense of deep dedication watching him pray over his parishioners. Most priests today didn't make time for house calls. When they were done, Father Donnelly would take her to lunch, which she knew for a fact he did not do with the other gals from the Legion. He had done so much for her. He even helped her around the house now and then—changing

the high-up lightbulb on the porch, hauling away tree branches after a storm. Perhaps this special treatment was only a result of the little arrangement they had made, but she hardly cared.

Father Donnelly and the seven members of the Legion of Mary (no fewer than five of them actually named Mary) were the only people Alice interacted with on a regular basis at this time of year. She was the lone summer person in the group, their foreign exchange student, she called herself as a joke. The year-rounders were suspicious of outsiders. But they had agreed to let her join just for the season after the archdiocese shut down St. Agnes two years back.

St. Agnes was her church at home in Canton, the church where Alice's children were baptized, where her husband, Daniel, was eulogized, where she had gone to Mass every day for the past six decades and run both the Sunday school program, when her children were small, and the Legion of Mary once they had grown. She had co-chaired the campaign to save the church with a young mother of four named Abigail Curley, who had translucent skin and a soft, childlike voice. Together, they gathered five hundred signatures; they wrote dozens of letters; they petitioned the cardinal himself.

At the final Mass, Alice cried quietly into her handkerchief. These closures were becoming common practice; you read about them all the time. But you never thought they'd impact you. At St. Agnes, Abigail Curley and some of the other congregants refused to leave. Thirty months later they were still occupying the church around the clock, holding vigil even though there was no priest there anymore, no lighting or heat. Alice started going to a new church in Milton for morning Mass, but she felt no connection to the place or the people there. Now her summer church was her main link to her faith and her past. The Legion members seemed to understand as much.

They were mostly widows who had let themselves go. They wore sweat suits and chunky white sneakers, and their hair was a uniform disaster. Alice was the sole one among them who had kept her figure. Only her deep, deep damn wrinkles even hinted at the horrifying fact that she was eighty-three. But like the rest of them, she was alone. Sometimes she wondered if they all took their morning prayer sessions so seriously because they each needed someone to bear witness to their presence. Otherwise, one of them might have a stroke at the kitchen table some morning, and simply go unnoticed.

Her husband, Daniel, won the property in 1945, just after the war ended, in a stupid bet with a former shipmate named Ned Barnell. Ned was a drunk, even by the standards of his fellow navy men. He had grown up in a fishing village in Maine, but now spent his time squandering his

paychecks in some of Boston's finest barrooms and underground gambling clubs. He made a fifty-dollar wager with Daniel on some basketball game, which absolutely enraged Alice. They had been married two years then, and she was pregnant with Kathleen. But Daniel said the bet was a sure thing, that he never would have made it otherwise. And he won.

Ned didn't have the money to pay him.

"Surprise, surprise," Alice said when Daniel came home that night and told her the news.

He had a wild grin on his face. "You'll never guess what he gave me instead."

"A car?" Alice said sarcastically. Their twelve-year-old Ford coupe sputtered and pooped out whenever she started it. By then, they were so accustomed to gas rations that they mostly walked everywhere anyway, or took the streetcar. But the war was over now, and another New England winter was coming. Alice had no intention of being one of those mothers on the train, shushing her screaming newborn while others looked on with disapproving stares.

"Better," Daniel said.

"Better than a car?" Alice asked.

"It's land," Daniel said gleefully. "A whole big plot of land, right on the water in Maine."

She was skeptical. "You better not be joking, Daniel Kelleher."

"I kid you not, Mrs. Kelleher," he said, coming toward her. He pressed his face to her stomach.

"You hear that, jelly bean?" he said to her belt.

"Daniel!" she said, trying to push him away. She hated when he talked directly to the baby, already attached.

He ignored her.

"This time next summer we'll be making sand castles. Daddy got you your own beach." He straightened up. "Ned's grandfather gave all his grandkids some land, but Ned's got no interest in his piece. It's ours!"

"For a fifty-dollar bet?" Alice asked.

"Let's just say it was the last in a long line of fifty-dollar bets that may or may not have gone unpaid."

"Daniel!" Despite the good news, her blood boiled a bit.

"Honey, don't worry so much, you married a lucky guy," he said with a wink.

Alice didn't believe in luck, though if it existed she was fairly sure that hers was lousy. In two years of marriage, she had already miscarried three times. Her mother had lost two babies in infancy before the rest of her children came along, though Alice wouldn't dare ask her about it. All her mother ever said on the topic was that she assumed God had taken away

the things she loved most as some sort of test. Alice wondered if in her case the children simply vanished because they knew they weren't quite wanted or, more to the point, that she was no mother.

She was used to the routine—no dark spots on her delicates at the usual time of the month, followed by a few weeks of nausea and vomiting and headaches, and then the sight of blood in the white china toilet, another soul gone.

She had overheard a gal in the elevator in her office building whispering to her girlfriend that a doctor in New York had fitted her for a diaphragm.

"Such a relief!" the girl had said. "Lord knows Harry's not doing anything to make sure I don't get knocked up."

"If the men had to push the babies out, then they'd take the precautions," her friend said. "Can you imagine Ronald, huffing and puffing?" She closed her mouth and filled her cheeks up with air, squinting her eyes until they both began to giggle.

Alice wished she could say something to them, find out more. But they were strangers to her, and it was a vulgar thing to be talking about in the first place. She didn't know whom to ask, so she went to a priest before work one morning—someone a few parishes away from her own. Everyone acted as though penance was an anonymous process, but you could see the priest before he went into the confessional, and he could just as easily see you. This one was old, with pure white hair. *father delponte*, it said on a plaque on the outside of the box. Italian, she supposed. Everyone knew Italian girls were fast. She hoped he wouldn't mistake her for one of them. She was married, after all.

In the dim box, she knelt down, closed her eyes, and crossed herself.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one month since my last confession," she began, the same words she had uttered so many times before.

Her cheeks blushed a fiery red as she told him about the babies she had lost.

"I wonder if perhaps now isn't the time for me," she said. "I wonder if there's something I might do to hold off. My sister died a couple years back, and I'm still not myself, Father. I'm afraid of being a mother. I don't think I have it in me to love another person enough, at least not yet."

She wanted to say more, but then he asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Alice could swear she saw him make a baffled face through the screen.

"You're more than old enough, my dear," he said softly. "God has a plan for each of us. We have to believe in it, and do nothing to put it off course."

She did not know if he had understood. Perhaps she should have been clearer.

“There are ways I’ve heard of to delay,” she began, fumbling for the words. “I know the Church frowns on it.”

“The Church forbids it,” he said, and that was all.

She cried for a moment in the parking lot and then set off for work. She never told Daniel what she had done.

This pregnancy had lasted six months so far. Alice was terrified. She tiptoed everywhere, afraid to breathe. She had to drink half a glass of whiskey each night to get to sleep. She smoked twice as many cigarettes as usual and paced around the block in the afternoons—she had been reprimanded by her boss three times now for being away from her desk when she wasn’t supposed to be. Mr. Kristal was downright wretched to her, probably because he recognized her condition, and knew from experience that she’d be giving her notice soon enough.

The Saturday after Daniel won the land, they took a ride out to Cape Neddick. Alice didn’t know what to expect. She had been to Maine only once before, on a day trip with her brothers and sister when she was a teenager. All six of them were jammed into their father’s Pontiac, barreling along the highway with the windows rolled down. They ate lunch at a clam shack and then drove east until they found a slip of beach to relax on. The boys skipped rocks into the water, and Alice and Mary sat in the sand, talking. Alice did a sketch of the dunes in her notebook. They didn’t know what town they were in, and they didn’t linger for long. They couldn’t afford to stay overnight, not even at one of the cheap roadside motels.

Only a few years had passed since then, but it seemed like another lifetime.

Daniel drove the car through downtown Ogunquit, past a motor inn and a dance hall and Perkins Drugstore, and the Leavitt Theatre, where *Anchors Aweigh* was playing at two o’clock. They went straight, past the stone library and the Baptist church and a row of grand hotels, until they reached the tip of town, where fishermen’s shacks and lobster traps stood on the land, and fishing boats bobbed up and down in the harbor. There was water on three sides: the Atlantic’s rocky coastline to the left and in front of them, and to the right a small inlet with a footbridge leading to the other side. Carved into a stone at the base of the bridge were the words PERKINS COVE.

Alice raised an eyebrow. “Gosh, is everyone in this town called Perkins?”

“Just about,” Daniel said, clearly excited to have a bit of inside information. “According to Ned, that family owns half the land around here. They’re fishermen, like his people. Ned went with one of the Perkins cousins back in high school.”

“Lucky her,” Alice said.

“Now now,” Daniel said. “Hey, Ned even taught me a little poem one of them wrote. You ready to hear it?”

Before she could protest, he was reciting it, almost singing, in his best James Cagney voice:

*A Perkins runs the grocery store  
A Perkins runs the bank  
A Perkins puts the gasoline in everybody's tank.  
A Perkins sells you magazines  
Another sells you fish  
You have to go to Perkinses for anything you wish.  
You'll always find a Perkins has fingers in your purse  
And when I die, I think that I  
Will ride a Perkins hearse.*

Alice rolled her eyes at her husband. “Okay, darling, I catch your drift.”

They turned the car around and pulled onto Shore Road. Daniel drove slowly, looking this way and that. Through a long bank of pine trees on the left, you could see the ocean. Here and there, clapboard houses with American flags out front dotted green lawns. Cows grazed in fields of grass.

“It’s somewhere off of this road,” Daniel said.

They had brought a map, which she held unfolded in her lap. Daniel expected Alice to know how to read it, but to her it looked like a mess of veins and muscles she had seen in her high school biology textbook years earlier. She half expected him to snap, “Oh, give me that!” But Daniel wasn’t the type. He only laughed and said, “I guess we’ll have to follow our noses, since I clearly chose a daydreamer for a co-pilot.”

That was when Alice saw them, a small assembly of women and men in smocks, sitting up on a hill, painting at easels.

“There’s an artist’s colony here,” Daniel said. “Ned told me bohemians are buying up the lobstermen’s shacks. I thought you’d like that. They have a summer school. Maybe you could take a class.”

Alice nodded, though she felt her body tighten. She willed herself not to grow dark. But she could already feel her mood shifting. She stared out the window.

Off to the right was a plain wooden saltbox with a sign out front that read ruby’s market. To the left was a small green building that she might have taken for a house were it not for the word pharmacy inlaid on a plaque above the porch.

There was no sign for Briarwood Road. Ned had told Daniel to take Shore for two miles, until he came to a fork. Then he was to turn left onto a dirt path, and follow it all the way to the ocean.

“He says we’ll think we’re driving straight into the woods, but we’re not,” Daniel said.

Alice sighed, preparing herself for what was probably a patch of overgrown brush that Ned had decided to call his own.

They passed the entrance twice and had to turn around. But on the third try, they turned at what hardly seemed like a fork. Alice gasped. The road was from a fairy tale, a long stretch of sand inside a tunnel of lush pine trees. When they reached the end, there was the ocean, sparkling in the sun, dark blue against a small sandy beach, which was nestled between two long stretches of rocky coast.

“Welcome home,” Daniel said.

“This is ours?” Alice asked.

“Well, three acres of it’s ours,” he said. “The best three acres, too—all this land along the water.”

Alice was elated. No one she knew back home had their own beach house. She could not wait to see her best friend Rita’s face when she came here and saw it.

Alice kissed Daniel smack on the lips.

He grinned. “I take it you like the place.”

“I already have the curtains picked out.”

“Good! I’m glad that’s taken care of. Now we just need a house to hang them in.”

On the way back into town, he stopped the car at the fork in the road and carved a shamrock into the soft trunk of a birch tree. He added the letters A.H. and said, “Now we’ll never miss the turnoff again.”

“A.H.?” she asked. “Who’s that?”

He pointed at each letter slowly, like a teacher leading a lesson. “Alice’s. House.”

Daniel and his brothers built the cottage with their own hands, laid every beam, one by one. The five rooms on the first floor made a loop: The narrow stone kitchen leading into the living room with its black piano from J. & C. Fischer New York, and the iron wood-burning stove in the corner, and the dining table that could comfortably seat ten, though they often had sixteen people crammed around it. That led straight into a small bedroom meant for a couple, which led into the sun-yellow bathroom, which led into the next bedroom, which was as big as the rest of the rooms put together, with two single beds and four bunk beds. There was a lofted space up above it all, the only private spot in the house. Off the kitchen stood a screened-in porch, and off the living room a deck. Beyond that was an outdoor shower full of cobwebs, from which you could gaze at the stars while you washed your hair. That was it. Their little piece of Paradise, where the Kelleher family had spent every summer since.

In the fifties, wealthy out-of-towners started buying up plots of land all around Ogunquit and Cape Neddick. But no one ever built on Briarwood Road, so it felt like the long stretch of glorious trees that led to their home on the beach was all theirs.

They went every June and stayed for as many weeks as possible. If Daniel couldn't get off work at the insurance company, Alice would invite Rita to come. The two of them would poke into antique shops in Kennebunkport, each with a baby slung over her shoulder, and then they would drink Manhattans on the beach in front of the cottage. On rainy days, they went to the movies or for a drive up the coast. Tallulah Bankhead did a four-week stint at the Ogunquit Playhouse, and they saw the show twice, even though it really wasn't any good. The town was a strange blend of fishermen and locals, tourists and actors and painters. Everywhere you went, someone was sketching a seascape, a sunset, a stack of lobster traps arranged just so. Alice avoided the artists when she could. In town one morning, one of them, quite handsome had asked if he could paint her picture. She smiled, but kept walking as if she hadn't understood.

Some weekends Alice's and Daniel's families visited, and everyone would stay up late, eating and drinking and singing Irish songs while Alice played the piano. After she went to church each morning, Alice and her sisters-in-law might lie out on the sand in a row for hours while the sun beat down against their bare legs. Alice always brought a book along since they weren't the most entertaining gals; they were morally opposed to gossip and clearly jealous of her figure. She wished like crazy that her own sister, Mary, were there. Alice would almost forget about what had passed, expecting to see Mary turn the corner at any moment.

Before dinner, the women shucked corn and boiled potatoes in the kitchen with a Dean Martin record playing in the background. Meanwhile, the men gathered outside around the grill, fanning the hot coals as if it took eight of them to get a fire going.

Later came more children—Alice and Daniel's three, and forty-two nieces and nephews between them. For years there was an army of kids in the cottage, and Alice gave up on even trying to make the place look presentable. By the time the Fourth of July arrived, all the children would be bright red and freckly from the sun, their brown hair ever-so slightly lightened, especially the girls, who squeezed lemon juice over their heads after breakfast each morning, same as their mothers. On arrival, everyone's feet were smooth and soft, but after weeks of walking barefoot out on the stone jetties and across the dunes, their soles toughened up. Daniel joked that by summer's end, they could walk over broken glass without feeling a thing.

In Cape Neddick, Alice was distracted, surrounded by smiling people, all of them grateful for the invitation. The children ran in a pack with their

cousins, demanding nothing. She watched the sky over the ocean turn pink in the evening, a reminder that God created beauty, every bit as much as He created pain. She became a different person there in summertime.

Back home in Massachusetts there were so many memories; left alone in the house with the children, she often felt like she was losing hold. Her thoughts took gloomy turns without warning, and she got terrible headaches that forced her into bed all afternoon. Her life there was by its very nature boring, and she could not stand to be bored. She never cottoned to gaily cooking dinners and folding laundry and scrubbing the kitchen floor, as if that were all the world had to offer, no matter how hard she tried. She had been meant for more. Her cottage in Maine was the only thing that set her apart from everyone else, the only unordinary thing about her.

When her older daughter, Kathleen, ever the wet blanket, turned twelve or thirteen, she declared that she hated going to Maine. The air was too buggy, she said, the water too cold. There was no television and nothing to do. From then on, from the moment they arrived each summer until the inevitable morning when they packed up the car to head back to Massachusetts, Kathleen would complain: “Can we go now? Can we?”

“It’s strange,” Daniel had said once.

“Oh I don’t think so,” Alice replied. “She must have picked up on how much I love this place and instinctually decided to hate it.”

Much later—it amazed her how time sped up more and more, the older she got—the grandkids came along. Daniel retired. Her children drove up to Maine whenever they liked, and no one bothered to call ahead. They’d just bring extra hot dogs and Heinekens, cookies, or a blueberry pie from Ruby’s Market. All summer, she and Daniel were the constant. Other bodies piled into the cottage and slept wherever they happened to drop: children under blankets on the hardwood floor in the living room, teenagers on inflatable mattresses up in the loft, her grandson Ryan’s playpen wedged into the narrow kitchen.

In the mornings while the rest of them slept, Alice would brew a pot of coffee, toast English muffins, and fry up a dozen eggs and bacon. She’d set a basin of warm water out on the porch for the children’s sandy feet, and later, maybe help Kathleen and Ann Marie slather the kids in SPF 50, which by then they understood was essential for Irish skin. Even so, they got burns. Red, painful, blistering burns that they spent long evenings dousing in Solarcaine. The grandchildren, like the children, mostly resembled Daniel’s side—a half hour in the sun and their faces were six pink little pools, covered in constellations of brown freckles.

A few years before Daniel passed, their son, Patrick, had offered them a gift. He was having a house of their own built for them on the property, he

said. A real, proper house with modern appliances and high-end fixtures and a view of the ocean and no kids screaming, next to the cottage, but worlds better. They would have a big-screen TV with a sound system that was somehow wired through the walls. In the cottage there was only a small radio that picked up Red Sox games if you put it on the windowsill at the right angle.

"I think it'll be wonderful," Alice said to her husband after Pat told them his plan. "Our own hideaway, no squirrels in the rafters or mildew smell in the bathroom. No leaky old refrigerator."

"But that's what a summer place is," Daniel said. "If we wanted to be alone in a souped-up house, we'd have stayed home in Canton. Why do I feel like this is a way to get rid of us?"

Alice had told him not to be ridiculous, even though she partly agreed. It was extravagant, and seemed a bit beside the point of a family retreat. But Patrick had already had the plans drawn up, and he sounded so pleased when he told them the news. Plus, as he pointed out, adding another house to the property would only increase its value.

"Like in Monopoly," he had said, a comparison that made Alice laugh, though she could see through Daniel's tight smile that he found the comment patronizing.

After the house went up, Patrick had the whole place appraised. When he told her that it was now worth over two million dollars, Alice nearly fainted. Two million dollars for land that had been handed to them for free half a century earlier!

"See? Our boy is a smart one," she had said to Daniel then.

He shook his head. "It's dangerous, talking about money this way. Our home is not for sale."

She looked into his sad eyes and gave him a smile. She wanted to hold on to it all every bit as much as he did.

She put a hand on his cheek. "No one said it was."

Of their three children, Patrick, the youngest, had done the best by far. They sent him to BC High. His last year of high school he dated Sherry Burke, the daughter of the mayor of Cambridge. Sherry was a sweet girl, and her family exposed Pat to the finer things. Alice always thought those years with her might have been what motivated him to make money later on. (She still saw Sherry—a state senator in her own right—in the newspaper now and then.) Pat went on to Notre Dame, where he finished sixth in his class. He met Ann Marie, who was studying at his sister school, Saint Mary's. They were married the summer they turned twenty-two. They had a strong marriage, and three wonderful children—Fiona, Patty, and darling Little Daniel, Alice's favorite of all her grandkids. Pat was a stockbroker; Ann Marie stayed at home. They lived in an enormous house in

Newton, with a swimming pool about back and matching blue Mercedes sedans.

Alice's daughters called them the Perfects. Well, by comparison, yes. Alice was always quick to point out that Ann Marie was a better daughter to her than either of them was. Ann Marie included her in weekend activities; they got their hair done together at a fancy place in town. They had long lunches and traded recipes and thick hardcover books and fashion magazines. Alice's own two daughters could barely manage to call her once a week and update her on their lives. Clare made up for it every now and then with nice presents, but Kathleen didn't even bother trying.

Clare was Alice's middle child, born two years before Patrick. When they were young, Alice had worried the most about her. She had a shock of red hair, the color of autumn leaves; an unfortunately round face; and freckles (Daniel's side). She was a tomboy, and she was smart, perhaps too smart for her own good. In high school, Clare acted as serious as a nun, cloistered away in her bedroom, reading her textbooks by the open window, sneaking cigarettes when she thought Alice wasn't looking. She never had many friends, no more than one or two at a time, and never for longer than a few months. Daniel said it wasn't very motherly of her to say so, but Alice feared it was something Clare was doing that kept chasing people off, rather than the opposite.

After graduating from BC, Clare worked with computers, doing something Alice still didn't quite understand. She was completely devoted to her job, and never went on any dates as far as Alice knew. In her late thirties, she met Joe, through work, of course. His family business was a religious goods store in Southie that sold ornate Bibles and prayer books to true believers, and crosses and Infant of Prague statues to children making their First Communion. Joe's father gave him the company when he retired and Clare put the merchandise on the Internet somehow.

They had done well for themselves. They lived in an old Victorian house in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood that they claimed to love for its diversity and public victory gardens. (Those sound like the sort of traits you'd use to praise a slum, Alice thought each time they mentioned them, though she knew the house had not come cheap.) Their neighbors on either side were black.

Until she went to work in downtown Boston at the age of nineteen, Alice had hardly ever seen a black person. Today, you couldn't drive down the street she had grown up on in Dorchester without locking the doors and holding your breath and saying ten Hail Marys. There were gang members and prostitutes on the corner where her brothers used to play baseball before dinner. But you weren't allowed to comment on such things. If you did, according to Clare and Joe, you were a bigot.

The two of them were a perfect match, so in step with all that liberal hoo-haw. So in love that Joe didn't even seem to notice that Clare was downright plain and she didn't seem to care that he was embarrassingly short. Their son, Ryan, only seventeen, was a student at the Boston Arts Academy. He was a gifted little singer, a real hot ticket. A bit of a brat sometimes, but that was how he'd been raised. Alice had warned them against having just one child. When Ryan was small, he would ask her to play the piano for him and he'd belt out "Tomorrow" as well as any girl on Broadway. Alice and Daniel had gone to so many school plays over the years that eventually Daniel invested in earplugs so he could nap in the auditoriums. But Alice loved watching those shows. She had saved all the programs. Clare and Joe kept Ryan away from her so often now. They were always too busy with auditions and meetings and travel and life, as if that were any excuse.

Kathleen, her oldest, was the one with Alice's black hair and blue eyes—the prettier sister when they were young, though only by default. Kathleen's features were terribly round. When she was a teenager, her full hips and breasts hinted at the weight she would gain later. Daniel said that Alice never really took to Kathleen, that she didn't treat her like a mother should. He, on the other hand, spoiled her rotten, making no secret of the fact that she was his favorite. It was true when Kathleen was a little girl, and true when he offered her the cottage during her divorce, even though it wasn't strictly his to offer, and it was true right at the end of his life, a fact that Alice could never forgive.

After Kathleen's divorce, she went to graduate school for social work. Her kids were still young then, they needed her. But Kathleen stayed out late studying and attending AA meetings as if they were handing out bars of gold there. Later, she started working as a school counselor and began to date all sorts of unsuitable men.

Her two kids, Maggie and Christopher, had become the kind of adults one would expect from a broken home: Chris had anger issues. As a teenager, he once punched a hole in the bathroom wall because his mother grounded him for sneaking out. In contrast, Maggie always tried too hard to make everything perfect. She was too polite, too inquisitive. It put Alice on edge.

After Daniel died, Kathleen moved to California with a loafer boyfriend named Arlo, whom she had known for all of six months at the time. They had a plan (or rather, he did) to start a company making fertilizer out of worm dung. It was a preposterous choice that still embarrassed Alice nine years later, especially because Kathleen had used Daniel's money to finance the whole boneheaded plan. Kathleen had borrowed plenty of money from him before he died too. Alice didn't want to know how much.

She had once thought of Daniel's money as their money. But if it were hers as well, then she would have had some say in how he spent it, and that was certainly not the case when it came to Kathleen. Each time she made some foolish romantic mistake, there was Daniel, ready to clean it up.

Even as a teenager, Kathleen had always been popular with boys.

"Why don't you invite your sister to come to the party with you?" Alice would say to her on a Friday night. Or "Can't you find a nice fella for Clare?"

But Kathleen would only shrug, as though she couldn't hear her.

Once, they had argued about it, Alice feeling so enraged at her uncharitable offspring that she shouted, "You're lucky you even have a sister, you wretch. Do you know what I would do if I—"

"What would you do?" Kathleen had interrupted. "What? Take her out to some club and then leave her there to die?"

Alice was shocked, and instantly livid with Daniel for telling Kathleen. That was the only time in her life that she ever struck one of her children.

Usually, especially when they were young, she left the physical discipline to Daniel, for fear of what she might do out of fury or frustration.

They had agreed that he would hit the children with a belt when they needed it, and Alice had never felt bad about this. She and her own siblings had endured much worse.

"Wait until your father gets home," she'd tell the kids when they acted up, and their eyes would grow wide with fear.

When he arrived, Daniel always made a big show of dragging the offending youngster to his or her room, and closing the door. Alice would hear him say sternly, "Now, you brought this upon yourself and you know it. Take it like a grown-up."

Next came the sound of his belt lashing against a soft backside, and then the child's dramatic scream. This sort of behavior was highly out of character for her husband, and it always thrilled Alice a little, for the children could be monsters and she felt like he provided the exact buffer she needed to cope.

After Daniel died, the kids told Alice that in fact he had never once struck them, only taken them upstairs and thwacked his belt against the mattress a few times, instructing them to shout as soon as they heard the sound.

Alice rose from her spot on the porch now, and went to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of wine. Surveying all the dishes and silverware spread out on the counter, she sighed. She had wanted to get a bit of reading in before dinner, but the contents of her pantry were staring straight at her, begging to be dealt with.

There was a big roll of bubble wrap there, and she began by cutting off several thick sheets. Next, she wrapped the plates, one by one. News paper would have been quicker, but it seemed a shame to risk staining the china gray, even if she was giving it away. She had briefly considered asking Clare or Ann Marie if they wanted it, but she knew that would only raise their suspicions, and she didn't feel like arguing.

Lately, the one thing her three children had in common was a real love of nagging her.

They wanted her to quit smoking, and were forever citing statistics about the bad effects or pointing out that her white ceilings were tinged orange, so imagine how her lungs must look. Last spring she had somehow left a lit cigarette burning on the edge of an ashtray on her kitchen table when she went out shopping with Ann Marie. Her daughter-in-law helped her bring in her bundles afterward, and saw the still smoldering cigarette, which had rolled onto the tabletop and left an ugly burn. The kids all went crazy over it, even though nothing bad had happened.

They thought she drank too much. Well, honestly, who gave a fig about that? She had abstained for more than thirty years for heaven's sakes, and only to appease her husband. Patrick had given her a stern lecture at Thanksgiving about driving the car after a few cocktails, which made her laugh. She wanted to say that she had driven a car after more than a few lousy cocktails throughout her twenties; when she was pregnant with him and his two sisters; when they were screaming brats in the backseat of her station wagon; and everything had worked out fine. Alice assumed they were thinking about the accident back when they were kids, even though that was a onetime slipup, ancient history. Children felt a need to focus on unlikely hypothetical disasters that might or might not eventually occur.

They said she wasn't watching her diet carefully enough, monitoring her salt intake like the doctor said she should. Ann Marie called over and over with cautionary tales about her own mother's ever-worsening diabetes or an article she had read in *USA Today* on the subject. Alice had to bite her tongue to keep from saying that though Ann Marie's mother had once been pretty enough, she now looked a lot like Winston Churchill in a swimsuit, while Alice herself had never weighed an ounce over 119 pounds, other than during her pregnancies.

They said Alice should be smarter with her money, because in the wintertime, cooped up in her house with a Manhattan or a glass of cabernet, she enjoyed buying items off the television every now and then—*Time Life* music collections, hand blenders that promised perfectly thick soups in minutes, even a replica of Lincoln's log cabin for her granddaughter Patty's children. But she never spent much, not more than \$19.99. She went to the department stores in the mall after church one Sunday a month, and

made herself feel better by trying on silk scarves and lipstick or mascara at the Chanel counter. But she certainly didn't buy any of it. She just memorized the feel and the look, and then went to Marshalls and bought the closest knockoff. She followed the sales at Macy's and Filene's like a hawk. She clipped coupons every morning, and called Ann Marie to let her know about any really good deals.

Still, it was hard to keep much money in the bank just between her pension and Daniel's. A couple years back, when Patrick looked over her taxes, he frowned and said, "You're shelling out a heck of a lot more than you're bringing in. You need to reverse that situation, pronto."

Her very first thought was that perhaps she ought to sell the property in Maine. It surprised her that she would even consider it, but there it was.

Alice wasn't particularly attached to the big house, but she still felt sentimental about the cottage, with its familiar details, and stories from their past tucked inside each cupboard and under every bed. On the doorway leading to the kitchen, hundreds of dates and initials had been written in by hand, chronicling the heights of her children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews over the years. This was where Clare had learned to walk, and Patrick had broken his arm one summer, trying to jump off the roof of the screen porch and fly like Superman. Where her grandchildren had first stepped in sand and had their tiny bodies dipped into the ocean. Where she and Daniel had taken countless strolls to look at the stars, hand in hand, not a word spoken.

But those were only memories. The place wasn't moving forward anymore, not for Alice. In recent years, her children had even created an asinine schedule for the cottage: One month per family each summer. Kathleen and her kids got June; Patrick, Ann Marie, and theirs got July; Clare, Joe, and Ryan got August.

It made Alice nervous, unsettled, to have to see her children one at a time like this. The joy and spontaneity of summers past were gone now. Daniel's death had ended them as a family. Each had pulled away from the others, and at some point without realizing it, Alice had gone from the matriarch—keeper of the wisdom and the order—to the old lady you had to look in on before the day's fun could begin.

She got the feeling that none of her children particularly liked one another, or worse, that they had no use for each other. So why keep the old place? And why bother coming up, year after year, when it only made her feel lonely, longing for something she'd already had?

It seemed to Alice that everyone these days was out for themselves. The sort of families she and Daniel had grown up in and tried to carry on no longer existed, not really. Her mother had had eight children, including the two babies that died. Daniel's mother had had ten. Though she had

hated the noise and the chaos and the sacrifice this implied back then, now Alice saw that it gave you something, being part of a family like that. Her own children and their children would never understand it. That was why they were so comfortable splitting up their summer home, or living a few miles apart but only seeing one another every couple of weeks. Or, in Kathleen's case, moving clear across the country for no good reason. Worms, for Christ's sake.

She gently laid the plates in a cardboard box on the floor. The box already contained the second teapot they had kept around forever, and some old dish towels, and a *Kiss Me, I'm Irish* coffee mug that had once belonged to her brother Timothy. Alice took the mug out and placed it back in the cabinet.

She missed her brothers more now than she had when they died, years earlier. And lately, she was haunted by memories of her sister; of what might have been had Mary lived. That past winter had marked the sixtieth year since Mary's death. On the twenty-eighth of November, Alice had thought to go to the grave site. She hadn't been since she could remember. Her parents were buried there, too, all three names on a single headstone, as well as the names of the two babies who were lost back in the twenties. But Alice knew that if she went, she would hope to feel some part of them floating in the air around her, and she knew just as well that they weren't there.

She tried to put it from her mind, but when she opened her copy of *The Boston Globe* that day, she found a full-page story about the anniversary of the fire in the Metro section, complete with photographs. There were recollections of all of the most famous victims: The old Western film star Buck Jones had been taken to a hospital and died minutes before his wife reached his bedside to say good-bye. The body of a young woman was found in the phone booth, where she had tried in vain to call her father to come save her; a couple married that day in Cambridge both died, along with their entire bridal party. And then there was the one they called Maiden Mary, the woman who perished without knowing that her beloved planned to propose the very next day.

Alice had read her sister's name and, remembering that night, she was gripped with the sort of guilt she had not felt in years. There was no one she could tell. None of her children would understand. Daniel was dead, and if he had been alive, she still probably wouldn't have dared to say a word.

She willed herself not to think about it, but minutes later she was sobbing uncontrollably at the kitchen sink. Her chest seized up. She wondered if she was having a heart attack.

Alice wished she could go to church—her own church, which had been the comforting backdrop to so much joy and sorrow. The fact that she

couldn't made the pain all the worse. She hadn't been able to save the place, she knew that. Yet the fact of the closure still surprised her from time to time. Her priest from St. Agnes had been shipped off to a parish in Connecticut, and she had no idea how to reach him. She felt utterly alone.

She thought then of her summer priest, Father Donnelly. She called him with shaking hands, unsure of what she'd say—she had kept the secret for sixty years. She knew that confession meant telling it all, but for now, she told him some version of the truth, the parts that Daniel knew.

He was impossibly kind to her, and said that she needed to forgive herself, the same as her husband had always said.

"Please," she said over and over. "Give me a penance. Give me some way to fix this."

She didn't know how to say to anyone, even a priest, how terrified she was of Hell. But she knew that soon it would be too late.

"Alice, we all need to focus on doing good work with the time we have left," he said. "There's no reason to dwell on the past. Just think about what you can do now."

In Alice's day, a priest would absolve you of your sins by making you pray or go without. For Lent, you should deprive yourself of candy or perfume or gin, whatever it was that you liked best in life. But nowadays, it seemed that they wanted you to do something good instead: Paint a house, or collect money for UNICEF, or volunteer with troubled children. Something.

After they hung up, she could breathe again. It felt somewhat relieving to say the words out loud. But even so, she poured herself a glass of wine and got into bed before six.

A month later, right after Christmas, Father Donnelly came to Boston to visit friends, and stopped by Alice's house for lunch. He asked if she was feeling better after their talk, and she said she was, though it wasn't really true. Thoughts of Mary had been with her ever since, and his words had lingered: *Just think about what you can do now*. There was nothing she could do to bring her sister back or to redeem herself.

She served the priest a defrosted chicken potpie she had made weeks earlier. They sat in her kitchen and spoke of other things, while outside, snow fell on the rhododendron bushes. At some point the conversation turned to St. Michael's by the Sea. Alice watched the worry lines that crinkled around Father Donnelly's eyes as he spoke. Funds were dwindling. The rectory was falling apart. The church roof was in bad shape, and there was mold all over the cellar, which filled up with water every time it rained.

"We'll be lucky if the place lasts ten more years," he said. "There just isn't any money for upkeep."

Alice couldn't bear to see it lost like St. Agnes had been. Suddenly, she knew what she ought to do—"Father, it might put you at ease to know that my family and I have decided I should give my property in Maine to St. Michael's when I die," she said. "Between the house and the cottage, there's enough room to sleep probably ten or twelve men comfortably. Or you could sell it. It's worth over two million dollars."

Father Donnelly turned red, just as Daniel had when he got embarrassed as a young man.

"Oh Alice," he said. "I certainly wasn't asking—"

"I know," she said. "But really. We had already decided."

"I can't impose on your family like that," he said.

"I've been going to St. Michael's every summer since before you were born," she said sternly. "It's given me plenty. It's only right to give back. Besides, it's not like my children cherish the place."

Once she said it she realized that all of the kids, especially Patrick, would be furious with her for not consulting them. But why should she? It was her property, after all. They had certainly never asked her opinion about the cottage schedule. Clare and Patrick didn't need any of the money. And Kathleen had spent most of Daniel's savings already. Every time she thought of this, Alice was forced to remember the way she had cast aside her pride and asked Kathleen to help her talk sense into Daniel when he got sick. Kathleen had refused, a fact that Alice could never forgive. Daniel might still be alive today if not for his decision and Kathleen's willingness to go along with it. But Alice was powerless to change that now.

"You should take some time to think about it," Father Donnelly had said. "Talk it over with your family. It's a huge decision, Alice." She knew it was as good as made.

"I already spoke to my family about this and we're all in agreement," she said. Later that week, she met with the lawyer and changed her will. The three acres and two houses in Maine would go to St. Michael's. She called Father Donnelly to tell him that it was finalized. "Oh, thank you," he said, his voice filled with relief. "Please tell your children how incredibly grateful we are."

"I will," she lied.

Alice had decided not to tell the kids. They should be able to make their memories the same as always, without feeling the weight of an ending coming on. Plus, she didn't want to face their reaction if it was bad. They could be angry with her once she was dead and buried.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Maine*]

# *The Night Circus*

Erin Morgenstern

## **EXCERPT**

### **ANTICIPATION**

The circus arrives without warning.

No announcements precede it, no paper notices on downtown posts and billboards, no mentions or advertisements in local newspapers. It is simply there, when yesterday it was not.

The towering tents are striped in white and black, no golds and crimsons to be seen. No color at all, save for the neighboring trees and the grass of the surrounding fields. Black-and-white stripes on grey sky; countless tents of varying shapes and sizes, with an elaborate wrought-iron fence encasing them in a colorless world. Even what little ground is visible from outside is black or white, painted or powdered, or treated with some other circus trick.

But it is not open for business. Not just yet.

Within hours everyone in town has heard about it. By afternoon the news has spread several towns over. Word of mouth is a more effective method of advertisement than typeset words and exclamation points on paper pamphlets or posters. It is impressive and unusual news, the sudden appearance of a mysterious circus. People marvel at the staggering height of the tallest tents. They stare at the clock that sits just inside the gates that no one can properly describe.

And the black sign painted in white letters that hangs upon the gates, the one that reads:

*Opens at Nightfall*

*Closes at Dawn*

“What kind of circus is only open at night?” people ask. No one has a proper answer, yet as dusk approaches there is a substantial crowd of spectators gathering outside the gates.

You are amongst them, of course. Your curiosity got the better of you, as curiosity is wont to do. You stand in the fading light, the scarf around

your neck pulled up against the chilly evening breeze, waiting to see for yourself exactly what kind of circus only opens once the sun sets.

The ticket booth clearly visible behind the gates is closed and barred. The tents are still, save for when they ripple ever so slightly in the wind. The only movement within the circus is the clock that ticks by the passing minutes, if such a wonder of sculpture can even be called a clock.

The circus looks abandoned and empty. But you think perhaps you can smell caramel wafting through the evening breeze, beneath the crisp scent of the autumn leaves. A subtle sweetness at the edges of the cold.

The sun disappears completely beyond the horizon, and the remaining luminosity shifts from dusk to twilight. The people around you are growing restless from waiting, a sea of shuffling feet, murmuring about abandoning the endeavor in search of someplace warmer to pass the evening. You yourself are debating departing when it happens.

First, there is a popping sound. It is barely audible over the wind and conversation. A soft noise like a kettle about to boil for tea. Then comes the light.

All over the tents, small lights begin to flicker, as though the entirety of the circus is covered in particularly bright fireflies. The waiting crowd quiets as it watches this display of illumination. Someone near you gasps. A small child claps his hands with glee at the sight.

When the tents are all aglow, sparkling against the night sky, the sign appears.

Stretched across the top of the gates, hidden in curls of iron, more firefly-like lights flicker to life. They pop as they brighten, some accompanied by a shower of glowing white sparks and a bit of smoke. The people nearest to the gates take a few steps back.

At first, it is only a random pattern of lights. But as more of them ignite, it becomes clear that they are aligned in scripted letters. First a *C* is distinguishable, followed by more letters. A *q*, oddly, and several *e*'s. When the final bulb pops a light, and the smoke and sparks dissipate, it is finally legible, this elaborate incandescent sign. Leaning to your left to gain a better view, you can see that it reads:

*Le Cirque des Rêves*

Some in the crowd smile knowingly, while others frown and look questioningly at their neighbors. A child near you tugs on her mother's sleeve, begging to know what it says.

"The Circus of Dreams," comes the reply. The girl smiles delightedly.

Then the iron gates shudder and unlock, seemingly by their own volition. They swing outward, inviting the crowd inside.

Now the circus is open.

Now you may enter.

## PART I:

### Primordium

“The Whole of Le Cirque des Rêves is formed by a series of circles. Perhaps it is a tribute to the origin of the word ‘circus,’ deriving from the Greek *kirkos* meaning circle, or ring. There are many such nods to the phenomenon of the circus in a historical sense, though it is hardly a traditional circus. Rather than a single tent with rings enclosed within, this circus contains clusters of tents like pyramids, some large and others quite small. They are set within circular paths, contained within a circular fence. Looping and continuous.”

—*Friedrick Thiessen, 1892*

“A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moon-light, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.”

—*Oscar Wilde, 1888*

## UNEXPECTED POST

### New York, February 1873

The man billed as Prospero the Enchanter receives a fair amount of correspondence via the theater office, but this is the first envelope addressed to him that contains a suicide note, and it is also the first to arrive carefully pinned to the coat of a five-year-old girl.

The lawyer who escorts her to the theater refuses to explain despite the manager’s protestations, abandoning her as quickly as he can with no more than a shrug and the tip of a hat.

The theater manager does not need to read the envelope to know who the girl is for. The bright eyes peering out from under a cloud of unruly brown curls are smaller, wider versions of the magician’s own.

He takes her by the hand, her small fingers hanging limp within his. She refuses to remove her coat despite the warmth of the theater, giving only an adamant shake of her head when he asks her why.

The manager takes the girl to his office, not knowing what else to do with her. She sits quietly on an uncomfortable chair beneath a line of framed posters advertising past productions, surrounded by boxes of tickets and receipts. The manager brings her a cup of tea with an extra lump of sugar, but it remains on the desk, untouched, and grows cold.

The girl does not move, does not fidget in her seat. She stays perfectly still with her hands folded in her lap. Her gaze is fixed downward, focused on her boots that do not quite touch the floor. There is a small scuff on one toe, but the laces are knotted in perfect bows.

The sealed envelope hangs from the second topmost button of her coat, until Prospero arrives.

She hears him before the door opens, his footsteps heavy and echoing in the hall, unlike the measured pace of the manager who has come and gone several times, quiet as a cat.

“There is also a . . . package for you, sir,” the manager says as he opens the door, ushering the magician into the cramped office before slipping off to attend to other theater matters, having no desire to witness what might become of this encounter.

The magician scans the office, a stack of letters in one hand, a black velvet cape lined with shockingly white silk cascading behind him, expecting a paper-wrapped box or crate. Only when the girl looks up at him with his own eyes does he realize what the theater manager was referring to.

Prospero the Enchanter’s immediate reaction upon meeting his daughter is a simple declaration of: “Well, fuck.”

The girl returns her attention to her boots.

The magician closes the door behind him, dropping the stack of letters on the desk next to the teacup as he looks at the girl.

He rips the envelope from her coat, leaving the pin clinging steadfastly to its button.

While the writing on the front bears his stage name and the theater address, the letter inside greets him with his given name, Hector Bowen.

He skims over the contents, any emotional impact desired by the author failing miserably and finally. He pauses at the only fact he deems relevant: that this girl now left in his custody is, obviously, his own daughter and that her name is Celia.

“She should have named you Miranda,” the man called Prospero the Enchanter says to the girl with a chuckle. “I suppose she was not clever enough to think of it.”

The girl looks up at him again. Dark eyes narrow beneath her curls.

The teacup on the desk begins to shake. Ripples disrupt the calm surface as cracks tremble across the glaze, and then it collapses in shards of flowered porcelain. Cold tea pools in the saucer and drips onto the floor, leaving sticky trails along the polished wood.

The magician’s smile vanishes. He glances back at the desk with a frown, and the spilled tea begins seeping back up from the floor. The cracked and broken pieces stand and re-form themselves around the liquid until the cup sits complete once more, soft swirls of steam rising into the air.

The girl stares at the teacup, her eyes wide.

Hector Bowen takes his daughter's face in his gloved hand, scrutinizing her expression for a moment before releasing her, his fingers leaving long red marks across her cheeks.

"You might be interesting," he says.

The girl does not reply.

He makes several attempts to rename her in the following weeks, but she refuses to respond to anything but Celia.

Several months later, once he decides she is ready, the magician writes a letter of his own. He includes no address, but it reaches its destination across the ocean nonetheless.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Night Circus*]

# *The Astral*

Kate Christensen

## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter One**

Toxic water streamed with gold like the belly of a turning fish: sunset over Newtown Creek. Tattered pinkish-black clouds blew overhead in the March wind. The water below me rippled with tendons and cowlicks. Just across the brief waterway were the low mute banks of Hunters Point, church spire, low-slung old warehouses. An empty barge made its way down the creek toward the East River and the long glittering skyscrapery isle. I stood behind the chain-link fence the city had slapped up to keep the likes of me from jumping in.

I was hungry and in need of a bath and a drink. At my back thronged the dark ghosts of Greenpoint, feeding silently off the underwater lake of spilled oil that lay under it all, the polyfluorocarbons from the industrial warehouses. I had named this place the End of the World years ago, when it was an even more polluted, hopeless wasteland, but it still fit.

As I stood staring out through the webbing of fence, my mind cast itself through the rivulets of my own lost verse. I netted little flashes of lines and phrases I'd been reworking, "Held spellbound, your mollusk voice / Quietly swathing my cochlea / In tentacles of damask cloth" and "Slow-weathered verdigris of our once bronzed thighs," but they sounded dead to me now. All I could really hear was Luz, Luz, Luz like the feeble pulsing signals of a dying heart. Heartache was a physical thing, a pain in my chest, a sort of recoiling tension with an ache like a bruise. There was a withheld quality to my breathing lately, as if I had been sucker punched and was waiting to get my wind back, but no wind came. I could remember whole published poems, but if these new, destroyed verses still existed in my brain, they fled from the webbing of my memory like darting schools of tiny fish, scooching away the instant before capture.

I turned away from this butt end of waterfront warehouses and walked back the way I'd come, along Manhattan Avenue, past the flophouse where

I lived now, bare mattresses piled in the front window. I passed junk shops full of old radios, used dolls, and cowboy shirts, Goldsholle and Garfinkel Inc., Mexican bodegas, liquor stores, the abandoned hulk of JK Restaurant Supply with its twisted metal grate, small markets with root vegetables in boxes along the sidewalk, butchers' shops festooned with loops of kielbasy. I went through the intersection at Greenpoint Avenue, the dingy McDonald's, defeated Starbucks, opposing Arab newsstands, and on to the old Associated Supermarket with its sexy Polish girls pouting at nothing as they rang up your groceries. The outdoor clock at the Smolenski Funeral Home was permanently stopped at 6:30, both hands pointing straight down to hell.

I hung a right off Manhattan Avenue and aimed myself toward the glowing neon sign in the window of Marlene's, one of the last local old-man bars. Was I an old man yet, at fifty-seven? I'd been going there for years. The place had rusty tin ceilings, original wainscoting, two-dollar drafts in small, icy mugs, and moose antlers. The one concession to the new millennium was a flat-screen the size of a small car.

"Hello there, Harry," said George as I came in. The most deadpan voice I have ever heard. If he has any feelings that cause him to lie awake wracked with turmoil in the small hours of the morning, he's not telling. What he'll do is pour you a grudging whiskey finger for three bucks. Never a double; that's not the way they do things at Marlene's.

George has a pocked face the color of gray chalk, a thin colorless wavelet of hair pasted to his scalp, and small protruding eyes. He has a day job at the Acme Smoked Fish warehouse on Gem Street, but he moonlights, so to speak, at Marlene's, for the social life it affords him; otherwise he would have none, he once confided in me with endearing frankness. Marlene is his sister.

I parked myself on a stool midway down the empty bar. George handed me a whiskey and I swallowed it whole and felt a little warmer. My mother was Irish, my father English, but whiskey unites my opposing factions; I like the smokier, pricier, older single malts, but the cheap blended brands do the job just the same.

"How are things, George?" I asked as he set my second whiskey before me.

"Never better," he said. "Yourself, Harry?"

I looked him in the eye. "Never better."

Marlene's opens every day before noon and closes in the very early morning and is almost always populated by its regulars, most notably several local women who park themselves in a row at the bar and settle in for the duration like birds on a wire, smoking and kibitzing and getting shitfaced. But here George and I were tonight with the place to ourselves,

separated by a barrier of scuffed wood, he serving, me drinking, a scenario that plays itself out everywhere, all the time, two lonely men doing some manner of business together, not quite making eye contact.

“Couldn’t find the remote the other night,” said George. “Looked for it everywhere, all over my apartment. High and low. Even tried the freezer.”

“What were you watching?”

“One of my programs,” he said. “The one with the doctors. So I’m looking for it and the phone rings. I go to pick up the phone and press the remote and say, Hello? So there was the remote. Then I couldn’t find the phone. Finally found it on top of the fridge where I left it when I was looking for the remote. Sometimes it seems like the world is playing a joke.”

“And it’s not always funny,” I said. “By the way, Luz threw me out.”

“What? She did? When was this?” He looked truly shocked. Long-term marriages apparently appear as permanent to others as geographical formations; when one dissolves, it’s as if Fuji or Fiji had disappeared overnight.

“Not too long ago,” I said.

“Well,” he said, “that’s tough. That’s just tough. So where you living now?”

“I’m renting a room in the hotel down by Newtown Creek.”

He cocked his head and set another whiskey in front of me. “This one’s on me.”

“Thanks, George.” I lifted my glass. “‘Blindly we lurch through life like crones / Plying high heels on the cobblestones.’” That was from one of my old poems, the ones that were as accessible to my memory as my own name.

“Sure,” he said. He was used to my delusions that I was the neighborhood bard. He folded his arms and looked down at the scuffed surface of the bar. “Those cobblestone bricks down on West Street are made of wood, not clay, did you know that?”

“Near Noble Street,” I said. “You can see the tree rings in them if you look closely. I wrote a poem about it. ‘Frets, concentric, fraught with letters from old clouds.’”

“I was afraid they’d catch fire when the Terminal Market went up a few years back.”

“Me too,” I said. “I kept thinking, if the wind were blowing inland, the whole neighborhood would catch. It would have happened so fast—a piece of burning ash falling just so.”

I had watched the grand old warehouse burn with Luz beside me, both of our faces pressed to the same windowpane.

George shot me a look. “Right, you live in the Astral,” he said. “That must have been scary.”

“Used to.”

“That’s right,” said George, the tip of his tongue swiping at his upper lip. “Maybe you’re better off out of that place. I hear there’s mushrooms growing in the bathrooms and bedbugs living in the furniture. I hear the super has a photo studio in the basement where he takes pictures of young Asian girls.” He said this last without a whiff of salaciousness. George seems to have excised the sexual part of his brain as a way of keeping his life simple. Smart man.

The door opened, and Karina entered and charged down the bar toward me. “Hi, Dad!” she said. “I thought you’d be here. I wish you would get a cell phone.”

“Why do I need one?” I asked as she kissed me on the cheek. “You know where to find me.”

“I’ll have a draft, please,” she told George, then said to me, “I’ve been worried about you. How are you?”

“Never better,” I said hopefully, but I already knew she wasn’t having any of it, and anyway, I was flattered by her concern. My daughter had just turned twenty-five, but unlike other girls her age, she was totally uninterested in anything beyond a narrow range of severely ascetic passions, the most intense of these being Dumpster diving, colloquially known as freeganism. She regularly foraged for and redistributed quantities of garbage, or rather “perfectly good food and clothing,” to “the poor,” of which I was now, come to think of it, one. In addition to trying to save the world from its proliferation of waste and to save the poor from deprivation, she has never been able to shake the notion that she’s solely responsible for the well-being of her family.

Karina’s coloring is like mine, pure English/Irish, reddish-haired, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, rather than her olive-skinned, black-haired, dark-eyed Mexican mother’s, but her face looks so much like Luz’s—oval shape, large eyes, blunt nose, a quiveringly focused expression like an alert animal’s—it pierced my heart just then to look at her.

“Come on,” she said. “Tell the truth.”

“The truth,” I told her as she took a swig of bitter foam, “is that life goes on, like it or not, till you croak.”

“Oh Dad,” she said without appearing to have heard me, “I wish you would come and live at my place. That hotel is a death trap. Guys knife each other in the hallway.”

“Thank you,” I said with a brief internal quailing. Had it come to this, that my own daughter thought I was incapable of taking care of myself? Of course it had; she had thought that since the day she was born, and she was right. “Thank you, Karina, but really, I’m all right.”

“I have that extra little room,” she said, bossy and insistent.

“When is the last time you heard from your brother?”

“Hector? He never calls me.”

“I haven’t been able to contact him for a while. The only number I have for him is some sort of public telephone, and no one seems to be willing to go and fetch him when I call. He’s always in some sort of meeting or working or asleep.”

“Why are you trying to call him? You never call me.”

“Because I’m worried about him, and I’m not worried about you.”

“You can’t call just to say hi? Look, I came all the way over to Greenpoint to track you down. And Hector can’t even bother to come to the friggin’ phone.”

“I’m worried about him,” I repeated, “and I’m not worried about you.”

She laughed. “Okay, okay. But come on! He’s probably just busy.” She took another sip of beer. “Dad, please come and stay at my place. Please. You’re living with junkies and vagrants and lunatics. It’s dangerous.”

“I like it there,” I said. “It suits my purposes for now. I don’t want to move all the way to Crown Heights. That’s not my neighborhood. I don’t know anyone there, and it’s too far from Marlene’s, but thanks for the offer.”

“Then please get a cell phone. I have a heap of cast-off phones in a drawer, so all you need is a cheap monthly plan. Or pay as you go.”

“I don’t have any money,” I said. “Have you seen your mother lately?”

“I just came from there. She needed help getting rid of some things.”

“My things,” I said without inflection.

“Well, she says you don’t want them.”

“I want them,” I said, “to stay right where they are, waiting for me to live among them again.”

This put an end to our conversation for a moment. Behind me on the enormous flat-screen, a coiffed Latina in a blue jacket looked directly into the camera and with plush red lips intoned the goings-on of today’s world with cool, sultry authority. She reminded me of Luz. But everything reminded me of Luz right now, even the moose antlers above the bar. They made me think of our twentieth-anniversary trip; there had been moose antlers over our bed in the Adirondacks cabin we’d rented for a week. Luz had asked me to take them down and put them in a closet, or better yet, outside where they belonged. They were disgusting, she said; they were cruel. That I hadn’t done so, on the grounds that it was not my place to redecorate property belonging to others, was ranked thereafter in her hypothetical marital black book as one of my offenses. At least, I had always assumed it was hypothetical. Maybe she had written it all down somewhere. If so, I wondered what she would do with her compendium now that it was all over. Sell it at a stoop sale? Publish it as an antimarriage manifesto?

“Oh, well,” I said, “never mind about that. Will you come with me to visit Hector tomorrow?”

Karina lifted up her glass and looked into her beer as if it were piss, then set it down again. “I have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“Come with me,” I said. “The garbage will wait.”

“It’s not that. I have a deadline. I’m writing an article for an online magazine. It’s going to take all day because I spent this afternoon tracking my parents down and making sure they were all right.”

I said before I could stop myself, “So your mother is all right.”

“Of course she is,” said my daughter. “She’d be all right in a nuclear war. But underneath, you know.”

“I know,” I said. I was too sad to say any more.

George had moved down to the far end of the bar and was concentrating on the TV news, or seeming to, while he busied himself with a pinkie fingertip, pulling wax from his ear. I motioned to him, caught his eye, pointed to my whiskey glass. He nodded and made his way down the bar with the bottle.

“Dad, I think this whole thing is horrible,” said Karina. “I’m not taking sides, I swear, I love you both, and it’s none of my business. But is it true you’re involved with Marion? No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Is that what your mother told you?”

“Well, it’s classic. Men usually have affairs with the women they’re closest to. Their female friends, their wives’ sisters or best friends, their co-workers, their friends’ wives . . .”

To mask my horror that Luz would tell our daughter this, I grinned at Karina. “How do you know so much about men’s extramarital affairs? You’re a lesbian. And you’re not married.”

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Astral*]

# *The Things We Cherished*

Pam Jenoff

## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter 1**

**Philadelphia, 2009**

“You know, don’t you, that you’re looking at twenty-five to life?” Charlotte peered over the top of the file at the seventeen-year-old with the rows of tiny braids who slouched in the chair on the other side of the graffiti-covered table, staring intently at his sneakers.

The preliminary hearing had not gone well. Charlotte had hoped that the judge would take one look at Marquan’s baby face, with its wide smooth cheeks and the unblinking almond-shaped eyes, and know that he was not a danger to anyone, that he did not belong here. She thought that Judge Annette D’Amici, who herself had once been a public defender, might have a soft spot for a teenager with no record of prior violence who was about the same age as her grandchildren. But in a streak of phenomenally bad luck, Judge D’Amici had called in sick, replaced for the day by Paul Rodgers. Rodgers, a political wannabe who viewed the bench as a stepping-stone to a higher state office, had earned a reputation as a hanging judge during his first term. He barely glanced at Marquan before banging his gavel and remanding him to the juvenile wing of the city prison.

Normally, Charlotte would have chalked the hearing up as a loss and gone on to her next file and courtroom, dispensing with the morning’s caseload. But Marquan was different. They had met almost two years earlier when he’d been a scared fifteen-year-old brought in on a petty drug charge. There was a sparkle that told her he had intelligence, a quiet dignity in his perfect posture and the way he looked at her with those somber brown eyes, seeming to see right through. He had promise. She’d done all the things she usually didn’t get to do with a docket of thousands of cases per year: getting Marquan into a first-time offenders’ track that left him

with no permanent record, as well as an after-school mentoring program in his neighborhood. So why was he sitting here now, dull-eyed and hardened, facing a murder charge for a carjacking gone wrong?

Because it simply wasn't enough. The after-school programs amounted to only a few hours per week, a drop in an ocean of poverty and drugs and violence and boredom in which these kids had to swim every night on the streets. There had been a police chase that ended with an SUV crushed against the pavement steps of a row house, two small children pinned fatally beneath its wheels. Marquan hadn't meant to hurt anyone; of that she was certain. He had a little brother the same age as those kids, whom he walked to school every day, escorted home again each evening. No, he had simply been along for the ride when the stupid plan was hatched and he didn't have the strength or good sense to say no.

Charlotte drummed the edge of the table, running her fingers along a heart that someone had carved into the wood with a knife. "If you would testify," she began. There had been three boys in the car, but Marquan was the only one who had not fled the scene. "I mean, if you're willing to say who was there with you . . ."

She did not finish the sentence, knowing the proposal was futile. No one talked where Marquan came from. don't snitch! screamed the brazen T-shirts of the kids she passed in the Gallery food court at lunch, kids ditching school and hanging out, waiting for trouble to find them. Snitching meant never going home again, never closing your eyes and knowing if you or your loved ones would be safe. Marquan would sooner take the sentence.

She exhaled sharply, glancing up at the water-stained ceiling. "Anything you want to tell me?" she asked, closing the file, watching for the imperceptible shake of his head. "If you change your mind, or if you need something, have your case officer call me." She pushed back from the table and stood, knocking on the door to be let out.

A few minutes later, Charlotte stepped from the elevator and made her way across the lobby of the Criminal Justice Center, thronged with prospective jurors and families of the victims and the accused who pushed past the metal detector toward the security desk for information. On the street, she swam through a cloud of cigarette smoke left by courthouse clerks lingering before the start of their day, then paused, her eyes traveling left toward the hulking Reading Terminal Market. A walk through the open stalls, a gastronomic world's fair touting everything from Amish delicacies to lo mein and cheesesteaks, would have been just the thing to clear her head, but there wasn't time.

As she reached the busy intersection beneath the shadow of City Hall, William Penn peering down piously from his perch atop the tower,

Charlotte paused, inhaling the crisp late-September air. There were only a few days like this each fall in Philadelphia, before the persistent humidity of summer gave way to the cold rainy winter.

Still thinking of Marquan, Charlotte entered the office building. On the sixth floor, she stepped out of the elevator and proceeded down the drab corridor. The voice of section chief Mitch Ramirez, arguing with a prosecutor, bellowed through an open doorway. "Are you going to fucking tell me . . . ?" Charlotte smiled as she passed. Mitch was a legend among the defenders, a seventy-two-year-old dinosaur who had marched in the civil rights protests of the sixties and could still go toe to toe with the best of them when he thought his client was getting a raw deal.

She stopped before the door to her office, indiscernible from the others she had just passed. It wasn't much; a glorified closet, really, with a small desk and two chairs wedged close together—a far cry from the marble and mahogany suite she'd had when she was a summer associate at a large New York firm. But it was all hers. It had taken two years just to get it, to fight her way out of the pit of rookie defenders who shared the sea of cubicles one floor below and have a door that closed so she could hear herself think.

Charlotte reached for the handle, then stopped, studying it. The door was ajar. She was certain that she had closed it when she left for court that morning, but perhaps one of the other attorneys had dropped off a file. As she stepped inside, her breath caught.

There, in the narrow chair across from her desk, sat her ex-boyfriend.

"Brian?" she asked, as though unsure of his name. The word came out in a croak.

He stood, unfolding from the chair. Brian had the tall, broad-shouldered frame that fashion houses paid good money for, brown hair that flopped improbably to his forehead no matter how many times he got it cut to a shorter, more professional length. Despite the muscular arms that suggested a threat on the basketball court, he conveyed an air of vulnerability that implied he might cry at a chick flick and made women want to take care of him.

Looking at him now, it was almost possible to forget that he had broken her heart.

"Hello, Charlotte," he said, his use of her full name a reminder of the years that had come and gone since their last meeting. He bent to kiss her and a hint of his familiar Burberry cologne tickled her nose, sending her places she had hoped never to go again. "You're looking well." He brushed off his legs, his expensive suit woefully out of place in her tiny drab office. She was suddenly self-conscious about her black knit pantsuit, practical and unflattering. His Chanel-and-heels wife would not have been caught dead in it.

He waited for her to speak, then filled the silence when she did not. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Your secretary let me in.”

She did not, Charlotte reminded herself, have a secretary. He must have been referring to Doreen, the office admin. Doreen was usually too busy updating her Facebook page to help visitors, but it was easy to see how Brian might have charmed her into unlocking the office and letting him wait. She studied him again. There was a paunch that bespoke too many overpriced steakhouse dinners, missed visits to the racquet club he once frequented daily. But he still had that appeal that had sucked her in almost a decade ago—that had gotten her in trouble in the first place.

She took a deep breath, centered herself. “What are you doing here?”

His expression changed as he processed the new rules of the game: pleasantries were to be dispensed with, business stated. “I’m in town for work and I was hoping to talk to you about something.”

You’ve left Danielle, she thought suddenly. Realized after all these years that you made a fatal mistake, that I was the one. The scenario rushed through her head: his profuse apologies and tears, her eventual gracious acceptance and forgiveness. It would be messy, of course. There was the divorce, the question of whether to reside here or in New York. “About a case I’m working on,” he added.

The vision evaporated, a raindrop on a warm, humid day, so quickly gone she might have imagined it. So this isn’t about us after all, she thought, feeling very foolish. Brian wanted something, but it wasn’t her.

“Let me buy you lunch?” he asked.

She shook her head. Thirty seconds around Brian and he was already toying with her mind. She needed to get as far away from him as possible. “I can’t. I’m due back in court in half an hour.”

“Of course. Dinner then. Does six work?” She could see him calculating the time that the meal might take, whether he could make the nine o’clock train back to Manhattan. Back to Danielle. Her stomach twisted, the bile undiluted by the years.

For a second she considered taking back an ounce of the control that had been stolen from her all those years ago and declining his last-minute invitation. She might have plans after all. Usually they consisted of nothing more than Thai takeout in front of the television, a hot night of CSI reruns with her cat, Mitzi, but he didn’t have to know that. Her curiosity was piqued, though. Did Brian really have business in Philadelphia or had he come all this way just to see her? And what on earth could it be about?

“All right,” she replied, trying to sound casual.

“Buddakan?” The choice was an obvious out-of-towner selection, one of the pricey Stephen Starr restaurants that received national attention and spawned a clone of the venue in New York. The furthest thing possible

from the quiet BYOBs she loved, like the Northern Italian one in Greenwich Village they had frequented as students, its name faded with the years.

She considered suggesting an alternative venue like Santori's, a Greek trattoria in her neighborhood, with its gorgeous hummus plate and complimentary ouzo shot at the end of the meal. But this was not a social call and she didn't need Brian invading that part of her world. "Fine."

"I'll let you work then," he said, walking from the office, not looking back. That was Brian. He treated life like a movie set—when he left a scene, the lights went out and it simply ceased to exist.

It was not until the door closed behind him that she sank to the chair, trying not to shake.

They had met during law school while interning with the war crimes tribunal at The Hague, assisting with the prosecution of genocide in the former Yugoslavia. She could still remember walking into the tiny Dutch bar, and seeing Brian for the first time. He was holding court amidst a semicircle of other interns, mostly female. She'd stood there for several seconds, staring at him in spite of herself. Though she could not hear what he was saying, there was something in the way he spoke that captivated her, a confident manner that seemed larger than life. His head turned in her direction. Embarrassed, she started to look away, but then his gaze caught hers and she was paralyzed, unable to move.

A minute later, he broke from his minions and made his way to Charlotte, holding out a second beer as though he'd been waiting for her. "Brian Warrington."

"Charlotte Gold," she managed, trying not to stammer.

"I know. You're the Root Tilden from NYU, right?" She hesitated, taken aback. She had not expected him to know who she was or that she'd received the prestigious public-interest fellowship. "I'm at Columbia. I think we're both assigned to the Dukovic case. Your memo on the evidentiary issue was very impressive." She fought the urge to swoon. "I'd like to get your take on one of my witnesses." Just then, the jazz band that had been setting up in the corner started to play and the voices around them were raised to a din. "There's a little bistro just down the street that's quieter. Want to go get something to eat?" Too surprised to answer, Charlotte nodded and followed him from the bar, feeling the stares of the other interns behind her.

After that, they were inseparable. They fell in love over Belgian beer and heated debates about the efficacy of the proposed International Criminal Court. When they returned to Manhattan that fall, she abandoned her Greenwich Village dorm room, accepting his invitation to move into his Upper West Side apartment.

Though it had not been obvious from their egalitarian Dutch housing, she quickly realized once back home that Brian was wealthy. She found herself swept along to warm fall weekends in the Hamptons, holidays at his parents' estate in Chappaqua. She spent less time at school, traveling downtown only for classes. They made plans for after graduation, fellowships with the UN, a short engagement.

Her idyllic world came crashing to a halt in December when she traveled to Philadelphia for what was supposed to be a brief holiday visit with her mother, Winnie, a retired math teacher. The first morning over breakfast, her mother broke the news that she had been keeping until after Charlotte finished final exams: small-cell lung cancer brought on, she suspected, by a smoking habit abandoned years earlier. By the time the persistent cough she'd taken to be allergies had sent her for a chest X-ray it was too late—she was stage four and had just months to live.

Winnie refused to let her take the semester off, so Charlotte commuted back and forth every weekend on Amtrak, watching with disbelief the speed with which her once-strong mother deteriorated. Brian offered to come along, of course, but she always declined, embarrassed to have him see the tiny suburban condo with its dilapidated furniture and yellowed walls. He didn't fight her on it but retreated gracefully, glad to be excused from the messiness of a life not his own. The time apart and her constant worry began to take its toll on their relationship and by March, when her mother had been discharged a final time to hospice care, Charlotte returned to New York to find a strange tube of lipstick beneath the vanity in the bathroom. Later she would wonder if perhaps he left it there purposely, a final act of passive-aggressiveness designed to hasten things to their inevitable conclusion.

She had confronted him that gray afternoon, hoping for denial or at least an explanation, ready to forgive. It was a day still damp and chilly enough to be called winter, their breath foggy in front of them as they clutched Styrofoam cups of coffee that neither actually drank. He looked down at the bench in the southeast corner of Washington Square Park that they had shared in happier times, now defiled because it would always be remembered for this. His face seemed a caricature of itself, drawn and weak. As he started to talk, she braced herself for the platitudes, that they had grown apart, it was just one of those things.

"I've met someone," he said bluntly.

A rock slammed into her stomach. "Her name's Danielle," he continued. "She went to Harvard, two years ahead of us." Of course. Because she couldn't have been someone vacuous and trite. An image flashed through her mind of the holiday party at the firm where Brian was clerking this year. Through the haze of worry and despair over her mother,

Charlotte recalled a sleek blond junior associate, a conversation about summer houses to which she could not at all relate.

“I’m sorry,” he finished. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask about why and when and how. But he was already throwing his cup in the trash and straightening his coat, eager to move on to this new chapter of his life.

Three weeks later, she would learn the rest of the story. She opened the Sunday Times over breakfast and saw the engagement announcement, the happy couple staring back at her, Danielle’s smile wider and more perfect than she remembered. She was flooded with disbelief. In the weeks since Brian told her about his new relationship, Charlotte had consoled herself over pints of Häagen-Dazs and bottles of wine, telling herself that it was nothing serious. Danielle was just the rebound until he figured things out. But in that moment, the truth came home to roost: Brian and Danielle were engaged. How long had they been seeing each other behind her back?

Unable to look away, she forced herself to continue reading. And somewhere between learning that Brian’s grandfather had been CEO of a Fortune 250 company and that the bride would be keeping her name, she felt a sudden sense of release, like the air being let out of a balloon. She was relieved to have been excused from a world where she did not belong, a student given permission to change majors or drop a class that was too hard.

Giving up the rest was easy after that, and she turned down the fellowship to The Hague that she had been scheduled to start after graduation. Instead, she applied for and got the public defender position, returning to Philadelphia and slipping into the city like a pair of comfy old shoes.

That night at five minutes to six, Charlotte stepped out of a cab at Third and Chestnut and glanced down the street in both directions. Old City, once the province of Ben Franklin and the Founding Fathers, was now Philadelphia’s version of trendy and she seldom ventured down to the endless rows of hip bars and restaurants that maligned the Federalist architecture of the neighborhood. Two blocks west, laughter spilled over from the throngs of tourists departing Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell as they boarded their motor coaches for home. A swath of parkland across the street sat in improbable late-day stillness, sunlight slatting through the crisp leaves.

Charlotte paused, wishing she’d been able to override her normal tendencies and arrive casually late. For a minute she considered circling the block, stalling for time to compose herself. But there was no point in delaying the inevitable—the sooner she met with Brian, the sooner she could put him and his devilish green eyes back on that train to New York.

As she approached the restaurant, she studied her reflection in the glass window of an adjacent store, smoothing her shoulder-length brown hair. There hadn’t been time to go home—the modest Queen Village

townhouse she'd bought before the neighborhood had become fashionable was a thirty-five-minute walk from the office, pleasant enough on a nice day, but too far in the wrong direction to make it before dinner. So after work she had stopped in Macy's, the city's one surviving department store. Resisting the urge to buy a new outfit entirely, she settled instead for a crème silk blouse to replace the knit top she'd worn previously under her suit and some makeup and perfume from samples at the Clinique counter.

Inside, Charlotte lingered uncertainly by the reservation desk, adjusting her eyes to the dimmer lighting. The Asian fusion restaurant was a cavernous sea of tables, walls draped in red silk, a massive gold Buddha statue dominating one side of the room. A dozen or more chefs bustled behind clouds of steam in the open kitchen to the rear. At the bar to the left, young twentysomethings tried to impress one another over brightly colored ten-dollar cocktails.

"Can I help you?" the hostess asked without interest. Charlotte did not answer but scanned the room, spotting Brian at a table to the rear. That was unexpected; early was not his style, the notion of waiting for others unpalatable to him. As she approached, he stood, hurriedly tucking a BlackBerry into his jacket pocket.

"Thanks for joining me," he said, sounding like he meant it.

She studied the menu the waitress handed her as she sat, grateful for the reprieve. "Grey Goose martini, up, extra olives," she said. She did not usually drink hard liquor on a work night, but the circumstances called for an exception.

"Same," he said, surprising her again. Brian was strictly a beer drinker, or had been anyway.

"So you're in town for a case?" she asked when the waitress had returned with their drinks and taken their dinner order, a lobster pad thai for her, sesame tuna for him. He did not, she noticed, order an appetizer, further evidence of his hurry to get back to New York and Danielle. Pain stabbed at her stomach as she relived the rejection of a decade ago all over again. But she had not asked for this meeting, she reminded herself; he wanted to see her. "Depositions?" She was suddenly aware of her own Philadelphia accent, the way she seemed to have gone vocally native again in the years since she had returned.

"Just passing through," he replied, his own pronunciation devoid of geographical markings. "I had a meeting in Washington this morning." He was usually so precise, but there was a vagueness now to his words that made her wonder if he was telling the truth. Had he come down from New York just to speak with her?

"How have you been?" he asked, and if the question was just a pleasantry, a necessary step to get where he wanted to go, he gave no indication—his

face and voice conveyed genuine curiosity. He had always had the ability to make anyone think he was on their side, sincerely concerned with their best interests—which was exactly what made him so dangerous. She had not suspected anything was wrong, until the very moment he told her he was leaving for someone else.

“Great,” she replied, a beat too quickly. She suddenly felt naked, exposed. “I’m working with juveniles . . .” She almost tuned herself out as she rattled on, wearing her job like a cloak. But the work, about which she was usually so passionate, sounded provincial, unsophisticated. “And you?”

“Fine. I just came off a two-month securities trial and we, that is, Dani . . .” He hesitated, as though for a moment he had forgotten the impropriety of speaking about his wife to the woman he had left for her. As though Charlotte were anyone. “Anyway, a vacation would be nice. Maybe Aspen.”

Charlotte imagined the two of them swooshing through the powder in perfect unison. She had always been a train wreck on skis, a menace to herself and those around her. “But then this new matter came up,” he added, as she took a large swallow of her drink, steeling herself. “That’s why I wanted to see you.”

“Me?” she blurted out, louder than intended, nearly choking on the liquid. Brian was a securities litigator, defending lawsuits for the biggest brokerage houses in the country. What kind of matter could he possibly want to discuss with her?

He took a sip of martini, grimacing. “It’s a pro bono matter.”

Charlotte faltered, caught off guard. Pro bono work had never been Brian’s thing—he had empathy for the less fortunate on an abstract, policy level, a sort of noblesse oblige inherent in his liberal, upper-class background. But he couldn’t deal with the messiness that surrounded the actual clientele, the ambiguity of the individual cases. What had he gotten himself into now? It must be something high profile, she decided, a death penalty case, perhaps. Her annoyance rose. Firms were taking those on with increasing frequency because of the good press that usually ensued. But despite their resources, they were ill equipped to handle matters requiring such specialized expertise. And now he was here asking her for free advice.

The waitress returned to the table and set a plate in front of Brian. The food was served family-style, Charlotte recalled from her one previous visit, which seemed code for we-bring-out-whatever-we-want-when-ever-we-feel-like-it. She shook her head as he gestured toward the plate, offering her some. “Go ahead and eat.”

She expected him to reach for his fork and tear into the meal with the gusto she remembered, but he did not. “Have you ever heard of Roger Dykmans?” he asked instead.

She repeated the name inwardly. “I don’t know. The last name, maybe.”

“Roger is a securities client of mine. His brother was Hans Dykmans.”

Hans Dykmans. The full name sparked immediate recognition. “The diplomat?” Hans Dykmans, like Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and German industrialist Oskar Schindler, had been credited with saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. Like Wallenberg, he was arrested and disappeared mysteriously toward the end of the war.

“Yes. Roger is Hans’s younger brother and the head of a major international brokerage house. Only now he’s been arrested and charged as a war criminal for allegedly helping the Germans.” Brian paused, watching Charlotte’s face for a reaction to the possibility that the brother of a war hero might have been a Nazi collaborator. But she was not as surprised as he might have expected. She had learned years ago that the extreme circumstances of the war provoked a wide spectrum of reactions, even in the closest of families.

Brian waited until the server put Charlotte’s plate down in front of her before continuing. “Recently, historians uncovered some papers that seem to implicate Roger. They claim he sold out his brother during the war, and that as a result, Hans was arrested and several hundred Jewish children he was trying to save were killed.” Staring down at the scarlet tablecloth, Charlotte recoiled. She herself was the descendant of Holocaust survivors, or more accurately, one survivor. Her mother had escaped Hungary as a child, sent on a *kindertransport* to London and later to relatives in America. But the rest of her mother’s family, her parents and brothers, had all perished in the camps. Many times in Winnie’s lonely final days, Charlotte had wondered how different her life might have been had her mother grown up surrounded by a loving family, rather than distant cousins who took her in out of obligation. Their coolness, Charlotte suspected, was what had sent her mother flying into the arms of the first man who ever glanced her way, and who would quickly break her heart, leaving her pregnant and alone.

She looked up at Brian, who was watching her expectantly, waiting for some kind of response. “So Dykmans is a Nazi collaborator,” she said finally. “And you’re trying to defend him.”

“Accused collaborator.” He shrugged, taking a bite of his tuna. “He’s my client. I was asked by the partnership to take on the matter.”

“And you’re here for my help,” she concluded, irritated. Did Brian not remember her family history or simply not care what the nature of his request would mean to her? “Why me?”

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*The Things We Cherished*]

# *The Upright Piano Player*

David Abbott

## **EXCERPT**

**London | November 1999**

By the time he finally left, the adulation was beginning to pall. There had been a month of farewells. Lunches every day, three dinners a week—all preceded or concluded with speeches and presentations. His clients had given him a gold pen; the staff, an antique watch, older than himself, but unlike himself, still burnished and bright. There had been photographs from his partners by names he revered: Doisneau, Bravo, Lartigue, all framed in oak, their certificates of authenticity housed modestly in brown manila envelopes. He was familiar with this trick of the rich, restraint adding to the value of the gifts, the generosity of the givers.

There were books, too, first editions of novels he loved—*Black Mischief* by Evelyn Waugh, published by Chapman and Hall in 1928 for 7/6, and now worth £400. They had found him a fine copy of Iris Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good* and presented it, he realized, with more than a touch of irony. There was a quince tree for his garden in London (to be lifted and planted at his command) and more than a hundred leaving cards and letters, many of great tenderness.

At the presentations he looked into his lap as clients and colleagues chronicled his thirty years in the company. Occasionally, he glanced up to acknowledge a common memory or to share in the enjoyment of his own edgy wit recalled from earlier days. On the Wednesday of his final week, the company had hosted the official goodbye in the ballroom of the hotel across the square. At 5:00, the staff meandered across the road, latecomers dodging the traffic in their haste to secure a good seat. It was the end of an era, they had been saying in the corridors. Even the graduate trainees, who had joined the company just seven days earlier and had never actually met him, were caught up in the conflicting emotions of the day: sadness at his going, gratitude for all that he had done, but also excitement at the prospect of change.

His three partners were eloquent, each generous with his praise. As he walked to the lectern to give his reply he was aware that everyone was standing. There was applause, a sea-roar in his ears, and he stood waiting for it to stop, smiling into the dark space above the heads of the audience.

In the pub later, the video team said it had been the longest ovation they had ever filmed. “Not that there was much to film, Henry standing there for five minutes and the rest just clapping their heads off. And that was before he’d even said anything.”

He had worked hard on his speech. He knew they expected it to be the speech of a lifetime—quite literally the distillation of thirty years at the company, a list of do’s and don’ts, a formula to keep things as they were—though in their hearts they must have known that was not possible, perhaps not even desirable. He knew it, too, and no longer wanted to make the speech of a leader. In the old days he would inspire them, lift their spirits, and send them back to their desks with renewed energy and enthusiasm. Now he simply wanted to say goodbye and slip away. Somehow he had found the right words and if the audience missed the old fire they had responded to the gentle sincerity of his farewell.

On the Friday, the last day of a long week, Henry cleared his office. A tidy man on the surface, only he knew what chaos existed in the cupboards so exquisitely fronted with beech veneers and brushed aluminum. He threw out almost everything: letters, cards, documents, and photographs. Crates had been sent up to take the books that lined one wall of his office. His books had been a daily comfort, confirming that even in commerce there was room for contemplation. Now he realized he no longer wanted them. He scribbled a note that they were to be given away. He left his awards, certificates, and business degrees on the wall. He wondered if they would end up in the archives or the bin. It was all the same to him.

It was past 9:00 when he took the lift down to the basement. Even at that time on a Friday evening, the building was usually busy. In the meeting rooms, people would be working on presentations for the week to come. Often, they would be there all night—the conference tables littered with charts and the debris of takeaway meals. When the cleaners came in at daybreak, they would sniff the air in reception, gauging the scale of the job ahead.

As the lift passed the fourth floor, Henry knew that Dan Priestly would still be at his desk—not working, but waiting. His evening routine was well established. First, the Times crossword and then television until it was time for the last train home to a wife he no longer loved. (A year later, in the divorce court, she would claim in all innocence that it had been the company’s work ethic that had destroyed their marriage.)

There were many reasons for staying late and Henry was not surprised when the lift stopped at the second floor. A girl got in, someone he did not know. She was flustered to find him there. In the confusion he saw that she was tall with dark, cropped hair. She was wearing a long black coat.

“Ground?” he said. Before he could push the button the doors closed, leaving his finger in midair.

She smiled.

“I’m Maude, one of the new graduates. I was really moved by your speech on Wednesday. I’m sorry we won’t have overlapped for longer.”

He said that he was sorry, too, and could think of nothing to add. He stood looking at his shoes until the lift doors opened on the ground floor. She got out. He felt he had let her down by failing to offer a suitable benediction. Well, he had no more wisdom left.

In the underground car park, his Mercedes stood alone, its black paintwork dulled by a light film of dust. For ten years he had grumbled about the fallout from the cheap ceiling tiles, but nothing had been done. Now it did not matter. He drove up the ramp, only mildly irritated.

In the car, sensors picked up the first drops of rain on the windscreen and the wipers swept across the glass.

He is back again in California driving with Nessa and Tom to San Francisco. It is 1977. Tom is five and needs to pee. They are on the Seventeen-Mile Drive in Pebble Beach and there is no place to stop.

“You’ll just have to hang on, Tom.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Just think of something else. It always works.”

And then he pushes the windscreen washers so that two arcs of water rise and splash gently on the glass. He does it again and again.

“Just think about something else,” he repeats. They are all laughing. In the front seat, Nessa grips his arm. “Stop it,” she says, but her eyes are shining.

Reluctant to go home, on a whim, he drove to a small mews near Grosvenor Square. He parked in the shadows and turned off the lights. The rain was getting heavier. He looked across at the modest building where it had all began. Management consultants had been less fashionable in 1970 and the investment in 1200 square feet of office space had seemed adventurous. He saw that an architect now occupied the first floor offices above the row of lock-up garages. Today, the garages probably raised as much income as the rooms above, but it had not always been so. He had been lucky in that building, winning his first major clients there.

He had always been fascinated by business, but he had never believed in making it more complicated than it was. He was suspicious of textbook managers—the graduates from business schools, who, fed on a curriculum

of turbulent case histories, storm out into the real world with an appetite for mayhem. He used to complain that they had been educated at drama school not business school. The people who had inspired Henry had been hands-on leaders who ran their companies the way they ran their lives. He admired patience and conviction and had found these qualities not in corporate time-servers, but in entrepreneurs, people who had put their houses and futures on the line to follow a dream. He had learned from them that, at its best, management was intuitive, honest, and simple. He believed in common sense.

It was a belief that had brought his company early success. It had been one of the first in its sector to go public and had grown to become a group of twelve allied businesses encompassing everything from advertising to contract publishing. The original consultancy, however, had always been positioned at the center of this wider universe—the place where the knowledge burned brightest.

Clients came to Henry for constructive, conservative advice: the rebuilding of assets, the freshening of known and traditional strengths, the protection and growth of brands. They went to others for step-change thinking, for remodeling on a giant scale with all the consequent upheavals. Such grandiose meddling had suited neither Henry's skills nor his temperament. He thought most change overrated.

He slid further down into the seat as a car turned in to the mews. It stopped at a pub celebrated for its steaks. Three men were dropped off, bulky in their business suits and eager to get in out of the rain. Their voices carried.

“We'll be out by midnight.”

“We may even be standing.”

There was laughter and the car departed.

Thank God, his days of corporate entertaining were over. He had never been a comfortable host and after the Basil Hume evening he had given up trying.

The cardinal had been invited to speak at a black-tie dinner in a London hotel. Henry had reserved a table and taken a group of his clients. It was an all-male dining club with a simple code: total indiscretion inside the room, total discretion outside. The opportunity to let their hair down had lured many illustrious speakers to the club's evenings—even prime ministers—and it gave the members what Henry had come to see was their greatest thrill: the belief that they were in the know, right at the heart of things.

When Cardinal Hume rose to speak that evening, the room already grayed by the fog of a hundred cigars, no one anticipated that he was about to give the most audacious speech in the club's history, more

outrageous than anything they had heard from Thatcher, or Heath, or Murdoch.

Hume had said very little. What he did say he said with his usual modesty. Perhaps he was on his feet for ten minutes. He told them to be good people and to do good things. He reminded them that they were leaders and that they had a responsibility to fashion the tone and conduct of their companies. He had spoken with grace and good humor, yet he had not tried to entertain them. He had sat down to restrained applause. The clients at Henry's table were barely polite. Naive was the general verdict.

"If I want a sermon I go to church, not to Claridges."

There was general agreement at the table, guests tapping their wineglasses with their coffee spoons to underline their approval of this sentiment. Henry said nothing. He had found himself moved by the cardinal's speech and admired its courage. He had resigned from the club a week later, pleading pressure of business. A meaningless gesture, since his partners went on taking the firm's clients to the dinners and Henry's absence went unnoticed.

Two young women came out of the pub arm in arm, their high heels barely coping with the slick cobbles as, bent double, they hurried to get out of the rain. Reaching the darkened car they stopped for breath or support—he wasn't sure which—their breasts flattened against the windows, their arms flung over the roof. They were celebrating an escape.

"Well, I don't have to put my tongue down his throat, just to say hello."

He lowered the passenger window and the car was suddenly full of curves and the smell of wet wool.

"What the fuck?"

They were startled, but when they saw him in the driver's seat they ran off laughing.

He started the car and drove home, saddened by the empty seat beside him.

He lived just off the Fulham Road in a two-story, double-fronted house that the local estate agent had sold him as "a country cottage in London." The house was larger than it looked, and in one of the three reception rooms there had been space to tuck his piano against the wall. He had taken lessons until the age of fifteen when hormones had directed his energies elsewhere. But on the death of his parents, he had claimed the piano and it had gone with him from flat to flat and house to house. It was the only remnant he had of his childhood, its tone a song line to his past. He played it late at night—hushed, tentative jazz—the chords barely reaching the walls.

His friends thought his house somewhat modest, considering his success, but Henry and Nessa had bought it for the gardens.

In the front they had planted four standard holly trees, each in a square bed of lavender edged with box. In the beds below the windows, catmint and ladies mantle were ground cover for Queen of the Night tulips in the spring and Japanese anemones in the autumn. The whole front of the house hosted a magnificent *Rosa banksiae* “Lutea”—small round buds appearing in late April, bright green and tipped with the yellow of the rose to come.

In the back garden, a formal pond took center stage in a lawn framed by a mossy brick path. Behind this lawn, up two gentle steps and concealed for the most part by yew hedging, was a raised parterre and a small pavilion. Enclosing everything were walls of London brick topped with lengths of trellis that buckled under the weight of ramblers. In summer, the serenity of the center seemed always under threat from the chaos of the edge.

There were no lights on in the house when he arrived. He turned off the alarm and went into the kitchen. The morning’s post was on the table, most of it junk. He sat down to open the rest, too tired to take off his overcoat. He had won £50 on his Premium Bonds. There was a brochure from a wine merchant, several bills, and a letter erroneously addressed to Sir Henry Cage. He studied the envelope. The address had been typed on a computer, the label perfect—a secretary’s mistake rather than a cynical ploy, he thought.

Having read the letter, he was not so sure. It was from someone he had met only once and instantly disliked. It appeared the man was now the chairman of an appeal fund for a government-backed business school. They had been awarded £30 million by the Lottery for a new building and needed to match that with a similar sum from the private sector. The letter said they were looking for fifteen key individuals who had an interest in business. In return for their £2 million they could have a scholarship or one of the lecture halls named after them. It was a crass letter, so inept that perhaps a title had been dangled, after all. He would not reply. He put the bills and the check aside and scooped up the rest for the bin. As he did so, he saw that he had missed one letter, a blue airmail envelope, the handwriting unmistakably Nessa’s. He left it unopened on the table. He had not heard from her in five years. One more night would not make any difference.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*The Upright Piano Player*]

# *Jamrach's Menagerie*

Carol Birch

## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter 1**

I was born twice. First in a wooden room that jutted out over the black water of the Thames, and then again eight years later in the Highway, when the tiger took me in his mouth and everything truly began.

Say Bermondsey and they wrinkle their noses. Still, it was the home before all other homes. The river lapped beneath us as we slept. Our door looked out over a wooden rail into the channel at the front, where dark water heaved up an odd sullen grey bubble. If you looked down through the slats, you could see things moving in the swill below. Thick green slime, glistening in the slosh that banged up against it, crept up the crumbling wooden piles.

I remember the jagged lanes with bent elbows and crooked knees, rutted horse shit in the road, the dung of sheep that passed our house every day from the marshes and the cattle bellowing their unbearable sorrows in the tannery yard. I remember the dark bricks of the tanning factory, and the rain falling black. The wrinkled red bricks of the walls were gone all to tarry soot. If you touched them the tips of your fingers came away shiny black. A heavy smell came up from under the wooden bridge and got you in the gob as you crossed in the morning going to work.

The air over the river though was full of sound and rain. And sometimes at night the sound of sailors sang out over the winking water—voices wild and dark to me as the elements themselves—lilts from everywhere, strange tongues that lisped and shouted, melodies running up and down like many small flights of stairs, making me feel as if I was far away in those strange hot-sun places.

The river was a great thing seen from the bank, but a foul thing when your bare toes encountered the thin red worms that lived in its sticky mud. I remember them wriggling between.

But look at us.

Crawling up and down the new sewers like maggots ourselves, thin grey boys, thin grey girls, grey as the mud we walked in, splashing along the dark, round-mouthed tunnels that stank like hell. The sides were caked in crusty, black shit. Peeling out pennies and trying to fill our pockets, we wore our handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths, our eyes stung and ran. Sometimes we retched. It was something you did, like a sneeze or a belch. And when we came blinking out onto the foreshore, there we would see a vision of beauty: a great wonder, a tall and noble three-masted clipper bringing tea from India, bearing down upon the Pool of London, where a hundred ships lay resting like pure-bred horses getting groomed, renewed, readied, soothed and calmed for the great sea trial to come.

But our pockets were never full. I remember the gnawing in my belly, the hunger retch. That thing my body did nights when I lay in bed.

All of this was a long time ago. In those days my mother could easily have passed for a child. She was a small, tough thing with muscular shoulders and arms. When she walked she strode, swinging her arms from the shoulders. She was a laugh, my ma. She and I slept together in a truckle. We used to sing together getting off to sleep in that room over the river—a very pretty, cracked voice she had—but a man came sometimes, and then I had to go next door and kip in one end of a big tumbled old feather bed, with the small naked feet of very young children pushing up the blankets on either side of my head, and the fleas feasting on me.

The man that came to see my mother wasn't my father. My father was a sailor who died before I was born, so Ma said, but she never said much. This man was a long, thin, wild-eyed streak of a thing with a mouth of crooked teeth, and deft feet that constantly tapped out rhythms as he sat. I suppose he must have had a name, but I never knew it, or if I did I've forgotten. It doesn't matter. I never had anything to do with him, or he with me.

He came when she was humming over her sewing one day—some sailor's pants gone in the crotch—threw her down upon the floor, and started kicking her and calling her a dirty whore. I was scared, more scared I think than I had ever been before. She rolled away, hitting her head against the table leg, then up she jumped, screaming blue murder, that he was a bastard and a fly boy and she'd none of him no more, flailing with her short strong arms and both fists balled for punching.

"Liar!" he roared.

I never knew he had a voice like that. As if he was twice as big.

"Liar!"

"You call me a liar?" she screeched, and went for the sides of his head, grabbing him by both ears and bashing his head about as if it was an old cushion she was shaking up. When she let go he wobbled. She ran

out onto the walkway hollering at the top of her voice, and all the neighbour women came out at a run with their skirts hoicked up, some with knives, some with sticks or pots, and one with a candlestick. He dashed out amongst them with his own knife drawn, a vicious big stabber raised over his shoulder, damning them all as whores and scattering them back as he ran for the bridge.

"I'll get you, you bitch!" he yelled back. "I'll get you and I'll cut out your lights!"

That night we ran away. Or that's how I remember it. Possibly it was not that night, possibly it was a few days or a week later, but I remember no more of Bermondsey after that, only the brightness of the moon on the river as I followed my mother barefoot over London Bridge, to my second birth. I was eight years old.

I know we came in time to the streets about Ratcliffe Highway, and there I met the tiger. Everything that came after followed from that. I believe in fate. Fall of the dice, drawing of the straw. It's always been like that. Watney Street was where we came to rest. We lived in the crow's nest of Mrs. Regan's house. A long flight of steps ran up to the front door. Railings round the basement area enclosed a deep, dark place where men gathered nights to play cards and drink strong liquor. Mrs. Regan, a tall, worn woman with a pale, startled face, lived under us with an ever-changing population of sailors and touts, and upstairs lived Mr. Reuben, an old black man with white hair and a bushy yellow moustache. A curtain hung down the middle of our room, and on the other side of it two old Prussian whores called Mari-Lou and Silky snored softly all day long. Our bit of the room had a window looking over the street. In the morning the smell of yeast from the baker's opposite came into my dreams. Every day but Sunday we were woken early by the drag of his wheelbarrow over the stones, and soon after by the market people setting up their stalls. Watney Street was all market. It smelled of rotten fruit and vegetables, strong fish, the two massive meat barrels that stood three doors down outside the butcher's, dismembered heads of pigs sticking snout upwards out of the tops. Nowhere near as bad as Bermondsey, which smelled of shit. I didn't realise Bermondsey smelled of shit till we moved to the Highway. I was only a child. I thought shit was the natural smell of the world. To me, Watney Street and the Highway and all about there seemed sweeter and cleaner than anything I'd ever known and it was only later, with great surprise, that I learned how others considered it such a dreadful smelly hole.

Blood and brine ran down the pavement into the gutters and was sucked into the mush under the barrows that got trodden all day long up and down, up and down, into your house, up the stairs, into your room. My

toes slid through it in a familiar way, but it was better than shitty Thames mud any day.

Flypapers hung over every door and every barrow. Each one was black and rough with a million flies, but it made no difference. A million more danced happily about in the air and walked on the tripe which the butcher's assistant had sliced so thinly and carefully first thing that morning and placed in the window.

You could get anything down Watney Street. Our end was all houses, the rest was shops and pubs, and the market covered all the street. It sold cheap: old clothes, old iron, old anything. When I walked through the market my eyes were on a level with cabbages, lumpy potatoes, sheep's livers, salted cucumbers, rabbit skins, saveloys, cow heels, ladies' bellies, softly rounded and swelling. The people packed in, all sorts, rough sorts, poor sorts, sifting their way through heaps of old worn shoes and rags, scrabbling about like ants, pushing and shoving and swearing, fierce old ladies, kids like me, sailors and bright girls and shabby men. Everyone shouted. First time I walked out in all that I thought, blimey, you don't want to go down in that muck, and if you were small you could go down very easy. Best stay close by the barrows so there'd be something to grab a hold of.

I loved running errands. One way was the Tower, the other Shadwell. The shops were all packed with the stuff of the sea and ships, and I loved to linger outside their windows and hang around their doors getting a whiff of that world. So when Mrs. Regan sent me out for a plug of bacca one day for Mr. Reuben, it must have taken me at least a half an hour to get down to the tobacco dock. I got half an ounce from one of the baccy women and was on my way back with my head in a dream, as was the way, so I thought nothing of the tray of combs dropped on the pavement by a sallow girl with a ridge in her neck, or the people vanishing, sucked as if by great breaths into doorways and byways, flattened against walls. My ears did not catch the sudden stilling of the Highway's normal rhythms, the silence of one great held communal breath. How could I? I did not know the Highway. I knew nothing but dark water and filth bubbles and small bridges over shit creeks that shook no matter how light of foot you skipped over. "This new place, this sailor town where we will stay now nice and snug awhile, Jaffy-boy," as my ma said, all of it, everything was different. Already I'd seen things I'd never seen before. This new labyrinth of narrow lanes teemed with the faces and voices of the whole world. A brown bear danced decorously on the corner by an alehouse called Sooty Jack's. Men walked about with parrots on their shoulders, magnificent birds, pure scarlet, egg-yolk yellow, bright sky blue. Their eyes were knowing and half amused, their feet scaly. The air on the corner of Martha Street hung sultry with the perfume of Arabian sherbet, and women in silks as bright as

the parrots leaned out from doorways, arms akimbo, powerfully breasted like the figureheads of the ships lying along the quays.

In Bermondsey the shop windows were dusty. When you put your face close and peered, you saw old flypapers, pale cuts of meat, powdery cakes, strings of onions flaking onto yellowing newsprint. In the Highway the shops were full of birds. Cage upon cage piled high, each full of clustering creatures like sparrows but bright as sweets, red and black, white and yellow, purple and green, and some as gently lavender as the veins on a baby's head. It took the breath away to see them so crowded, each wing crushed against its fellows on either side. In the Highway green parakeets perched upon lamp posts. Cakes and tarts shone like jewels, tier on tier behind high glass windows. A black man with gold teeth and white eyes carried a snake around his neck.

How could I know what was possible and what was not? And when the impossible in all its beauty came walking towards me down the very middle of Ratcliffe Highway, why would I know how to behave?

Of course, I'd seen a cat before. You couldn't sleep for them in Bermondsey, creeping about over the roofs and wailing like devils. They lived in packs, spiky, wild eyed, stalking the wooden walkways and bridges, fighting with the rats. But this cat . . .

The Sun himself came down and walked on earth.

Just as the birds of Bermondsey were small and brown, and those of my new home were large and rainbow-hued, so it seemed the cats of Ratcliffe Highway must be an altogether superior breed to our scrawny north-of-the-river mogs. This cat was the size of a small horse, solid, massively chested, rippling powerfully about the shoulders. He was gold, and the pattern painted so carefully all over him, so utterly perfect, was the blackest black in the world. His paws were the size of footstools, his chest snow white.

I'd seen him somewhere, his picture in a poster in London Street, over the river. He was jumping through a ring of fire and his mouth was open. A mythical beast.

I have no recall of one foot in front of the other, cobblestones under my feet. He drew me like honey draws a wasp. I had no fear. I came before the godly indifference of his face and looked into his clear yellow eyes. His nose was a slope of downy gold, his nostrils pink and moist as a pup's. He raised his thick, white dotted lips and smiled, and his whiskers bloomed.

I became aware of my heart somewhere too high up, beating as if it was a little fist trying to get out.

Nothing in the world could have prevented me from lifting my hand and stroking the broad warm nap of his nose. Even now I feel how beautiful that touch was. Nothing had ever been so soft and clean. A ripple ran

through his right shoulder as he raised his paw—bigger than my head—and lazily knocked me off my feet. It was like being felled by a cushion. I hit the ground but was not much hurt, only winded, and after that it was a dream. There was, I remember, much screaming and shouting, but from a distance, as if I was sinking underwater. The world turned upside down and went by me in a bright stream, the ground moved under me, my hair hung in my eyes. There was a kind of joy in me, I do know that—and nothing that could go by the name of fear, only a wildness. I was in his jaws. His breath burned the back of my neck. My bare toes trailed, hurting distantly. I could see his feet, tawny orange with white toes, pacing the ground away, gentle as feathers.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Jamrach's Menagerie*]

# *Daughters of the Revolution*

Carolyn Cooke

## EXCERPT

He begins with a bang at the center of his story. It's spring of that revolutionary year, not too far in. Meringues of snow line the sidewalks, but a freshness cuts the air. Goddard Byrd—known to his friends and enemies as “God”—has just emerged from an afternoon at the Parker House Hotel, a virile, uncircumcised male of his class, upbringing and era. His prostate gland and his *praeputium* have not yet been removed, and he is unburdened, just now, of Puritanism's load. He has drunk a glass of gin, then lain with Mrs. Viktor Rebozos—whom he must remember to call Aileen—and both of them are better for this exercise.

In bed, she tells him he is a bear, all paws and claws. She insults him, purrs, climbs on top. She wants to know if he could be any wild animal, which would he be?

An animal? He would be a tiger!

(She would be a gazelle.)

He likes himself better this way, his natural shyness tempered by adrenaline. She is more flexible than he, more at ease, depending on the occasion—more pliable. Women are pliable, he thinks; they revel in the shifting relations required by husbands,

children, lovers, others. (How can this be a matter of opinion?) He can't tell Mrs. Rebozos these things; she might eat him alive.

They lie together in the fading afternoon light, the March grisaille. “The most beautiful words in the English language are *sex in the afternoon*,” she tells him, and he can't, in the moment, find reason to correct her. Mrs. Rebozos's tongue darts suddenly across his left nipple, and God rises with an animal roar, his body fire and ice.

She smiles. “I read that in *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*.”

“Do it again,” says God.

Her tongue and lips move excruciatingly over his body, describing ancient erotic techniques from the Orient. He rises obediently as a snake in a basket. God lifts his head to look at her, and feels an organ breach (liver?)

spleen?). She is so gamine, indeed! She looks like a boy. Almost. Short hair. Hoops in her ears. All of it signifying what? Maybe nothing. Eventually, he pins her to her back, which she seems to enjoy, and humps her in the familiar way, running breathlessly toward a goal, which he reaches.

“You’re beginning to get it, my earnest missionary,” she tells him afterward. “Let’s hope it’s not too late.”

They share a plate of cold roast beef, a famous roll. Naked, quivering a little, she wraps a blue knit scarf around her shoulders. “My dark secret,” she says. “All my life I’ve been drawn to misogynist coots like you. Like a taste for black coffee—incredible when you think about it.” Even God is surprised that a free-spirited woman such as Mrs. Rebozos would so defiantly stand beside an old man, in his shadow, eat meat with him and be his prize!

“I have to go,” he says into her ear. “You could stay all afternoon; you could have a bath.”

“Just a quick shower,” she says. “I have a women’s thing. Last week, we inspected our cervixes. Mine looked like an eye.

It *blinked*.”

God tries to conceal his horror. At three, he descends, leaving Mrs. Rebozos to enjoy the rented room, whose extravagant price stabs him when he thinks of it. (In spite of the evidence, he imagines her as feminine, passive, mysterious and inert. Women

in their beds, Rorschach blots on luminous sheets.)

He advances through the lobby and rolls into the street like a well-oiled man on wheels. The atmosphere of hostility and depravity beyond the doors of the Parker House stings him like a slap. The street is filthy; even the city fathers are off their game, lax or stoned. Girls in paper dresses—temporary dresses for temporary girls—giggle at him. He’s harmless, they think, the last of a dying breed.

God passes gently into a haze of mustard-purple-maroon and marijuana fumes. In spite of the expense of the hotel and the crudeness of the street, he feels deeply at home in this world. It is divided and antagonistic, filled with human hatreds bred by race, religion and economics; he loves it anyway.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*Daughters of the Revolution*]

# *Conquistadora*

Esmeralda Santiago

## **EXCERPT**

### **“Her Small Person”**

The horizon was smudged, like a bruise, but as the *Antares* approached land, a veiled green pyramid emerged from the haze. Ana grabbed Ramón’s arm and bounced on her toes, unable to contain her excitement.

“Is that it?”

Ramón wove her left hand through his elbow, and brought her gloved fingers to his lips. “We’ll soon be inside the harbor.”

“You can make out San Felipe del Morro.” Inocente pointed to a mustard-colored headland over the frothing surf.

“It’s huge!”

“Impregnable,” Inocente added. “Spanish military engineering at its best.”

Other passengers pushed closer to the rail, craned their necks, adjusted their hats and bonnets to shade their eyes from the blinding sun. Crewmen hopped around the deck in a dance of sail lowering, rope loosening, latch securing, and the tying down of canvas-wrapped bundles. As the vessel glided through the protected passage into the broad harbor, Ana’s breath quickened. This is it, she thought, Puerto Rico. A sense of *déjà vu* made her dizzy.

“Now I know what my ancestors must have felt,” she said, “seeing land after weeks at sea. . . .”

“Let’s hope we have the luck of those who became rich and not the luck of those eaten by the Caribs,” muttered Inocente.

Ramón and Ana laughed. Some passengers standing nearby glanced at them nervously and gave them a bit more room. The brothers exchanged an amused look over Ana’s head. She put her other arm through Inocente’s so that they were linked to each other through her. She sighed happily as the walled city came into view.

“At last,” she said softly. “We’re here at last.”

She closed her eyes and mentally etched the date into memory: Wednesday, October 16, 1844.

It was early morning, and the harbor was thick with two- and three-masted schooners, barges, sloops, and fishing boats vying for lanes, most of them flying the red-and-gold Spanish flag. San Juan rose from the waterfront behind the thick walls that protected it from invasions and enemy attacks from the Atlantic Ocean. Wide swatches of green peppered the hill, gardens, or pastures—Ana couldn't tell—but closely packed buildings intersected by roads and alleys defined most of the land. Several towers topped by crucifixes were scattered across the citadel, their bells echoing over the water. To Ana, San Juan looked like Cádiz, the city they'd left three thousand miles behind in Spain.

She freed her arms from Ramón and Inocente and turned to where verdant hills stretched east to west, the vegetation nearly unbroken by man-made structures. Low white clouds formed over the green, blackening the land below. She turned again to the light and sunny city. As the schooner approached the dock, passengers oohed and aahed at the painted houses, the balconies adorned with flowers and foliage on the upper stories. On the fl at roofs, women's skirts and fringed shawls fl uttered in the breeze in a panoply of color and movement. Some of them waved, and passengers returned their greetings. Other women dressed in black stood as immobile as the sentry boxes over the rock walls of the fort. They were too far from shore for Ana to distinguish features, but so many women in mourning over the gay city palled her humor. She threaded her arms again through Ramón's, then Inocente's, arm and pulled them closer, focusing their attention on the movement on the wharf, away from the widows.

"There he is!" Ramón pointed at don Eugenio standing by an open carriage near the dock, amid the bustle and hubbub around the waterfront. Next to him stood a younger man, somewhat taller, powerfully built, his face shaded by a wide-brimmed straw hat. Eugenio waved when he spotted them, nodded at the younger man, and walked toward the wharf.

The dock was narrower than Ana expected, the boards slippery, set wide apart, and she worried her foot might get caught between them. Crowds made her nervous because she was so short that she couldn't see over people's heads or around the wide feminine silhouette that was the fashion of the day. Ramón and Inocente formed a barrier between her and the multitude. They steered her to avoid women's skirts, a man carrying a heavy valise, an old man being led by a much younger woman. Five impeccably dressed children walked slowly hand in hand, taking up the width of the dock, while behind them, a toddler screeched at the top of his lungs in spite of his nurse's efforts to comfort him. After the fresh ocean breeze on

the open seas, the waterfront smelled of dead fish and pine tar, of sweat, urine, rotting wood. Ana was faint.

"Almost there," Ramón said as he led her forward. She finally stepped on solid ground.

"*Bienvenidos*, welcome!" don Eugenio said, kissing Ana on both cheeks. His whiskers were damp. "What a joy to have you near again!"

While he hugged and kissed his sons, she discreetly wiped the moisture from her cheeks with the back of her glove. From the corner of her eye she caught the bemused smile of the man don Eugenio had been talking to. She turned her back on him.

"This way. Your trunks will be delivered to the house."

Don Eugenio helped her into the open carriage, and Ramón climbed in beside her. Inocente and don Eugenio took the facing seats. The driver, a round-faced man with the blackest skin Ana had ever seen, sat on one of the two horses, clucked his tongue, tugged and loosened the reins as he skillfully guided them through the crowd. As Ana opened her parasol, she noticed that the man who smiled at her was still standing in the same spot. He lifted his hand in a wave, and she wondered that he'd be so brazen, but then realized he was waving at don Eugenio, who acknowledged him with a nod.

"Who is that?" asked Inocente.

"His name is Severo Fuentes. He worked for Rodrigo and has been recommended as manager for the plantation. You'll meet him later."

Ana wanted to get a better look, but when she turned around, he'd vanished.

The street was so congested that they made little progress and beggars took advantage.

"*Por favor, señora, una limosna,*" implored a boy whose left arm ended in a stump just above the wrist.

"*Por amor a Dios,*" begged another, his narrow face peeling in strips as thin and transparent as discarded snakeskin.

On the other side of the carriage a woman pressed along, silently, hands cupped, huge eyes imploring.

Don Eugenio scattered them with his walking stick, but they followed, clamoring, while Ramón, Inocente, and Ana tried to ignore them. It was impossible, however. There were so many, and so persistent.

Ana reached into her reticule, and thinking she was about to hand out alms, the beggars changed their outcries. "*Que Dios la bendiga, señora,*" they blessed her. "*Que la Santísima Virgen se lo pague, señora.*" Their grateful voices brought more pleas and outstretched hands, bringing the carriage to a stop.

"If you give to one, they won't leave us alone," Inocente warned.

"I know that," she said irritably. She was born in a city where dodging beggars was a skill learned from childhood. She pulled a handkerchief from the reticule and blotted her cheeks and forehead. The beggars' cries of disappointment were followed by curses.

"Go away. There's nothing for you here." Inocente's walking stick struck a boy on the chest, another on the shoulders. A small boy tried to climb onto the carriage.

Don Eugenio pushed him off. "Where are you going?"

A mounted soldier pressed his horse through the crowd and, in between curses and threats, moved the beggars along. They didn't go far, though, just to the carriage behind, already mobbed.

"Everything all right, Colonel?" the soldier asked, saluting don Eugenio.

"Thank you. We're fine now." Don Eugenio saluted back. "Just trying to get home."

The soldier cleared the road in front of them, and soon they entered the gate and were heading uphill. Don Eugenio brushed the sleeves and lapels of his white suit, even though none of the beggars had touched him. "Disgraceful! Something must be done about these people."

"Every city has beggars, Papá," said Ramón, "and orphans and lunatics. San Juan wouldn't be a proper city without them."

"You might think it's funny, but your mother and cousin can't leave the house without being harassed. It's outrageous."

"Why are there so many children?" asked Ana.

"No orphanage," answered don Eugenio, "and for that matter, no lunatic asylum. There's no place to put them. And the city has grown rapidly. The authorities can't keep up."

Don Eugenio continued his harangue, but Ana couldn't concentrate. She couldn't bear the hot, humid air. Her clothes were heavy; the seven ruffled petticoats under her fine cambric skirt weighed against her thighs. Her scalp was on fire even under her parasol and bonnet. Droplets of sweat slid down her neck and back, dampening her chemise, soaking into her corset, the stays digging into her ribs.

"Are you all right, *querida*?" asked Ramón. "You look flushed."

"It's the heat. It will take getting used to."

"We'll be home soon," don Eugenio promised.

She'd never seen such bright sun, nor shadows with such finely defined edges. The contrast between light and dark was so great that her eyes watered and strained, trying to make out the shapes inside buildings and beyond alleys.

Even away from the harbor, pedestrians vied for space with carts, carriages, and soldiers on horseback and on foot, with servants carrying baskets full of produce or stacks of kindling on their heads. Barefoot stevedores

in tattered pants and shirts moved sacks and bundles from the wharves into the wooden buildings lining the waterfront and the streets leading to it. In Sevilla there were people from all over the world, but Ana had never seen so many black men, women, and children. And even along the busy waterfronts in Sevilla and Cádiz, human beings didn't carry such huge loads.

Ana had expected San Juan to be pretty. It was the capital of the island, after all, settled three hundred years earlier. It surprised her that it was so unfinished. The road they were traveling on was deeply rutted. Trenches along one side or the other ran with streams of foul-smelling black water. Ana had read that the government decreed that all houses in San Juan should be masonry, but along the city walls, an amalgam of shacks and *ranchos* leaned against one another, most of them built from scraps and roofed with straw or layers of palm fronds. Dogs, pigs, and goats wandered unattended, eating whatever they could scavenge from the mounds of garbage. Hens squawked, flailing their wings into short, ungainly flight to avoid the wheels of slow-moving carriages or the hooves of horses and beasts of burden. The people in the shacks were dressed in tatters, the children naked, the women in thin cotton skirts and blouses cut low on the shoulder, their unkempt hair tied up loosely or wrapped in turbans.

"This section of the city," don Eugenio said, "is less well maintained, as you can see. Most of the people here are *libertos*. They were slaves who fought on the royalist side in the wars for independence in Spanish America, so the government allowed them to find asylum, and liberty, in Puerto Rico."

"But there are whites here, too," Ana said. "So they can't all be *libertos*."

"Doubtless you've read that this island was a penal colony for centuries. Some of the men here are *desterrados*, exiles who chose not to or couldn't return to Spain after serving their sentences. Others came here as soldiers and established families. Some," don Eugenio sighed, "came to make their fortune but were seduced by the bottle, by cards, by fighting cocks."

As the carriage wheeled west, the dwellings were more what Ana expected: closely set masonry houses two or three stories high with overhanging balconies and terra-cotta roof tiles. Most had businesses on the ground floor with residences upstairs, evidenced by lace curtains waving in the breeze. The only women on the streets were servants and hawkers, most of them dark complexioned.

The higher they climbed, the newer the houses, and the fewer the businesses on the ground floors. Just as they turned the corner from a small plaza, they stopped in front of a solid, new two-story house with carved doors. A painted tile was embedded in the masonry: Calle Paloma 9.

“Here we are.” Don Eugenio helped Ana from the carriage. “Take care, my dear, the stones are slippery.” This street was narrower, paved with cobblestones and raised flagstone sidewalks on either side.

As they entered the foyer, Ana’s eyes adjusted to the dim, cool interior. The hall led to an open courtyard shaded by blooming plants and bushes. A gurgling fountain in the center masked the street sounds. Doña Leonor was waiting at the bottom of a wide set of stairs to the left, and behind her, Elena. When their eyes met, Ana read in them Elena’s happiness and her longing.

A flurry of hugs, kisses, and blessings. A young, barefoot maid appeared to take their hats, gloves, Ana’s parasol, and the men’s walking sticks. Ana noticed Elena’s envious accounting of her fashionable pale green dress and lace pelerine.

“Take this, too,” she said to the maid, slipping the pelerine from her shoulders. She was immediately cooler. “My goodness, is it always this hot here?”

“The end of October marks the beginning of the dry season,” don Eugenio explained. “San Juan is known for its healthful breezes, and it’s unusual for the air to be so still this time of year.”

“It’s a disaster in the countryside,” doña Leonor said, snapping her fan open and leading them upstairs. “We’ve had no rain in weeks. The crops are suffering, and the cattle . . .”

“Come, my dear, no bad news. They’ve just arrived,” don Eugenio chided his wife.

“You’ve grown taller, I’m certain of it,” doña Leonor addressed her two sons as one. “And you, Ana, have filled out a bit. Your face is rounder. It’s most becoming.”

She led them into a parlor with tall louvered doors facing a balcony choked with potted geraniums and gardenias. The louvers were half open to cut down the sun, but fragrance weighted the air, and Ana again was assaulted by too much light, color, perfume, heat. Ramón led her to a chair away from the balcony in the cooler part of the room. She found comfort in the furnishings she recognized from the Argoso home in Cádiz by their heavy, carved wooden backs and armrests, their solid Spanishness.

“Your harp!” Ana exclaimed when she saw it in a corner.

“Yes, isn’t it lovely!” Doña Leonor looked fondly toward the instrument. “It arrived without a scratch, in spite of my fears. You can imagine how much I missed it.”

“She fussed and worried about it more than she worried about me!” Don Eugenio smiled.

Ana noticed that Elena seemed confused about where to place herself, as if the arrival of so many people had thrown off the natural balance. She

settled in the chair don Eugenio held for her, next to his own. Elena kept glancing from Ramón to Inocente, bypassing Ana's gaze between them. Finally, she looked at Ana, blushed, lowered her lids, and pressed her lips together.

"Will you play for us later, Mamá?" Ramón asked.

"Of course, hijo. I'm so happy that we're together again." Doña Leonor wiped her eyes. "It's been a most difficult adjustment—"

"Let's have some coffee," don Eugenio interrupted, and Elena jumped to ring for the maid.

"We missed you, too, Mamá." Ramón held his mother's hand. "We came as soon as we could."

"But you'll be leaving again." She looked accusingly at Ana.

She avoided her mother-in-law's eyes and sought those of Elena, whose expression was noncommittal. How infuriating she is, Ana thought suddenly, so humble and unassuming. She longed to upset her composure, to reveal the true, passionate Elena.

"We must go to the hacienda, of course," Inocente said. "But we'll spend a couple of months with you in San Juan. You must show us the city. I'm sure you've already met everyone worth knowing."

"She's unstoppable, son," don Eugenio said. "Your mother and Elena have made many friends. They're always visiting someone or other."

"We mostly see to the sick and housebound, don't we, Elena?"

"There is much charity work."

"Surely you saw the beggars on your way here."

The maid entered with an ornate silver tray that Ana remembered from Cádiz. She served with the alert submissiveness of a woman who'd been a servant all her life.

"Would you prefer something cool?" Elena asked softly when Ana hesitated before the offered coffee. Her beautiful blue eyes wouldn't meet Ana's.

"Yes," Ana said. "Yes, I would. Water for me, please." She knows, Ana thought, about me and Ramón and Inocente. She knows.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Conquistadora*]

# *The Snowman*

Jo Nesbo

## **EXCERPT**

### **Day 3**

#### **The Pit**

“Was that *great* or what?”

Oleg’s enthusiastic voice drowned out the spitting fat in the kebab shop, which was crowded with people after the concert at the Oslo Spektrum. Harry nodded to Oleg, who was standing in his hoodie, still sweaty, still moving to the beat as he prattled on about the members of Slipknot by name, names Harry didn’t even know since Slipknot CDs were sparing with personal data, and music magazines like *MOJO* and *Uncut* didn’t write about bands like that. Harry ordered hamburgers and looked at his watch. Rakel had said she would be standing outside at ten o’clock. Harry looked at Oleg again. He was talking nonstop.

When had it happened? When had the boy turned eleven and decided to like music about various stages of death, alienation, freezing and general doom? Perhaps it ought to have worried Harry, but it didn’t. It was a starting point, a curiosity that had to be satisfied, clothes the boy had to try on to see if they fit. Other things would come along. Better things. Worse things.

“You liked it, too, didn’t you, Harry?”

Harry nodded. He didn’t have the heart to tell him the concert had been a bit of an anticlimax for him. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was; perhaps it just wasn’t his night. As soon as they had joined the crowd in the Spektrum, he had felt the paranoia that used to regularly accompany drunkenness but that during the last year had come when he was sober. And instead of getting into the mood, he had had the feeling he was being observed, and stood scanning the audience, studying the wall of faces around them.

“Slipknot rules,” Oleg said. “And the masks were übercool. Especially the one with the long, thin nose. It looked like a . . . sort of . . .”

Harry was listening with half an ear, hoping Rakel would come soon. The air inside the kebab shop suddenly felt dense and suffocating, like a thin film of grease lying on your skin and over your mouth. He tried not to think his next thought. But it was on its way, had already rounded the corner. The thought of a drink.

“It’s an Indian death mask,” a woman’s voice behind them said.

“And Slayer was better than Slipknot.”

Harry spun around in surprise.

“Lots of posing with Slipknot, isn’t there?” she continued. “Recycled ideas and empty gestures.”

She was wearing a shiny, figure-hugging, ankle-length black coat buttoned up to her neck. All you could see under the coat was a pair of black boots. Her face was pale and her eyes made up.

“I would never have believed it,” Harry said. “You liking that kind of music.”

Katrine Bratt managed a brief smile. “I suppose I would say the opposite.”

She gave him no further explanation and signaled to the man behind the counter that she wanted a Farris mineral water.

“Slayer sucks,” Oleg mumbled under his breath.

Katrine turned to him. “You must be Oleg.”

“Yes,” Oleg said sulkily, pulling up his army trousers and looking as if he both liked and disliked this attention from a mature woman.

“How d’ya know?”

Katrine smiled. “‘How d’ya know?’ Living on Holmenkollen Ridge as you do, shouldn’t you say ‘How do you know?’? Is Harry teaching you bad habits?”

Blood suffused Oleg’s cheeks.

Katrine laughed quietly and patted Oleg’s shoulder. “Sorry, I’m just curious.”

The boy’s face went so red that the whites of his eyes were shining.

“I’m also curious,” Harry said, passing a burger to Oleg. “I assume you’ve found the pattern I asked for, Bratt. Since you’ve got time to come to a gig.”

Harry looked at her in a way that spelled out his warning: Don’t tease the boy.

“I’ve found something,” Katrine said, twisting the plastic top off the Farris bottle. “But you’re busy, so we can sort it out tomorrow.”

“I’m not so busy,” Harry said. He had already forgotten the film of grease, the feeling of suffocation.

“It’s confidential and there are a lot of people here,” Katrine said. “But I can whisper a couple of key words.”

She leaned closer, and over the fat he could smell the almost masculine fragrance of perfume and feel her warm breath on his ear.

“A silver Volkswagen Passat has just pulled up outside. There’s a woman sitting inside trying to catch your attention. I would guess it’s Oleg’s mother . . .”

Harry straightened up with a jolt and looked out the large window toward the car. Rakel had wound down the window and was peering in at them.

“Don’t make a mess,” Rakel said as Oleg jumped into the backseat with the burger in his hand.

Harry stood beside the open window. She was wearing a plain, light blue sweater. He knew that sweater well. Knew how it smelled, how it felt against the palm of his hand and cheek.

“Good gig?” she asked.

“Ask Oleg.”

“What sort of band was it, actually?” She looked at Oleg in the mirror. “Those people outside are a bit oddly dressed.”

“Quiet songs about love and so on,” Oleg said, sending a quick wink to Harry when her eyes were off the mirror.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said.

“My pleasure. Drive carefully.”

“Who was that woman inside?”

“A colleague. New on the job.”

“Oh? Looked as if you knew each other pretty well already.”

“How so?”

“You . . .” She stopped in midsentence. Then she slowly shook her head and laughed. A deep but bright laugh that came from down in her throat. Confident and carefree at the same time. The laugh that had once made him fall in love.

“Sorry, Harry. Good night.”

The window glided upward; the silver car glided off.

Harry walked the gauntlet down Brugata, between bars with music blaring out of open doors. He considered a coffee at Teddy’s Softbar, but knew it would be a bad idea. So he made up his mind to walk on by.

“Coffee?” repeated the guy behind the counter in disbelief.

The jukebox at Teddy’s was playing Johnny Cash, and Harry passed a finger over his top lip.

“You got a better suggestion?” Harry heard the voice that came out of his mouth; it was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

“Well,” said the guy, running a hand through his oily, glistening hair, “the coffee’s not exactly fresh from the machine, so what about a freshly pulled beer?”

Johnny Cash was singing about God, baptism and new promises.

“Right,” Harry said.

The man behind the counter grinned.

At that moment Harry felt the mobile phone in his pocket vibrate. He grabbed it quickly and greedily, as though it were a call he had been expecting.

It was Skarre.

“We’ve just received a missing-persons call that fits. Married woman with children. She wasn’t at home when the husband and children returned a few hours ago. They live way out in the woods in Sollihøgda. None of the neighbors have seen her and she can’t have left by car because the husband had it. And there are no footprints on the path.”

“Footprints?”

“There’s still snow up there.”

The beer was banged down in front of Harry.

“Harry? Are you there?”

“Yes, I am. I’m thinking.”

“What about?”

“Is there a snowman there?”

“Eh?”

“Snowman.”

“How should I know?”

“Well, let’s go and find out. Jump in the car and pick me up outside Gunerius shopping center, on Storgata.”

“Can’t we do this tomorrow, Harry? I’ve got some action lined up for tonight, and this woman is only missing, so there’s no immediate hurry.”

Harry watched the foam coiling its way down the outside of the beer glass like a snake.

“Actually . . .,” Harry said, “. . . there’s one hell of a hurry.”

Amazed, the bartender looked at the untouched beer, the fifty-krone note on the counter and the broad shoulders making off through the door as Johnny Cash faded out.

“Sylvia would never have simply left,” said Rolf Ottersen.

Rolf Ottersen was thin. Or, to be more precise, he was a bag of bones. His flannel shirt was buttoned all the way up, and from it protruded a gaunt neck and a head that reminded Harry of a wading bird. A pair of narrow hands with long, scrawny fingers that continually curled, twisted and twirled protruded from his shirtsleeves. The nails of his right hand had been filed long and sharp, like claws. His eyes, behind thick glasses in

plain, round steel frames, the type that had been popular among seventies radicals, seemed unnaturally large. A poster on the mustard-yellow wall showed Indians carrying an anaconda. Harry recognized the cover of a Joni Mitchell LP from hippie Stone Age times. Next to it hung a reproduction of a well known self-portrait by Frida Kahlo. A woman who suffered, Harry thought. A picture chosen by a woman. The floor was untreated pine, and the room was lit by a combination of old-fashioned paraffin lamps and brown clay lamps, which looked as if they might have been homemade. Leaning against the wall in the corner was a guitar with nylon strings, which Harry took to be the explanation for Rolf Ottersen's filed nails.

"What do you mean, she 'would never have left'?" Harry asked.

In front of him on the living-room table Rolf Ottersen had placed a photograph of his wife with their twin daughters, Olga and Emma, ten years old. Sylvia Ottersen had big, sleepy eyes, like someone who had worn glasses all her life and then started wearing contact lenses or had laser eye surgery. The twins had their mother's eyes.

"She would've said," Rolf Ottersen explained. "Left a message.

Something must've happened."

In spite of his despair his voice was muted and gentle. Rolf Ottersen pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and put it to his face. His nose seemed abnormally big for his narrow, pale face. He blew his nose in one single trumpet blast.

Skarre poked his head inside the door. "The dog patrol's here. They've got a cadaver dog with them."

"Get going, then," Harry said. "Have you spoken to all the neighbors?"

"Yep. Still nothing."

Skarre closed the door, and Harry saw that Ottersen's eyes had become even bigger behind the glasses.

"Cadaver dog?" Ottersen whispered.

"Just a generic term," Harry said, making a mental note that he would have to give Skarre a couple of tips on how to express himself.

"So you use them to search for living people as well?" From his intonation, the husband appeared to be pleading.

"Yes, of course," Harry lied, rather than tell him that cadaver dogs sniffed out places where dead bodies had been. They were not used for drugs, lost property or living people. They were used for deaths.

Period.

"So you last saw her today at four," Harry said, looking down at his notes. "Before you and your daughters went to town. What did you do there?"

"I took care of the shop while the girls had their violin lessons."

“Shop?”

“We have a small shop in Majorstuen selling handmade African goods. Art, furniture, fabric, clothes, all sorts of things. They’re imported directly from the artisans, and the artisans are paid properly. Sylvia is there most of the time, but on Thursdays we’re open late, so she comes back home with the car and I go in with the girls. I’m at the shop while they have violin lessons at the Barrat Due Institute of Music from five until seven. Then I pick them up, and we come home. We were home a little after seven-thirty.”

“Mm. Who else works in the shop?”

“No one.”

“That must mean you’re closed for a while on Thursdays. About an hour?”

Rolf Ottersen gave a wry smile. “It’s a very small shop. We don’t have many customers. Almost none until the Christmas sales, to be honest.”

“How . . . ?”

“NORAD. They support shops and our suppliers as part of the government’s trade program with Third World countries.” He coughed quietly. “The message it sends is more important than money and shortsighted gain, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded, even though he wasn’t thinking about development aid and fair trade in Africa but about the clock and driving time in Oslo. From the kitchen, where the twins were eating a late snack, came the sound of a radio. He hadn’t seen a TV in the house.

“Thank you. We’ll carry on.” Harry got up and went outside.

Three cars stood parked in the yard. One was Bjørn Holm’s Volvo Amazon, repainted black with a checkered rally stripe over the roof and trunk. Harry looked up at the clear, starry sky arching over the tiny farm in the forest clearing. He breathed in the air. The air of spruce and wood smoke. From the edge of the wood he heard the panting of a dog and cries of encouragement from the policeman.

To get to the barn Harry walked in the arc they had determined so as not to destroy any clues they might be able to use. Voices were emanating from the open door. He crouched down and studied the footprints in the snow in the light from the outside lamp. Then he stood up, leaned against the frame and tugged out a pack of cigarettes.

“Looks like a murder scene,” he said. “Blood, bodies and overturned furniture.”

Bjørn Holm and Magnus Skarre fell silent, turned and followed Harry’s gaze. The big open room was lit by a single bulb hanging from a cable wrapped around one of the beams. At one end of the barn there was a lathe and, behind it, a board with tools attached: hammers, saws, pliers,

drills. No electric gadgets. At the other end there was a wire fence and behind it chickens perched on shelves in the wall or strutted around, stiff-legged, on the straw. In the middle of the room, on gray, untreated, bloodstained floorboards, lay three headless bodies. Harry poked a cigarette between his lips without lighting it, entered, taking care not to step in the blood, and squatted down beside the chopping block to examine the chicken heads. The beam from his flashlight focused on matte-black eyes. First he held half a white feather that looked as if it had been scorched black along the edge, then he studied the smooth severing of the chickens' necks. The blood had coagulated and was black. He knew this was a quick process, not much more than half an hour.

"See anything interesting?" asked Bjørn Holm.

"My brain has been damaged by my profession, Holm. Right now it's analyzing chickens' bodies."

Skarre laughed and painted the newspaper headlines in the air: "savage triple chicken murder. voodoo parish. Harry hole assigned."

"What I can't see is more interesting," Harry said.

Bjørn Holm raised an eyebrow, looked around and began to nod slowly.

Skarre looked at them skeptically. "And that is?"

"The murder weapon," Harry said.

"A hatchet," Holm said. "The only sensible way to kill chickens."

Skarre sniffed. "If the woman did the killing, she must have put the hatchet back in its place. Tidy types, these farmers."

"I agree," Harry said, listening to the cackle of the chickens, which seemed to be coming from all sides. "That's why it's interesting that the chopping block is upside down and the chickens' bodies scattered around. And the hatchet is not in its place."

"Its place?" Skarre faced Holm and rolled his eyes.

"If you can be bothered to take a peek, Skarre," Harry said without moving.

Skarre was still looking at Holm, who nodded toward the board behind the lathe.

"Shit," said Skarre.

In the empty space between a hammer and a rusty saw was the outline of a small hatchet.

From outside came the sound of a dog barking and whimpering, and then the policeman's loud shout, which was no longer encouraging. Harry rubbed his chin. "We've searched the whole barn, so for the moment it looks as if Sylvia Ottersen left the place while slaughtering the chickens, taking the hatchet with her. Holm, can you take the body temperatures of these chickens and estimate the time of death?"

"Yup." "Eh?" Skarre said.

“I want to know when she ran off,” Harry said. “Did you get anything from the shoe prints outside, Holm?”

The forensic officer shook his head. “Too trampled, and I need more light. I found several of Rolf Ottersen’s boot prints. Plus a couple of others going to the barn, but none from the barn. Perhaps she was carried out of the barn?”

“Mm. Then the prints of the carrier would have been deeper. Shame no one stepped in the blood.” Harry peered at the dark walls outside the range of the bulb. From the yard they heard a dog’s pitiful whine and a policeman’s furious curses.

“Go and see what’s up, Skarre,” Harry said.

Skarre went, and Harry switched the flashlight back on and walked toward the wall. He ran his hand along the unpainted boards.

“What’s . . .,” Holm began, but stopped when Harry’s boot hit the wall with a dull thud.

The starry sky came into view.

“A back door,” Harry said, staring at the black forest and the silhouette of spruce trees against the dome of dirty-yellow light from the town in the distance. He shone the flashlight on the snow. The beam immediately found the tracks.

“Two people,” Harry said.

“It’s the dog,” Skarre said on his return. “It won’t budge.”

“Won’t budge?” Harry lit up the trail of footprints. The snow reflected the light, but the trail vanished in the darkness beneath the trees.

“The dog handler doesn’t understand. He says the dog seems petrified.

At any rate it refuses to go into the forest.”

“Perhaps it can smell fox,” Holm said. “Lots of foxes in this forest.”

“Foxes?” Skarre snorted. “That big dog can’t be afraid of foxes.”

“Perhaps it’s never seen a fox,” Harry said. “But it knows it can smell a predator. It’s rational to be afraid of what you don’t know. The dog that isn’t won’t live long.” Harry could feel his heart begin to quicken. And he knew why. The forest. The dark. The type of terror that was not rational. The type that had to be overcome.

“This is to be treated as a crime scene until further notice,” Harry said. “Start work. I’ll check where this trail leads.”

“OK.”

Harry swallowed before stepping out the back door. It had been more than thirty years ago. And still his body bristled.

He had been staying at his grandparents’ house in Åndalsnes during his autumn vacation. The farm lay on a hillside with the mighty Romsdal Mountains towering above. Harry had been ten and had gone into the forest to look for the cow his grandfather was searching for. He wanted

to find it before his grandfather, before anyone. So he hurried. Ran like a maniac over hills of soft blueberry bushes and funny, crooked dwarf birch trees. The paths came and went as he ran in a straight line toward the bell he thought he had heard among the trees. And there it was again, a bit farther to the right now. He jumped over a stream and ducked under a tree and his boots squelched as he ran across a marsh with a rain cloud edging toward him. He could see the veil of drizzle beneath the cloud showering the steep mountainside.

And the rain was so fine that he had not noticed the darkness descending; it slunk out of the marsh, it crept between the trees, it spilled down through the shadows of the mountainside like black paint and collected at the bottom of the valley. He looked up at a large bird circling high above, so dizzyingly high he could see the mountain behind it. And then a boot got stuck and he fell. Facedown and without anything to grab. Everything went dark, and his nose and mouth were filled with the taste of marsh, of death, decay and darkness. He could taste the darkness for the few seconds he was under. And then he came up again, and discovered that all the light had gone. Gone across the mountain towering above him in its silent, heavy majesty, whispering that he didn't know where he was, that he hadn't known for a long time. Unaware that he had lost a boot, he stood up and began to run. He would soon see something he recognized. But the landscape seemed bewitched; rocks had become heads of creatures growing up out of the ground, bushes were fingers that scratched at his legs and dwarf birch trees were witches bent with laughter as they pointed the way, here or there, the way home or the way to perdition, the way to his grandparents' house or the way to the Pit. Because adults had told him about the Pit. The bottomless swamp where cattle, people and whole carts vanished, never to return.

It was almost night when Harry tottered into the kitchen and his grandmother hugged him and said that his father, grandfather and all the adults from the neighboring farm were out looking for him. Where had he been?

In the forest.

But hadn't he heard their shouts? They had been calling Harry; she had heard them calling Harry all the time.

He didn't remember it himself, but many times later he had been told that he had sat there trembling with cold on the wooden box in front of the stove, staring into the distance with an apathetic expression on his face, and had answered: "I didn't think it was them calling."

"Who did you think it was, then?"

"The others. Did you know that darkness has a *taste*, Grandma?"

Harry had walked barely a few yards into the forest when he was overtaken by an intense, almost unnatural silence. He shone the flashlight down

on the ground in front of him because every time he pointed it into the forest, shadows ran between the trees like jittery spirits in the pitch black. Being isolated from the dark in a bubble of light didn't give him a sense of security. Quite the opposite. The certainty that he was the most visible object moving through the forest made him feel naked, vulnerable. The branches scraped at his face, like a blind man's fingers trying to identify a stranger.

The tracks led to a stream whose gurgling noise drowned his quickened breathing. One of the trails disappeared while the other followed the stream on lower ground.

He went on. The stream wound hither and thither, but he wasn't concerned about losing his bearings; all he had to do was retrace his steps.

An owl, which must have been close by, hooted an admonitory to *wit-to-woo*. The dial on his watch glowed green and showed that he had been walking for more than fifteen minutes. Time to go back and send in the team with proper footwear, gear and a dog that was not afraid of foxes.

Harry's heart stopped.

It had darted past his face. Soundless and so fast that he hadn't seen anything. But the current of air had given it away. Harry heard the owl's wings beating in the snow and the piteous squeak of a small rodent that had just become its prey.

He slowly let out the air from his lungs. Shone the flashlight over the forest ahead one last time and turned to go back. Took one step, then came to a halt. He wanted to take another, two more, to get out. But he did what he had to do. Shone the light behind him. And there it was again. A glint, a reflection of light that should not be there in the middle of the black forest. He went closer. Looked back and tried to fix the spot in his mind. It was about fifty feet from the stream. He crouched down. Just the steel stuck up, but he didn't need to brush away the snow to see what it was. A hatchet. If there had been blood on it after the chickens were killed, it was gone now. There were no footprints around the hatchet. Harry shone the flashlight and saw a snapped twig on the snow a few yards away. Someone must have thrown the ax here with enormous strength.

At that moment Harry felt it again. The sensation he had had at the Spektrum earlier that evening. The sensation that he was being observed. Instinctively, he switched off the flashlight, and the darkness descended over him like a blanket. He held his breath and listened. Don't, he thought. Don't let it happen. Evil is not a thing. It cannot take possession of you. It's the opposite; it's a void, an absence of goodness. The only thing you can be frightened of here is yourself.

Harry switched on the flashlight and pointed it toward the clearing.

It was her. She stood erect and immobile between the trees, looking at him without blinking, with the same large, sleepy eyes as in the photograph. Harry's first thought was that she was dressed like a bride, in white, that she was standing at the altar, here, in the middle of the forest. The light made her glitter. Harry breathed in with a shiver and grabbed his mobile phone from his jacket pocket. Bjørn Holm answered after the second ring.

"Cordon off the whole area," Harry said. His throat felt dry, rough.

"I'm calling in the troops."

"What's happened?"

"There's a snowman here."

"So?"

Harry explained.

"I didn't catch the last part," Holm shouted. "Poor coverage here . . ."

"The head," Harry repeated. "It belongs to Sylvia Ottersen."

The other end went quiet.

Harry told Holm to follow the footprints and hung up.

Then he crouched against a tree, buttoned his coat right up and switched off the flashlight to save the battery while he waited. Thinking he had almost forgotten what it tasted like, the darkness.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Snowman*]

# *The Troubled Man*

Henning Mankell

## **EXCERPT**

The year Kurt Wallander celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday, he fulfilled a long-held dream. Ever since his divorce from Mona fifteen years earlier, he had intended to leave his apartment in Mariagatan, where so many unpleasant memories were etched into the walls, and move out to the country. Every time he came home in the evening after a stressful and depressing workday, he was reminded that once upon a time he had lived there with a family. Now the furniture stared at him as if accusing him of desertion.

He could never reconcile himself to living there until he became so old that he might not be able to look after himself anymore. Although he had not yet reached the age of sixty, he reminded himself over and over again of his father's lonely old age, and he knew he had no desire to follow in his footsteps. He needed only to look into the bathroom mirror in the morning when he was shaving to see that he was growing more and more like his father. When he was young, his face had resembled his mother's. But now it seemed as if his father was taking him over—like a runner who has been lagging a long way behind but is slowly catching up the closer he gets to the invisible finish line.

Wallander's worldview was fairly simple. He did not want to become a bitter hermit growing old in isolation, being visited only by his daughter and perhaps now and then by a former colleague who had suddenly remembered that Wallander was still alive. He had no religious hopes of there being something in store for him on the other side of the black River Styx. There would be nothing but the same darkness that he had once emerged from. Until his fiftieth birthday, he had harbored a vague fear of death, something that had become his own personal mantra—that he *would be dead for such a long time*. He had seen far too many dead bodies in his life. There was nothing in their expressionless faces to suggest that their souls had been absorbed into some kind of heaven. Like so many other police officers, he had experienced every possible variation of death. Just

after his fiftieth birthday had been celebrated with a party and cake at the police station, marked by a speech full of empty phrases by the former chief of police, Liza Holgersson, he had bought a new notebook and tried to record his memories of all the dead people he had come across. It had been a macabre exercise and he had no idea why he had been tempted to pursue it. When he got as far as the tenth suicide, a man in his forties, a drug addict with more or less every problem it was possible to imagine, he gave up. The man had hanged himself in the attic of the condemned apartment building where he lived, hanging in such a way that he was guaranteed to break his neck and hence avoid being slowly choked to death. His name was Welin. The pathologist had told Wallander that the man had been successful—he had proved to be a skillful executioner. At that point Wallander had abandoned his suicide cases and instead stupidly devoted several hours to an attempt to recall the young people or children he had found dead. But he soon gave that up as well. It was too repugnant. Then he felt ashamed of what he had been trying to do and burned the notebook, as if his efforts were both perverted and illegal. In fact, he was basically a cheerful person—it was just that he had allowed another side of his personality to take over.

Death had been his constant companion. He had killed people in the line of duty—but after the obligatory investigation he had never been accused of unnecessary violence.

Having killed two people was the cross he had to bear. If he rarely laughed, it was because of what he had been forced to endure.

But one day he made a critical decision. He had been out near Löderup, not far from the house where his father used to live, to talk to a farmer who had been the target of a very nasty robbery. On the way back to Ystad he noticed a real estate agent's sign picturing a little dirt road where there was a house for sale. He reacted automatically, stopped the car, turned around, and found his way to the address. Even before he got out of the car it was obvious to him that the property was in need of repair. It had originally been a U-shaped building, the bottom half clad in wood. But now one of the wings was missing—perhaps it had burned down. He walked around the house. It was a day in early fall. He could still remember seeing a skein of geese migrating south, flying directly above his head. He peered in through the windows and soon established that only the roof badly needed to be fixed. The view was enchanting; he could just make out the sea in the far distance, and possibly even one of the ferries on the way to Ystad from Poland. That afternoon in September 2003 marked the beginning of a love story with this remote house.

He drove straight to the real estate agent's office in the center of Ystad. The asking price was low enough that he would be able to manage the

mortgage payments. The very next day he returned to negotiate with the agent, a young man who spoke at breakneck speed and gave the impression of living in a parallel universe. The previous owners were a young couple who had moved to Skåne from Stockholm but almost immediately, before they even had time to buy furniture, decided to split up. Yet there was nothing hidden in the walls of the empty house that scared him. And the most important thing was crystal clear: he would be able to move in without delay. The roof would last for another year or two; all he needed to do was to redecorate some of the rooms, perhaps install a new bath and maybe acquire a new stove. But the boiler was less than fifteen years old, and all the plumbing and electrical fittings no older.

Before leaving, Wallander asked if there were any other potential buyers. There was one, said the agent, looking distinctly worried, as if he really wanted Wallander to get the house but at the same time implying that he had better make his mind up fast. But Wallander had no intention of rushing in blindly. He spoke to one of his colleagues whose brother was a home inspector and managed to arrange for the expert to inspect the house the very next day. He found nothing wrong apart from what Wallander had already noticed. That same day Wallander spoke to his bank manager and was informed that he could rely on a mortgage big enough to buy the house. During all his years in Ystad, Wallander had saved up a lot of money without ever thinking much about it. Enough for the down payment.

That evening he sat at his kitchen table and made detailed financial calculations. He found the occasion solemn and significant. By midnight he had made up his mind: he would buy the house, which had the dramatic-sounding name of Black Heights. Despite the late hour, he called his daughter, Linda, who lived in a new development just off the main road to Malmö. She was still awake.

“You must come over,” said Wallander excitedly. “I’ve got news for you.”

“What? In the middle of the night?”

“I know it’s your day off tomorrow.”

It had been a complete surprise to him a few years earlier when, during a walk along the beach at Mossby Strand, Linda told him she had decided to follow in his footsteps and join the police force. It cheered him up instantly. In a way it was as if she was giving new meaning to all the years he had been a police officer. When she finished her training, she was assigned to the Ystad force. The first few months, she lived with him in the apartment in Mariagatan. It was not an ideal arrangement; he was set in his ways, and he also found it hard to accept that she was grown up now. But their relationship was saved when she managed to find an apartment of her own.

When she arrived in the early hours, he told her what he was planning to do. The next day she accompanied him to the house and said immediately that it was perfect. No other house would do, only this one at the end of a dirt road at the top of a gentle slope down to the sea.

“Granddad will haunt you,” she said. “But you don’t need to be afraid. He’ll be a sort of guardian angel.”

It was a significant and happy moment in Wallander’s life when he signed the contract of sale and suddenly found himself standing there with a bunch of keys in his hand. He moved in on November first, having redecorated two rooms but having refrained from buying a new stove. He left Mariagatan without the slightest doubt that he was doing the right thing. A southeasterly gale was blowing the day he moved in.

That first evening, with the storm raging, he lost electricity. Wallander sat in his new home in pitch darkness. There was groaning and creaking coming from the rafters, and he discovered a leak in the ceiling. But he had no regrets. This was where he was going to live.

There was a dog kennel outside the house. Ever since he was a little boy Wallander had dreamed of having a dog. By the time he was thirteen he had given up hope, but out of the blue he got one as a present from his parents. He loved that dog more than anything else in the world. Looking back, it felt like the dog, Saga, had taught him what love could be. When she was three years old, she was run over by a truck. The shock and sorrow were worse than anything he had experienced in his young life. More than forty years later, Wallander had no difficulty recalling all those chaotic emotions. *Death strikes*, he sometimes thought. It has a powerful and unforgiving fist.

Two weeks later he acquired a dog, a black Labrador puppy. He wasn’t quite a purebred, but he was nevertheless described by the owner as top class. Wallander had decided in advance that the dog would be called Jussi, after the world-famous Swedish tenor who was one of Wallander’s greatest heroes.

Nearly four years after he bought the house, on January 12, 2007, Wallander’s whole life changed in an instant.

As he stepped out into the hall a few paces behind Kristina Magnusson, whom he liked viewing from behind when nobody was looking, the phone rang in his office. He considered ignoring it, but instead he turned and went back in. It was Linda. She had a few days off, having worked on New Year’s Eve, during which Ystad had been unusually lively, with lots of cases of domestic violence and assaults.

“Do you have a minute?”

“Not really. We’re on the verge of identifying some crooks in a big case.”

“I need to see you.”

Wallander thought she sounded tense. He started to worry, as he always did, that something might have happened to her.

“Is it anything serious?”

“Not at all.”

“I can meet you at one o’clock.”

“Mossby Strand beach?”

Wallander thought she was joking.

“Should I bring my bathing suit?”

“I’m serious. Mossby Strand. But no bathing suit.”

“Why do we have to go out there in the cold with this icy wind blowing?”

“I’ll be there at one o’clock. So will you.”

She hung up before he could ask anything else. What did she want? He stood there, trying in vain to think of an answer. Then he went to the conference room with the best television set and sat for two hours going through CCTV camera footage for the case he was working on, the brutal attack and robbery of an elderly arms dealer and his wife. As twelve thirty approached, they were still only halfway through. Wallander stood up and announced that they could review the rest of the tapes after two o’clock. Martinsson, one of the officers Wallander had worked with longest in Ystad, looked at him in surprise.

“You mean we should stop now? With so much still to do? You don’t usually break for lunch.”

“I’m not going to eat. I have an appointment.”

He left the room, thinking that his tone of voice had been unnecessarily sharp. He and Martinsson were not only colleagues, they were also friends. When Wallander threw his housewarming party out at Löderup it was of course Martinsson who gave a speech in praise of him, the dog, and the house. We are like an old hardworking couple, he thought as he left the police station. An old couple who are always bickering, mainly to keep each other on our toes.

He went to his car, a Peugeot he’d had for the last four years, and drove off. How many times have I driven along this road? How many more times will I drive along it? As he waited for a red light to change, he remembered something his father had told him about a cousin Wallander had never met. His cousin used to be captain of a ferry plying between several islands in the Stockholm archipelago—short trips, no more than five minutes at a time, but year in, year out, the same crossings. One afternoon in October something snapped inside him. The ferry had a full load, but he suddenly changed course and headed straight out to sea. He said later that he knew there was enough diesel in the tank to take him as far as one of the Baltic states. But that was all he said, after he was overpowered by angry pas-

sengers and the coast guard raced out to put the ferry back on course. He never explained why he did what he did.

But in a vague sort of way, Wallander thought he understood him.

As he drove west along the coast road he could see dark thunderclouds building up on the horizon. The radio had warned that there was a risk of more snow in the evening. Shortly before he passed the side road to Marsvinsholm he was overtaken by a motorcycle. The rider waved at him and made Wallander think of something that frightened him more than anything else: that one of these days Linda would have a motorcycle accident. He had been totally unprepared when, several years earlier, she turned up outside his apartment on her newly bought bike, a Harley Davidson covered in glittering chrome. His first question when she took off her crash helmet was whether she had lost her mind.

“You don’t know about all my dreams,” she had said with a broad, happy grin. “Just as I’m sure I don’t know all yours.”

“I don’t dream about a motorbike, that’s for sure.”

“Too bad. We could have gone for rides together.”

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Troubled Man*]

# *I Think I Love You*

Allison Pearson

## **EXCERPT**

### **1**

His favorite color was brown. Brown was such a sophisticated color, a quiet and modest sort of color. Not like purple, which was Donny's favorite. I wouldn't be seen dead in purple. Or in a Donny cap. How much would you have to like a boy before you went out wearing a stupid purple peaked cap?

Honest, it's amazing the things you can know about someone you don't know. I knew the date of his birth—April 12, 1950. He was a typical Aries, but without the Arian's stubbornness. I knew his height and his weight and his favorite drink, 7Up. I knew the names of his parents and his stepmother, the Broadway musical star. I knew all about his love of horses, which made perfect sense to me because when you're that famous it must be comforting to be around someone who doesn't know or care what famous is. I knew the instrument he learned to play when he was lonely. Drums. I knew the name of the dog he left behind when he had to move away from New Jersey. I knew that when he was a boy he was small for his age and he had a squint and had to wear an eye patch and corrective glasses, which must have been hard. Harder than for a girl even. I didn't wear my glasses if I could help it. Only in class for the blackboard, though I couldn't see well without them and it got me into trouble a few times when I smiled in the street at total strangers I mistook for members of my family. A few years later, when I got contact lenses, I was stunned by the trees. They had leaves, millions of leaves, with edges so sharp and defined they looked like God had made each one with a pastry cutter.

Basically, before I was sixteen, the world was one big Impressionist painting, unless I screwed up my eyes really tight to bring it into focus. Some things, as I would discover, were best left a blur.

Back then, I wasn't interested in the real world. Not really. I answered my parents' questions, I gave the appearance of doing homework, I lugged

my cello into school on my back, I went downtown on Saturday afternoons with girls who sometimes felt like friends and sometimes didn't, but I was living for Him. Each night, I spread my long dark hair out on the pillow and made sure to sleep on my back so my face was ready to receive a kiss in case he came in the night. It wasn't that likely, obviously, because I lived in South Wales and he lived in California, which was five thousand miles away, and he didn't even have my address, although I had once sent a poem for him to a magazine. Choosing the right color paper took longer than writing the actual poem. I settled on yellow, because it seemed more mature than pink. I thought all the other girls would choose pink and part of loving him was finding better ways to please him so he would know how much more I cared. They didn't sell brown writing paper or I would have used brown, because that was his favorite color. Sometime later—three weeks and four days if you're counting, and I definitely was—a reply came in the post. It was seventeen words long, including my name. It didn't matter that the letter said they were sorry they couldn't publish my poem. In some crucial way, I felt as though I had made contact with him at long last. Someone important in London, someone who had been in the same room as him, had touched the yellow paper I had touched and then typed my name on an envelope and licked the stamp. No rejection slip has ever been more treasured. It took pride of place in my scrapbook.

I knew exactly where he lived in California. In a canyon. A canyon was like one of our valleys, only much bigger. We said much bigger. David said way. Way bigger. *Way* was American for *much*. America was so big that Americans would drive one hundred miles just to have dinner with someone and they didn't think that was a long way to go. In America, *way to go* means you've done something well. Way to go, baby! And they have gas instead of petrol.

Other words I had learned were *cool*, *mad* and *bathroom*. You have to be careful because a bathroom is not a bathroom in America, it's a toilet.

"The Americans are a most polite people who are not standing for vulgarity," said my mother, who was German and beautiful and disapproved of many things. You might say that my mother's whole life was a battle to keep the vulgar and the ugly at bay. In our town, she had found the perfect enemy. I just liked knowing American words because they brought me closer to Him. When we met, it would be important to retain my individuality, which was one of the top things David looked for in a girl.

In every interview I had read, David said that he preferred a girl to just be herself. But to be honest with you, I was unsure of who myself was, or even if I had one, although I still maintained a touching faith that this unknown and as yet undiscovered me would be deeply appealing to David

when we eventually met. How could I be sure? The understanding in his eyes told me so. (Oh, those eyes. They were deep green pools you could pour all your longing into.) Still, I reckoned that meeting David would be awkward enough without any unnecessary confusion, so I did my best to pick up American. It would be tricky to go to a bathroom in his house in Los Angeles, for example, and find there was no bath, wouldn't it? Or imagine saying someone was mad. David would think that I meant they were angry. *Crazy* means mad in America. Back then, I couldn't imagine David ever being angry, he was so gentle and sensitive. Sorry, do I sound mad?

"Donny Osmond's a moron," Sharon said firmly. She was kneeling on the floor, picking at the staples in a centerfold with her thumbnail, trying to free a male torso. The slender, headless body was naked to the waist and practically hairless, except for a fine golden down just above the belt, which boasted a heavy bronze buckle. It looked like the door knocker to an Aztec temple. Sharon eased the poster off the frail metal pins until it rested on her hands, trembling a little in the hot air blowing from the small heater beside her. Sharon's bedroom was small, painted a sickly shade of ointment pink and reeked of burned hair, a bad cotton-candy smell that got in your nostrils and stayed there. Sharon had dried her hair in front of the heater and a few strands had gotten sucked into the back, but we didn't really notice the smell, so absorbed were we in our work.

"I don't think Donny's a moron, to be honest with you," I said carefully.

"All the Osmonds are morons. I read it in a mag," she insisted, without looking up from the poster. Sharon was an expert restorer. The best artist in our class. When she grew up she could probably get a job in a museum or an art gallery. I loved to watch her work. The way she rolled her tongue into a little tunnel when she was concentrating and applied her attention to the tiny puncture holes in David's stomach, soothing the torn paper with her fingertips until the flesh appeared to seal up.

"There you go, lovely boy," she said, and placed a noisy smacking kiss on his belly button before adding the poster to the pile.

There was a prickle in my throat like a piece of trapped wool. I badly wanted to correct Sharon about the Osmonds' being morons, but our friendship was still too new to risk disagreement. We liked each other because we agreed. We agreed because we both thought David Cassidy was the most wonderful boy currently alive and maybe in all of human history. At thirteen years of age, I couldn't imagine the luxury of having a friend you could disagree with. If you disagreed with her, you could fall out. Then, before you knew it, you'd be back out there in the playground by yourself, sighing and checking your watch every couple of seconds to indicate that you did have an arrangement to meet someone and were not,

in fact, the kind of sad, friendless person who had to pretend they were waiting for friends who did not exist.

Even worse, you could find yourself entering into anxious negotiations with some other borderline outcast to be your partner in PE so you didn't have to be in a pair with Susan Davies—Susan Smell, who had a disease of the skin no one could spell. Her face, her arms and her legs were all cratered, like the surface of the moon, only some days the holes were filled in with the chalky dust of calamine lotion. We knew exactly what it was because our mothers dabbed the lotion on us when we got chicken pox. The angry, itchy spots were like tiny volcanoes around which the soothing pink liquid hardened into a tempting lava crust. Mustn't pick it, mind, or it would leave a scar. The worst thing about Susan Davies, apart from the way you felt really sorry for her but still didn't do anything to help her, was the stink. Honest to God, Susan smelled so bad it made you retch in the corridor when she went past, even though she always walked on the side with the windows.

"Donny's a *Mormon*. I think it's a religion they founded in Utah," I said cautiously, trying the sounds in my mouth.

Ooh. Ta.

I knew exactly what Mormons were. Donny Studies were part of my deep background research on David. I knew everything about the other Osmonds, too, just in case, even Wayne. At a pinch, I could have given you the star sign of every member of the Jackson 5, and details of their difficult upbringing, which was in such contrast to their carefree, joyful music. Twiddly diddly dee, twiddly diddly dee. Twiddly diddly dee. Dee dee!

You know, I can never hear the opening chorus of "Rockin' Robin" without a spasm of regret for what became of that remarkable little boy and all his sweetness.

Even as a child, I had this overdeveloped taste for tragic biographical information, a sort of twitching inner radar for distress. I may have been the only one not to be in the least bit surprised when Michael Jackson began to take leave of his adorable black face in painful cosmetic stages. You see, I understood all about hating the way you looked and wanting to magic away the child who made a parent feel angry or disappointed. When you grow up, they call this empathy. When you're thirteen, it just makes you feel like you're not so horribly alone.

"D'you reckon Mormons all have to wear purple because it's Donny's favorite color?" I asked.

Sharon giggled. "Get away with you, Petra, you're a case, you are!"

We thought we were hysterically funny. We laughed at anything, but lately boys had become a particular target for our witticisms. We laughed at them before they could laugh at us, or ignore us, which curiously felt

even more wounding than being teased or insulted. You know, I always liked Sharon's laugh better than mine. My laugh sounded like a nervous cough that only starts to let itself go too late, when the joke has passed. Sharon made that happy, hiccupy sound you hear when you pull a cord in a doll's back. She looked a bit like a doll, did my new maybe friend. She was round and dimpled and her eyes were an astonishing bluebell blue beneath the palest barely there lashes. Her hair was that bone-dry flaxen kind that bursts out of a person's head like a dandelion clock. When we sat next to each other in Chemistry, her hair would float sideways on an invisible current of hot air from the Bunsen burner and stick to my jumper. If I tried to sweep it off, the static gave me a shock that made my arm swarm.

Sharon was pretty in a way everyone in our group could agree was pretty without feeling bad about it. It was a mystery. Her weight seemed to act as a sort of protective jacket against jealousy. When she lost her puppy fat I think we all sensed it might be a different story. In the meantime, Sharon posed no threat to Gillian, who had gotten the two of us together in the first place and who was the star of our group. No, that's not right. Gillian was our sun. We all revolved around her and you would do anything, anything at all, really humiliating and shameful things, just in the hope she might shine on you for a few minutes because the warmth of Gillian's attention made you instantly prettier and more fascinating.

As for me, the jury was still out on my looks. I was so skinny that next to Sharon I looked like a Victorian matchgirl. And don't go thinking, "Oh, get her, she's proud of her figure." Skinny is not the same as slim, no way. Skinny is the last-girl-but-one-to-get-a-training-bra because you've got nothing up top. God, I hate that expression. Up top. "Hasn't got much up top, has she?"

Where we lived, girls had Up Top and Down There. You don't want to let a boy go Down There, but sometimes he was allowed Up Top, if you'd got anything there, like.

Skinny is always being late for hockey and being made to run five times round the games field because you keep your blouse on until the others have left the changing room so they don't see your sad little girl's vest. A vest with a single shaming rosebud on the front.

The magazines told us to identify our good points. Mine was eyes. Large and gray-blue, but sometimes green-blue flecked with amber, like a rock pool when the sun is shining on it. But my eyes also had these liver-colored smudges under them that no cucumber slices or beauty sleep could ever cure. I never stopped trying though.

"Petra's dark circles are so bad she could go to a masked ball and she wouldn't need a mask," Gillian said, and everyone laughed, even me.

Especially me. Be careful not to show her what really hurts or she'll know exactly where to put the knife in next time.

My worst feature was everything else, really. I hated my knees, my nose and my ears—basically anything that stuck out. And I had pale skin that seemed even paler because of my dark hair. On a good day, I looked like Snow White in her glass coffin.

Expertly, my mother took my face in one hand, chin pinched between thumb and forefinger and tilted it sharply toward the bathroom light. She squeezed so tight my jaw ached. “You are not unattractive, Petra,” my mother said coolly. “Bones really quite good. If you pluck the brows when you are older, here and here, like *szo*, revealing the eyes more. You know, you are really not *szo* bad.”

“It’s *too* bad, Mum, not so bad. I don’t look *too* bad.”

“That is exactly what I am saying to you, Petra. Relax, please. You are not *szo* bad for a girl at her age.”

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *I Think I Love You*]

# Reading Group Guides

## *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

Jennifer Egan

### READING GROUP GUIDE

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shifts among various perspectives, voices, and time periods, and in one striking chapter, departs from conventional narrative entirely. What does the mixture of voices and narrative forms convey about the nature of experience and the creation of memories? Why has Egan arranged the stories out of chronological sequence?
2. In “A to B” Bosco unintentionally coins the phrase “Time’s a goon,” used again by Bennie in “Pure Language.” What does Bosco mean? What does Bennie mean? What does the author mean?
3. “Found Objects” and “The Gold Cure” include accounts of Sasha’s and Bennie’s therapy sessions. Sasha picks and chooses what she shares: “She did this for Coz’s protection and her own—they were writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances.” Bennie tries to adhere to a list of no-no’s his shrink has supplied. What do the tone and the content of these sections suggest about the purpose and value of therapy? Do they provide a helpful perspective on the characters?
4. Lou makes his first appearance in “Ask Me If I Care” as an unprincipled, highly successful businessman; “Safari” provides an intimate, disturbing look at the way he treats his children and lover; and “You (Plural)” presents him as a sick old man. What do his relationships with Rhea and Mindy have in common? To what extent do both women

accept (and perhaps encourage) his abhorrent behavior, and why to they do so? Do the conversations between Lou and Rolph, and Rolph's interactions with his sister and Mindy, prepare you for the tragedy that occurs almost twenty years later? What emotions does Lou's afternoon in "You (Plural)" with Jocelyn and Rhea provoke? Is he basically the same person he was in the earlier chapters?

5. Why does Scotty decide to get in touch with Bennie? What strategies do each of them employ as they spar with each other? How does the past, including Scotty's dominant role in the band and his marriage to Alice, the girl both men pursued, affect the balance of power? In what ways is Scotty's belief that "one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out" confirmed at the meeting? Is their reunion in "Pure Language" a continuation of the pattern set when they were teenagers, or does it reflect changes in their fortunes as well as in the world around them?
6. Sasha's troubled background comes to light in "Good-bye, My Love." Do Ted's recollections of her childhood explain Sasha's behavior? To what extent is Sasha's "catalog of woes" representative of her generation as a whole? How do Ted's feelings about his career and wife color his reactions to Sasha? What does the flash-forward to "another day more than twenty years after this one" imply about the transitory moments in our lives?
7. Musicians, groupies, and entertainment executives and publicists figure prominently in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. What do the careers and private lives of Bennie, Lou, and Scotty ("X's and O's"; "Pure Language"); Bosco and Stephanie ("A to B"); and Dolly ("Selling the General") suggest about American culture and society over the decades? Discuss how specific details and cultural references (e.g., names of real people, bands, and venues) add authenticity to Egan's fictional creations.
8. The chapters in this book can be read as stand-alone stories. How does this affect the reader's engagement with individual characters and the events in their lives? Which characters or stories did you find the most compelling? By the end, does everything fall into place to form a satisfying storyline?
9. Read the quotation from Proust that Egan uses as an epigraph. How do Proust's observations apply to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*? What impact do changing times and different contexts have on how the characters perceive and present themselves? Are the attitudes and actions of some characters more consistent than others', and if so, why?

10. In a recent interview Egan said, “I think anyone who’s writing satirically about the future of America and life often looks prophetic. . . . I think we’re all part of a zeitgeist and we’re all listening to and absorbing the same things, consciously or unconsciously. . . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 8, 2010). Considering current social trends and political realities, including fears of war and environmental devastation, evaluate the future Egan envisions in “Pure Language” and “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.”
11. What does “Pure Language” have to say about authenticity in a technological and digital age? Would you view the response to Bennie, Alex, and Lulu’s marketing venture differently if the musician had been someone other than Scotty Hausmann and his slide guitar? Stop/Go (from “The Gold Cure”), for example?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Egan is the award-winning author of *The Keep*, the National Book Award-nominated *Look at Me*, *The Invisible Circus*, and the story collection *Emerald City*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## SUGGESTED READING

A. S. Byatt, *The Children’s Book*; Don DeLillo, *White Noise*; Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*; Rick Moody, *Right Livelihoods*; Alice Munro, *Open Secrets*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *A Visit From the Goon Squad*]

# *The Night Circus*

Erin Morgenstern

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel opens with a quote from Oscar Wilde: “A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.” How is this sentiment explored in *The Night Circus*? Who in the novel is a dreamer? And what is their punishment for being so?
2. The novel frequently changes narrative perspective. How does this transition shape your reading of the novel and your connection to the characters and the circus? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from varied perspectives?
3. The narrative also follows a non-linear sequence—shifting at times from present to past. How effective was this method in regards to revealing conflict in the novel?
4. There are a number of allusions to Shakespeare throughout the text: *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, and *As You Like It*. Explain these references—how does each play reveal itself in the novel?
5. What role does time play in the novel? From Friedrich Thiessen’s clock, to the delayed aging of the circus developers, to the birth of the twins—is time manipulated or fated at the circus?
6. “Chandresh relishes reactions. Genuine reactions, not mere polite applause. He often values the reactions over the show itself. *A show without an audience is nothing, after all.* In the response of the audience, that is where the power of performance lives.” How does this statement apply to both Le Cirque des Rêves and the competition? Which audience is more valuable: one that is complicit or one that is unknowing?
7. Chandresh is portrayed as a brilliant and creative perfectionist at the beginning of the novel, yet he slowly unravels as the competition matures. Is Chandresh merely a puppet of the competition—solely

- used for his ability to provide a venue for the competition—or do his contributions run deeper?
8. Marco asserts that Alexander H. is a father figure to him (though his paternal instincts aren't readily noticeable). In what ways does Alexander provide for Marco and in what ways has he failed him?
  9. Celia emphasizes that keeping the circus controlled is a matter of “balance.” And Marco suggests that the competition is not a chess game, but rather, a balancing of scales. However, both the circus and the competition get disordered at times—leaving both physical and emotional casualties in their wake. Is the circus ever really in “balance,” or is it a pendulum swinging from one extreme to the next?
  10. From the outside, the circus is full of enchantments and delights, but behind the scenes, the delicate push and pull of the competition results in some sinister events: i.e. Tara Burgess and Friedrich Thiessen's deaths. How much is the competition at fault for these losses and how much is it the individual's doing?
  11. How do you view the morality of the circus in regards to the performers and developers being unknowing pawns in Celia and Marco's competition? Do Celia and Marco owe an explanation to their peers about their unwitting involvement?
  12. Friedrich Thiessen asserts that he thinks of himself “not as a writer so much as someone who provides a gateway, a tangential route for readers to the circus.” He is a voice for those unable to attend the circus and suggests that the circus is bigger than itself. What role do the *rêveurs* play in keeping the spirit of the circus alive outside of the confines of the circus tents?
  13. What is Hector's role in determining the final fate of the competition? He lectures Celia about remaining independent and not interfering with her partner, but ultimately, Hector largely influences the outcome of the competition. Explain this influence.
  14. Poppet and Widget are especially affected by the lighting of the bonfire. How crucial are their “specialties” to the ongoing success of the circus?
  15. Isobel is a silent, yet integral, partner in both the circus and the competition. She has an ally in Tsukiko, but seemingly no one else, especially not Marco. How much does Marco's underestimation of Isobel affect the outcome of the competition?
  16. How does Isobel serve as a foil to Celia? Who, if anyone, fills that role for Marco?
  17. Tsukiko is aware of Isobel's “tempering of the circus” from the outset and when Isobel worries that it is having no effect, Tsukiko suggests:

- “perhaps it is controlling the chaos *within* more than the chaos without.” What, and whose, chaos is Tsukiko alluding to here?
18. Mr. Barris, Friedrich Thiessen, Mme. Padvá, and even Bailey are aware that the circus has made a profound, inexplicable, change in their lives, but they each choose not to explore the depth of these changes. Friedrich Thiessen confirms that, “I prefer to remain unenlightened, to better appreciate the dark.” Do you agree with this standpoint? What inherent dangers accompany a purposeful ignorance? What dangers present themselves when ignorance is not chosen? Is one choice better/safer than the other or are they equally fraught?
  19. Celia tells Bailey that he is “not destined or chosen” to be the next proprietor of the circus. He is simply “in the right place at the right time . . . and care[s] enough to do what needs to be done. Sometimes that’s enough.” In this situation, is that “enough?” Can the responsibility of maintaining the circus be trusted to just anyone, or unlike Celia suggests, is Bailey truly special?
  20. At the closing of the novel, we are left to believe that the circus is still traveling—Bailey’s business card provides an email address as his contact information. How do you think the circus would fare over time? Would the circus need to evolve to suit each generation or is it distinctive enough to transcend time?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Morgenstern is a writer and a multimedia artist, who describes all her work as “fairy tales in one way or another.” She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two very fluffy cats.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Night Circus*]

# *The Lake Shore Limited*

Sue Miller

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you read any of Sue Miller's other books? If so, does *The Lake Shore Limited* share any themes?
2. What do we learn from the first sentence of this novel? Now that you know the character Leslie, what does it mean to you?
3. Who did you assume was the main character when you first started reading? Did you change your mind?
4. Do you consider this to be a 9/11 novel? Why?
5. Leslie wonders, "But was [possibility] necessary? . . . Weren't there people, everywhere, who lived without it? Who didn't imagine anything other than *what was?*" Ultimately, which of the characters are open to possibility, and which aren't?
6. Discuss the marriages in the novel. What do they have in common? In what ways are they different? Which seems healthiest to you?
7. Leslie realizes that "she had been asking [Pierce] whether he would come with her into what she thought of as this new life—and that he was telling her no." How does Leslie react to this? Why?
8. In the play, Gabriel says to Anita, "It's what we all feel. We want. Then we want more. It's the human condition." Is this true for Leslie, Rafe, Billy, and Sam?
9. What do you think Miller is trying to say about the creation of art and its reflection of real life?
10. The notion of playing a role is a recurrent theme in the novel. Who is most true to his or her authentic self? Who has mastered his or her role? Whose changes most drastically?
11. Why is the Henry James reference in the play so important? What was Billy trying to say?

12. When Rafe asks Billy if the play is based on her own life, she insists it isn't autobiographical. Is she intentionally lying, or is there something else going on here?
13. Why does sleeping with Billy affect Rafe's performance in the play?
14. Both Rafe and Sam see themselves in Gabriel. Which man do you think is more like him? Why?
15. What does Gus represent to Billy? To Leslie? What role does grief play in the novel?
16. Over the course of the novel, various characters note that Billy looks like a child. What does this signify?
17. Why do Sam and Leslie stop at just a kiss? What do you think would have happened if they had had an affair?
18. What is the purpose of the scene between Sam and Jerry? How does it affect Sam?
19. Why is Billy so frosty when Sam brings his son to see the play?
20. Leslie thinks, "*But that's what the play was about. . . .* At least in part. The wish to imagine what life could be, how it could change, if you were unencumbered." What do you think the play was about? Which of the four main characters most wishes for an unencumbered life?
21. Reread the alternate endings Billy considered for the play. Why do you think she chose to end the play the way she did?
22. Miller writes, "Now as Sam sits in his living room, holding the Christmas letter from Emma, thinking of Melanie Gruber, he realizes that he's called her up in part because he feels the same way about Billy, about the accident of Billy's arrival in his life—exactly that surprised." Why does he feel this way? How does it change him?
23. Discuss the ending. Was it satisfying? What do you imagine happens next?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Miller is the author of the novels *The Senator's Wife*, *Lost in the Forest*, *The World Below*, *While I Was Gone*, *The Distinguished Guest*, *For Love*, *Family Pictures*, and *The Good Mother*; the short story collection *Inventing the Abbotts*; and the memoir *The Story of My Father*. She lives in Boston.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

*The Last Time I Saw You* by Elizabeth Berg; *The Last Time They Met* by Anita Shreve; *Back When We Were Grownups* by Anne Tyler; *Two Truths and a Lie* by Katrina Kittle; *So Long at the Fair* by Christina Schwarz; *Three Junes* by Julia Glass.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Lake Shore Limited*]

# *Last Man in Tower*

Aravind Adiga

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What are some of the major themes of the novel? How does Adiga set them forth even in the first pages through his description of Vishram Society? What do you think the banyan tree symbolizes?
2. The novel begins, “If you are inquiring about Vishram Society, you will be told right away that it is pucca—absolutely, unimpeachably pucca.” What does the word pucca mean? Why is this fact about Vishram important to the story?
3. How does Adiga use humor as social commentary?
4. There is a quote adapted from the Bhagavad Gita: “I was never born and I will never die; I do not hurt and cannot be hurt; I am invincible, immortal, indestructible.” Which characters in the novel seem to feel this way?
5. Why is Masterji so respected at the beginning of the novel? How would he be treated in the United States?
6. According to Masterji, his wife’s favorite saying was “ ‘Man is like a goat tied to a pole.’ Meaning, all of us have some free will but not too much.” Does this prove true for him?
7. There are dozens of scenes that revolve around food. What do the characters’ eating habits tell us about them?
8. Is Dharmen Shah a villain? What are his intentions? Who else might be considered a villain in the story?
9. Discuss Masterji’s friendship with Mr. and Mrs. Pinto. Does envy come into play? How does the offer change their relationship?
10. What is the symbolism behind Mr. Kothari’s flamingos? What are some of the other characters’ influential memories?
11. There are several instances of betrayal in the novel. Whose struck you as most shocking?

12. The offer brings out many different emotions and reactions from the residents of Vishram. In general, how is the reaction of the women different from that of the men in the building?
13. Several of the characters have children, Masterji included. How does their role as parents influence their decision-making? How does parenting in the novel's modern-day India compare to parenting in the United States?
14. After reading the sign his neighbors have posted criticizing him, Masterji thinks, "A man is what his neighbours say he is." Is this true in the novel? How does that notion affect Masterji? Do you think the neighbors' opinions were entirely new or had just lain dormant until he refused the offer?
15. What role does class play in the story? How does the neighbors' treatment of Mary and Ram Khare reflect their attitudes in general?
16. Why do you think Mr. Pinto changes his mind about accepting the offer? Is it only about the money or are there other reasons as well?
17. When Shah hears the news about Masterji, he says, " 'I thought it would be a push down the stairs, or a beating at night. That's all . . . I forgot we were dealing with good people.' " What does he mean?
18. Why does Ajwani refuse to sign?
19. The last line of the novel is, "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free." What is this referring to?
20. Why doesn't Masterji just agree to sell? What would you have done?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aravind Adiga is the author of *The White Tiger*, which was awarded the 2008 Man Booker Prize, and a collection of stories, *Between the Assassinations*. He was born in India and attended Columbia and Oxford universities. He is a former correspondent for *Time* magazine and his work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, the *Financial Times*, and *The Sunday Times*. He lives in India.

## SUGGESTED READING

*A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry; *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh; the *Bhagavad Gita*; the *Ramayana*; *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie; *The Astral* by Kate Christensen; *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al Aswany; *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* by Helen Simonson.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Last Man in Tower*]

# *Girls in White Dresses*

Jennifer Close

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Which character did you relate to most closely, and why?
2. How does Close use humor to convey character? Are the women themselves funny, or the situations they find themselves in?
3. Ambivalence—toward jobs, men, apartments, and children—is a recurring theme in *Girls in White Dresses*. Why do you think that is?
4. What did Isabella learn from JonBenét?
5. Several of the characters keep some pretty big secrets, such as the way Abby keeps her friends away from her hippy parents. How does this affect Abby's life? How do the book's other secrets affect the characters?
6. What is the metaphor of the peahen?
7. On page 98, Isabella thinks about her young nephew, Connor, "All he wanted was to know what to expect. His world didn't look like he'd thought it would, and she understood. How could he keep calm if he couldn't see?" Who else does this describe?
8. Why does "the ham" become so significant for Lauren?
9. Mary wonders why nobody warned her that during her first year as a lawyer, "You will be constantly afraid." What role does fear play in the women's lives?
10. "Kristi and Todd stood with their shoulders touching, wrapped in the cloth. It reminded Isabella of the way that Lauren and Kristi used to huddle together, whispering and laughing at jokes that only they understood." Why does Isabella get so emotional during the "chuppah within a chuppah" wedding scene?
11. Connect the dots between Shannon, Dan, Barack Obama, and the contestants on "The Biggest Loser." Why is hope so important?
12. Throughout the book, questions of identity pop up. For example, when a friend gets divorced and decides to keep her married name, Isabella thinks it may be because, "She's afraid no one will remember

- who she is.” How do these characters determine who they are? By the end, who seems to have created the strongest sense of self?
13. What is the turning point for Isabella in her relationship with Harrison?
  14. Why is Lauren ready to call the turtle Mark gives her Rudy, when she wouldn’t use that name for the goldfish?
  15. Discuss the last scene. How have the women changed over the course of the book? Who is the most satisfied with her life?
  16. Where do you imagine Isabella, Mary, and Lauren will be in five years?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jennifer Close earned her MFA at The New School in New York City. She lives in Washington, D.C.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

*Something Borrowed* by Emily Giffin; *Little Earthquakes* by Jennifer Weiner; *Circle of Friends* by Maeve Binchy; *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan; *How to Make an American Quilt* by Whitney Otto; *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Girls in White Dresses*]

# *Aleph*

Paulo Coelho

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. *Aleph* is a novel full of rituals, starting with Paulo and J.'s opening invocation around the sacred oak. However, Paulo's reaction to them varies wildly; sometimes they frustrate him (the oak), sometimes he embraces them (the shaman's midnight chant on the edges of Lake Baikal), and other times he criticizes them for being empty (Hilal's offering at the church in Novosibirsk). Why do you think this is? Do you think this has to do with the rituals themselves or is Coelho trying to express something deeper about the nature and purpose of ritual? What value can ritual have in your own life?
2. During his initial argument with J., Paulo says: "We human beings have enormous difficulty in focusing on the present; we're always thinking about what we did, about how we could have done it better, about the consequences of our actions, and about why we didn't act as we should have. Or else we think about the future, about what we're going to do tomorrow, what precautions we should take, what dangers await us around the next corner, how to avoid what we don't want and how to get what we have always dreamed of." Do you agree? Why do you think J. prescribes travel as a way for Paulo to better focus on the present instead of his past or future?
3. While he's waiting for a sign that he should embark on the journey J. suggests, Paulo thinks about the nature of tragedy. "Tragedy always brings about radical change in our lives, a change that is associated with the same principle: loss. When faced by any loss, there's no point in trying to recover what has been; it's best to take advantage of the large space that opens up before us and fill it with something new. In theory, every loss is for our own good; in practice, though, that is when we question the existence of God and ask ourselves: *What did I do to deserve this?*" Many of *Aleph's* characters are dealing with extreme

personal tragedy, from Hilal and her history of sexual abuse to Yao and the death of his wife. Do their experiences and struggles to move forward support or contradict Paulo's statements?

4. Paulo frequently refers to Chinese bamboo after reading an article about its growth process: "Once the seed has been sown, you see nothing for about five years apart from a tiny shoot. All the growth takes place underground, where a complex root system reaching upward and outward is being established. Then, at the end of the fifth year, the bamboo suddenly shoots up to a height of twenty-five meters." How does this function as an important metaphor for spiritual growth? What do you think are the best ways to build a "complex root system" of your own?
5. Coelho writes, "To live is to experience things, not sit around pondering the meaning of life" and offers examples of people who have experienced revelations in various ways. Do you agree? What people or writings are you familiar with that support (or disprove) his point of view?
6. In "The Aleph," Borges's narrator asks, "How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols: . . . one Persian speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds; Alanus de Insulis, of a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel, of a four-faced angel who at one and the same time moves east and west, north and south." How does Coelho attempt to explain the Aleph? Why do you think Coelho has Paulo and Hilal discover it on a train car? Do you think its location has a larger significance for the story?
7. What images, memories, and emotions most powerfully capture the mystery and the magic of the Aleph that Paulo and Hilal experience on the train? How do they affect them each as individuals? In what ways does it change and deepen their relationship?
8. What role does Yao serve in Paulo's quest? Are there similarities between Yao, Paulo, and the answers they seek? What does each learn from the other?
9. When Yao suggests that Paulo beg for money with him, he explains, "Some Zen Buddhist monks in Japan told me about *takuhatsu*, the begging pilgrimage. . . . This is because, according to Zen philosophy, the giver, the beggar, and the alms money itself all form part of an important chain of equilibrium. The person doing the begging does so because he's needy, but the person doing the giving also does so out of need. The alms money serves as a link between those two needs." How does this relationship apply to the balance of power between Paulo and Hilal? Between Paulo and his readers?

10. The origin of Paulo's deep-seated sense of guilt comes stunningly to life in his description of the Inquisition and his participation as a priest. What insight does this vignette offer into horrors and injustices committed in the name of religious beliefs? Compare and contrast the religious attitudes here with those portrayed in the present-day sections of *Aleph*. What do Paulo's references to the Koran, the Bible, Ueshiba, the founder of the Japanese martial art of aikido, and shamanism demonstrate about human beliefs and aspirations across cultures and time?
11. Discuss the erotic and romantic elements of the encounters between Paulo and Hilal—both real and imagined—leading up to his final gift of roses at the airport. Would you classify theirs as a love story? Why or why not? What different types of love does Coelho explore?
12. Were you familiar with the concept of past lives before reading *Aleph*? Is it necessary to believe in past lives to grasp the book's message and meaning?
13. What do you think Coelho means when he writes, "Life is the train, not the station"? What about when he says, "What we call 'life' is a train with many carriages. Sometimes we're in one, sometimes we're in another, and sometimes we cross between them, when we dream or allow ourselves to be swept away by the extraordinary."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paulo Coelho, regarded by millions as an alchemist of words, is one of this century's most influential writers. His books not only make it to the top of the bestseller lists, they also provoke social and cultural debate. He deals with subjects, ideas and philosophies that touch the aspirations of those many readers who are in search of their own path and of new ways of understanding the world.

## SUGGESTED READING

Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*; Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*; Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*; Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*; Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*; Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*; Dan Millman, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*; Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Aleph*]

# *The Invisible Bridge*

Julie Orringer

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the opening chapter establish about the cultural and social milieu of prewar Budapest? What do Andras's reactions to the Hász household reveal about the status of Jews within the larger society? How do the differences between the Hász and Lévi families affect their assumptions and behavior during the war? Which scenes and characters most clearly demonstrate the tensions within the Jewish community?
2. Why do Andras and his friends at the *École Spéciale* tolerate the undercurrent of anti-Semitism at the school even after the verbal attack on Eli Polaner and the spate of vandalism against Jewish students? To what extent are their reactions shaped by their nationalities, political beliefs, or personal histories? Why does Andras agree to infiltrate the meeting of *Le Grand Occident*? Is his belief that "[the police] wouldn't deport me . . . Not for serving the ideals of France," as well as the reactions of Professor Vago and Andras's father to the German invasion of Czechoslovakia naïve, or do they represent widespread opinions and assumptions?
3. Andras and Klara's love blossoms against the background of uncertainties and fear. Is Klara's initial lack of openness about her background justified by her situation? Why does she eventually begin an affair with Andras? Are they equally responsible for the arguments, breakups, and reconciliations that characterize their courtship? Do Klara's revelations change your opinion of her and the way she has behaved?
4. Despite the grim circumstances, Andras and Mendel produce satirical newspapers in the labor camps. What do the excerpts from *The Snow Goose*, *The Biting Fly*, and *The Crooked Rail* show about the strategies that

- helped laborers preserve their humanity and their sanity? What other survival techniques do Andras and his fellow laborers develop?
5. In Budapest, the Lévi and Hász families sustain themselves with small pleasures, daily tasks at home, and, in the case of the men, working at the few jobs still available to Jews. Are they driven by practical or emotional needs, or both? Does the attempt to maintain ordinary life represent hope and courage, or a tragic failure to recognize the ever-encroaching danger? What impact do the deprivations and degradations imposed by the Germans have on the relationship between the families? Which characters are the least able or willing to accept the threats to their homeland and their culture?
  6. What details in the descriptions of Bánhida, Turka, and the transport trains most chillingly capture the cruelty perpetrated by the Nazis? In addition to physical abuse and deprivation, what are the psychological effects of the camps' rules and the laws imposed on civilian populations?
  7. General Martón in Bánhida, Captain Erdó, and the famous General Vilmos Nagy in Turka all display kindness and compassion. Miklós Klein engages in the tremendously dangerous work of arranging emigrations for fellow Jews. What motivates each of them to act as they do? What political ideals and moral principles lie at the heart of Nagy's stirring speech to the officers-in-training? (Because of his refusal to support official anti-Semitic policies, Nagy was eventually forced to resign from the Hungarian Army; in 1965, he was the first Hungarian named as a Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute.)
  8. Why does Klara refuse to leave Budapest and go to Palestine? Is her decision the result of her own set of circumstances, or does it reflect the attitudes of other Jews in Hungary and other countries under Nazi control?
  9. "He could no sooner cease being Jewish than he could cease being a brother to his brothers, a son to his father and mother." Discuss the value and importance of Jewish beliefs and traditions to Andras and other Jews, considering such passages as Andras's feelings in the above quotation and his thoughts on the High Holidays; the weddings of Ben Yakov and Ilana and of Andras and Klara; the family seder in wartime Budapest; and the prayers and small rituals conducted in work camps.
  10. The narrative tracks the political and military upheavals engulfing Europe as they occur. What do these intermittent reports demonstrate about the failure of both governments and ordinary people to grasp the true objectives of the Nazi regime? How does the author create

- and sustain a sense of suspense and portending disaster, even for readers familiar with the ultimate course of the war?
11. Throughout the book there are descriptions of Andras's studies, including information about his lessons and the models he creates and detailed observations of architectural masterpieces in Paris. What perspective does the argument between Pingsson and Le Corbusier offer on the role of the architect in society? Whose point of view do you share? What aspects of architecture as a discipline make it particularly appropriate to the themes explored in the novel? What is the relevance of Andras's work as a set designer within this context?
  12. Andras's encounters with Mrs. Hász and with Zoltán Novak are the first of many coincidences that determine the future paths of various characters. What other events in the novel are the result of chance or luck? How do the twists and turns of fortune help to create a sense of the extraordinary time in which the novel is set?
  13. Does choice also play a significant role in the characters' lives? What do their decisions—for example, Klara's voluntary return to Budapest; György's payments to the Hungarian authorities; and even József's attack on Andras and Mendel—demonstrate about the importance of retaining a sense of independence and control in the midst of chaos?
  14. The Holocaust and other murderous confrontations between ethnic groups can challenge the belief in God. Orringer writes, “[Andras] believed in God, yes, the God of his fathers, the one to whom he'd prayed . . . but that God, the One, was not One who intervened in the way they needed someone to intervene just then. He had designed the cosmos and thrown its doors open to man, and man had moved in. . . . The world was their place now.” What is your reaction to Andras's point of view? Have you read or heard explanations of why terrible events come to pass that more closely reflect your personal beliefs?
  15. What did you know about Hungary's role in World War II before reading *The Invisible Bridge*? Did the book present information about the United States and its allies that surprised you? Did it affect your views on Zionism and the Jewish emigration to Palestine? Did it deepen your understanding of the causes and the course of the war? What does the epilogue convey about the postwar period and the links among past, present, and future?
  16. “In the end, what astonished him most was not the vastness of it all—that was impossible to take in, the hundreds of thousands dead from Hungary alone, and the millions from all over Europe—but the excruciating smallness, the pinpoint upon which every life was balanced.” Does *The Invisible Bridge* succeed in capturing both the “vastness of it

all” and the “excruciating smallness” of war and its impact on individual lives?

17. Why has Orringer chosen “Any Case” by the Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska as the coda to her novel? What does it express about individuals caught in the flow of history and the forces that determine their fates?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Orringer is the author of the *New York Times* Notable Book *How to Breathe Underwater* and the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## SUGGESTED READING

Louis Begley, *Wartime Lies*; Philippe Grimbert, *Memory*; Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List*; Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*; Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française*; Marge Piercy, *Gone to Soldiers*; Tatiana de Rosnay, *Sarah's Key*; Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, *Anya*; Simone Zelitch, *Louisa*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Invisible Bridge*]

# *The Things We Cherished*

Pam Jenoff

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why do you think Charlotte agreed to help Brian and take on the case? Do you agree with her decision?
2. Do you think the ends that Roger was seeking (saving Magda and her daughter) justified the means of his choices and actions? Did you find him likeable despite these choices?
3. What do you think drew Roger and Magda together so powerfully? How did their dynamic change throughout the book?
4. What do you think Magda really wanted?
5. What role does the clock play throughout the book? Are there commonalities in the way it touches people's lives? Differences?
6. The relationships between the brothers in the book (Brian and Jack, Sol and Jake, Roger and Hans) are fraught with both affection and acrimony. What is it about sibling relationships that makes them so complex? Is it different when the siblings are the same sex versus the opposite?
7. Charlotte initially dislikes Jack. When does she begin to feel differently about him? What conflicts develop between them, and are they things that can be overcome? Is the fact that they're both attorneys an advantage or a detriment to their romantic relationship?
8. How do you think Charlotte's personal and professional lives influenced one another at the beginning of the book? Did that change?
9. With whom in the book does Charlotte most closely identify/relate? Why?
10. Were you surprised at the way in which Johann, the farmer, went on to live his life after Rebecca died? How so?
11. Which character in the book was most tested by circumstance? Which was most transformed?

12. Did you think the events in the characters' lives were driven by fate? Chance?
13. What do you think of Sol's perception that he was the lucky one because he got to remain in Berlin after Jake was forced to flee?
14. Where do you think Charlotte winds up one month after the end of the book? One year? Five years?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Jenoff is the author of *The Kommandant's Girl*, *The Diplomat's Wife*, *Almost Home*, and *Hidden Things*. She attended George Washington University, Cambridge University in England, where she received a master's in history, and the University of Pennsylvania Law School. A former Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Army and State Department officer, she lives in Philadelphia, where she works as an attorney.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*The Things We Cherished*]

# *The Stranger's Child*

Alan Hollinghurst

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Much of *The Stranger's Child* concerns attempts to get at the truth of Cecil Valance. What does the novel as a whole say about our ability to truly know another person? In what ways does it illustrate the limits of our knowing? Do we as readers of the novel know Cecil more accurately than George, Daphne, Dudley—even Sebastian Stokes? What about Paul Bryant?
2. What role does keeping secrets play in the *The Stranger's Child*? Why do so many characters feel compelled to lead secret lives?
3. Several characters are said to have had “a bad war,” suffering from what would now be described as post traumatic stress disorder. How has the war affected Dudley Valance and Leslie Keeping in particular? In what ways does World War I cast a shadow over the entire novel?
4. Before her interview with Sebby Stokes for the memoir he's writing about Cecil, Daphne thinks: “What she felt then; and what she felt now; and what she felt now about what she felt then; it wasn't remotely easy to say.” Later in the novel, frustrated with Paul's interview for his biography of the poet, Daphne muses: “He was asking for memories, too young himself to know that memories were only memories of memories.” In what ways does the novel suggest that memory, of both facts and feelings, is an extremely unreliable method of recovering the truth?
5. What is suggested by the divergent attitudes expressed in the novel toward Victorianism, especially as it is embodied in Corley House? Why does Dudley detest the house so violently? What is the effect of Mrs. Riley's modernist makeover?
6. How do English attitudes towards homosexuality change over the period the novel covers, from 1913 to 2008? Why is it important, in terms of Cecil Valance's biography, that the true nature of his sex-

- uality, and the true recipient of his famous poem “Two Acres,” be revealed?
7. What other important generational changes in English life does the novel trace?
  8. *The Stranger’s Child* is, among many other things, a wonderfully comic novel. What are some of its funniest moments and most amusing observations?
  9. Cecil Valance is a purely fictional character—though he resembles the World War I poet Rupert Brooke—but he inhabits a milieu in the novel that includes real people: literary scholars Jon Stallworthy and Paul Fussell appear at a party, John Betjeman attends a rally to save St. Pancras Station, and Cecil is said to have known Lytton Strachey and other members of the Bloomsbury group. What is the effect of this mixing of real and fictional characters?
  10. Near the end of the novel, Jennifer Keeping tells Rob that Paul Bryant’s story of his father’s heroic death in World War II is a fiction, that in fact Paul was a bastard. For Rob, this revelation makes Paul “if anything more intriguing and sympathetic.” Do you agree with Rob—is Paul a sympathetic character? How does Paul’s own secret past shed light on his motivations and tactics as a biographer?
  11. In what ways does *A Stranger’s Child* critique English manners and morals? In what ways might it be said to celebrate them—if at all?
  12. The novel is filled with remarkable subtleties of perception. After Cecil leaves “Two Acres,” Daphne thinks: “Of course he had gone! There was a thinness in the air that told her, in the tone of the morning, the texture of the servants’ movements and fragments of talk.” Where else does this kind of finely attuned awareness appear in the novel? What do such descriptions add to the experience of reading of *The Stranger’s Child*?
  13. The novel opens with George, Daphne, and Cecil reciting Tennyson’s poetry on the lawn of “Two Acres” and ends with Rob viewing a video clip of a digitally animated photograph (on the website Poets Alive! Houndvoice.com) that makes it appear as if Tennyson is reading his poetry. What is Hollinghurst suggesting by bookending his novel in this way?
  14. What does the novel say about how literary reputations are created, preserved, revised?
  15. Why do you think Hollinghurst ends the novel with Rob’s unsuccessful attempt to recover Cecil’s letters to Hewitt before they go up in smoke? Is this conclusion satisfying, or appropriately open-ended?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Hollinghurst was born in 1954. He is the author of one of the most highly praised first novels to appear in the 1980s, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, and was selected as one of the Best of Young British Novelists 1993. His second novel, *The Folding Star*, won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and was short-listed for the 1994 Booker Prize. In 2004 he won the Man Booker Prize for *The Line of Beauty*. He was on the staff of the Times Literary Supplement from 1982 to 1995.

## SUGGESTED READING

A. S. Byatt, *Possession*; Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong*; Ford Maddox Ford, *Parade's End*; E. M. Forster, *Maurice*; Ian McEwan, *Atonement*; Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*; Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*; Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*; Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*; Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Stranger's Child*]

# *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*

Aimee Bender

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Rose goes through life feeling people's emotions through their food. Many eat to feel happy and comforted. Does this extreme sensory experience bring any happiness to Rose or only sadness?
2. What does Rose mean when she says her dad always seemed like a guest to her? How does this play out in the rest of the novel?
3. "Mom's smiles were so full of feeling that people leaned back a little when she greeted them. It was hard to know just how much was being offered." What does Rose mean and how does this trait affect her mother's relationships?
4. Why do you think Rose's dad liked medical dramas but hated hospitals?
5. Rose says, "Mom loved my brother more. Not that she didn't love me—I felt the wash of her love everyday, pouring over me, but it was a different kind, siphoned from a different, and tamer, body of water. I was her darling daughter; Joseph was her it." Do you think Rose is right in her estimation and why do you think her mother might feel this way?
6. What does the grandmother suggest when she tells Rose "you don't even know me, how can you love me?" How has the grandmother's relationship with Rose's own mother affected the family dynamic?
7. What is Joseph trying to accomplish by drawing a "perfect" circle when it, by very definition, is impossible? How does George's idea to create wallpaper out of the imperfections affect him? How does validation and affection through art recur in the novel and what does it signify?
8. Why does George suddenly conclude Rose's gift isn't really a problem and stops investigating it?

9. What is the significance of the mother's commitment to carpentry (compared to other, short-lived hobbies)? How does this play out in the rest of the novel?
10. What is the impact of Rose's discovery about her father's skills? Did this change the way you see the father?
11. Joseph is described as a desert and geode while Rose is a rainforest and sea glass. Discuss the implications.
12. Why does Rose want to keep the thread-bare footstool of her parents' courtship instead of having her mother make her a new one?
13. Are the family dinners—with Joseph reading, the dad eating, Rose silently trying to survive the meal and the mom talking non-stop—emblematic of the family dynamic? How has it evolved over the years?
14. How did you experience the scene in Joseph's room, when Rose goes to see him? What did that experience mean to Rose? Is there any significance to Joseph choosing a card table chair?
15. What does the last image about the trees have to do with this family? How do you interpret the last line of the novel?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aimee Bender is the author of the novel *An Invisible Sign of My Own* and the collections *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and *Willful Creatures*. Her work has been widely anthologized and has been translated into ten languages. She lives in Los Angeles.

## SUGGESTED READING

Jennifer Egan, *The Keep, A Visit from the Goon Squad*; Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate*; Helen Grant, *The Vanishing Act of Katharina Linden*; Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club, The Radleys*; Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*; DC Pierson, *The Boy Who Couldn't Sleep And Never Had To*; Scarlett Thomas, *The End of Mr. Y, Our Tragic Universe*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*]

# *The Widower's Tale*

Julie Glass

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. From the stories that the characters remember and tell, what kind of mother (and wife) was Poppy Darling? How would you explain the very different kinds of mothers her two daughters, Trudy and Clover, have become? Discuss the choices these two women have made and how they affect their relationships with their children. And how about Sarah? What kind of mother is she? Does being a mother define any or all of these women?
2. How do Percy's age, background, and profession shape the way he thinks about the world around him? How does the way he sees himself differ from the way other characters see him? How has being a single father and now an involved grandfather defined him? How do you think he would have been a different father and man had Poppy lived?
3. By the end of the novel, how has Percy changed/evolved?
4. Why do you think Percy chose to avoid romantic or sexual involvement for so many years after Poppy's death? Is it habit and routine, nostalgia and commitment to his wife, or guilt over her death; or a combination of all three? Why do you think he falls so suddenly for Sarah after all that time alone? Why now?
5. The novel takes place over the course of a year, with chapters varying from Percy's point of view (looking back from the end of that year) to those of Celestino, Robert, and Ira. Why do you think Julia Glass chose to narrate only Percy's chapters in a first-person voice, the rest in the third person? (Does this make you think of the way she handled voice in her previous books?) And why do you think, when there are so many important female characters in this novel, that she chose to tell the story only through the eyes of men?
6. What do you think of the allusion in this book's title to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*?

7. This is a novel about family, the intricacies of the intertwining relationships among parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and cousins, in-laws and girlfriends. Discuss and compare some of the central familial relationships here (particularly those between Percy and the various members of his extended clan). Do any of these relationships ring particularly true to your own family experiences? Which ones fascinate or move you the most?
8. Celestino is an outsider and a loner—in the eyes of the law, an illegal alien—who was brought to the United States by a stroke of good fortune, only to lose his favored status and end up in a precarious situation with little money and no close friends. Discuss the circumstances that bring him into Percy's circle and the way in which he becomes so important in Robert's and Percy's lives? What destiny do you imagine for him beyond the end of the novel?
9. Discuss Celestino and Isabelle's teenage relationship as compared with the way they view each other once they are reunited as adults. Do you think that it would have worked out differently under other circumstances, or do culture and class sometimes present insurmountable obstacles? Compare Celestino and Isabelle's youthful relationship with the one between Robert and Clara.
10. What do you think of Robert's relationship with his mother? Talk about the way he sees her in the college essay he wrote versus the way he sees her after the argument they have in the car the night before Thanksgiving and Robert finds out about the sibling he almost had. How is Robert's intimate view of Trudy, as her son and only child, different from Percy's fatherly view of Trudy as one of two daughters? Compare Robert's and Percy's different visions of her professional life: Robert's summer working in the chemo clinic versus Percy's first visit to the hospital when he seeks Trudy's advice about Sarah. Is there a generational difference to the way they encounter the world of modern medicine?
11. What about Percy's relationship with Clover? What do you think about his "sacrifice" of the barn to help her out? Is it entirely altruistic? What are the unintended consequences to their love for each other? Why does Clover resent her father and betray both him and her nephew, Robert, at the end of the novel?
12. Why does Robert, the good student and good son, allow himself to become involved in Arturo's "missions"? Discuss Robert's friendship with Arturo and why Arturo is so appealing to Robert. What do you think of the observation that Turo is "of everywhere and nowhere?"

13. What do you think about Turo's activist group, the DOGS, and their acts of eco-vandalism? Do you agree with Turo that conservation efforts like recycling and organic lawn care aren't "dramatic enough to make a dent" in society's lazy, consumerist ways—that true change will come about only through extremism?
14. Discuss the importance of the tree house in the novel. What does it represent, if anything, to each of the four main characters?
15. What do you think of Ira and his relationship with Anthony? How have Ira's fears influenced his relationships in general? How do you imagine the crisis at the end of the book has changed him, if at all?
16. Homes often seem like characters in Julia Glass novels; compare Percy's house with key houses in her other novels, if you've read them (e.g., Tealing, Fenno McLeod's childhood house in *Three Junes*; Uncle Marsden's run-down seaside mansion in *The Whole World Over*). Describe Percy's house and its significance to various members of the Darling family. Discuss its tie to the neighboring house and the revelation at the end about the two brothers who built the houses. Why is this important?
17. How have libraries changed over the course of Percy's working life, through his youth, his daughters' youth, and now Robert's youth? Percy doesn't seem to approve of the direction libraries are going and the way in which society regards books. Do you?
18. " 'Daughters.' This word meant everything to me in that moment: sun, moon, stars, blood, water (oh curse the water!), meat, potatoes, wine, shoes, books, the floor beneath my feet, the roof over my head." Compare and contrast Percy's two daughters.
19. Why is Sarah so evasive and even hostile when Percy confronts her about the lump in her breast—and even after she starts cancer treatment with Trudy? What do you think about her decision to marry her ex-boyfriend when he offers her the lifeline of his health insurance—and to keep this a secret from Percy? What does it say about Sarah and her feelings for Percy? Do you think the relationship, at the end of the book, is salvageable in any form?
20. While visiting a museum, Percy's friend Norval asks, "So what sort of landscape are you?" Percy replies, "A field. Overgrown and weedy." Norval then suggests, "Or a very large, gnarled tree." How would you describe Percy? How about yourself; what sort of landscape are you?
21. How is *The Widower's Tale* both a tale of our time and a story specific to its place, to New England?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Julia Glass is the author of the National Book Award–winning *Three Junes*, as well as *The Whole World Over*, and *I See You Everywhere*. She lives in Massachusetts.

# *Swamplandia!*

Karen Russell

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Now that you've read the novel, go back and reread the epigraph. Why do you think Russell chose this quote?
2. Some of these characters first appeared in the story "Ava Wrestles the Alligator" in Russell's collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Have you read that story? How does it compare to the novel?
3. "'Tradition is as important, kids,' Chief Bigtree liked to say, 'as promotional materials are expensive.'" Did the Chief show this in his actions? Which of the Bigtree tribe members paid the most respect to tradition?
4. How did Chief's myth-making affect his children? How might things have been different if he'd been more truthful?
5. Chief introduces his theory of Carnival Darwinism, which he thought would save Swamplandia! How might it have been successful? Why wasn't it?
6. Where else does the notion of evolution come into play?
7. Belief—in Carnival Darwinism, in ghosts—plays a large role in the novel. What prompts Ossie's beliefs? Ava's? Where is the turning point in their belief systems?
8. Why do you think Ossie sees Louis and other ghosts, but never Hilola?
9. What does Ava's red alligator represent? And the melaleuca trees?
10. Why do you think Russell interrupted the novel for the story of the Dredgeman's Revelation? What exactly is the "revelation"?
11. There are biblical references throughout the book, especially in the World of Darkness sections. Why does Russell include them?
12. How do Kiwi's actions affect his family? What do we learn via his sojourn on the mainland?
13. The Bird Man tells Ava, "Nobody can get to hell without assistance, kid." How does this compare to the quote from Dante that opens the chapter? What does it tell us about his character?

14. The three Bigtree children are innocent for their ages. Which one matures the most over the course of the novel?
15. The Bird Man calls the ending of the Dredgeman's Revelation "a vanishing point." What does he mean by that?
16. Both the Bird Man and Vijay act as guides to a Bigtree sibling. How does each approach his role?
17. When Ava said "I love you" to the Bird Man, what did you expect to happen as a result?
18. Ava recites a credo: "I believe the Bird Man knows a passage to the underworld. I believe that I am brave enough to do this. I have faith that we are going to rescue Ossie." Was she right about any of this?
19. Did the Bird Man believe in the underworld, or did he have an ulterior motive all along?
20. How does Kiwi's use of language change during the novel? What does it reflect?
21. Like the Dredgeman, several of the Bigtrees have revelations. Whose is the most surprising?
22. What is the significance of the Mama Weeds passage? What do we learn from it?
23. Why doesn't Ava ever tell anyone what the Bird Man did?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Karen Russell, a native of Miami, has been featured in *The New Yorker's* debut fiction issue and on *The New Yorker's* 20 Under 40 list, and was chosen as one of *Granta's* Best Young American Novelists. In 2009, she received the 5 Under 35 award from the National Book Foundation. Three of her short stories have been selected for the *Best American Short Stories* volumes. She is currently writer-in-residence at Bard College.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

*I'd Know You Anywhere* by Laura Lippman; *Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem; *Star Island* by Carl Hiaasen; *Room: A Novel* by Emma Donoghue; *C* by Tom McCarthy; *Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann; *The Divine Comedy, Volume I: Inferno* by Dante Alighieri.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Swamplandia!*]

# *The Gap Year*

Sarah Bird

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How does Bird use humor to convey character? What about the characters who aren't particularly funny?
2. Cam observes a group of mothers with their young children, "They wanted what we all want: reassurance that they had made the right choices." Does Cam believe she has chosen wisely? Does Aubrey agree with her? How do Aubrey's own choices reflect upon Cam's?
3. Discuss the way Bird uses time—setting Aubrey's story in one period and Cam's in another. How do the two timelines play off each other?
4. Cam believes that Tyler is the reason for the friction between her and Aubrey, but how does the secret that Aubrey is keeping about Martin affect her rebellion against Cam?
5. "My mother hovered and clung more than any helicopter mom that was ever invented after her. But even she couldn't control any of the most important events in my life." How does Cam's distaste for her own mother's parenting style affect her relationship with Aubrey? Why is Bobbi Mac so important, in contrast?
6. What do Aubrey's and Cam's notions of independence and individuality say about their decisions in life? Who seems more comfortable following her own path?
7. Discuss the notion of maternal sacrifice. How are Cam's and Dori's sacrifices interpreted by their daughters?
8. Why does Martin allow himself to be sucked into Next? Why doesn't Cam do the same?
9. Throughout the novel, Cam and Aubrey make assumptions—about each other, about Tyler, about Martin. Why can't they communicate more openly? Why have they lost each other's trust?
10. Martin tells Cam, "For some of us, being right is so much sexier than sex." What does he mean by this?

11. How does the revelation about Tyler's upbringing change your perception of him? What do you think Cam's response would be?
12. Martin tells Cam she is "a true rebel," who always knew exactly who she was and what she wanted. How does this differ from the way Aubrey sees her? From the way Cam sees herself?
13. Discuss the ending. How does Twyla's newborn, Aubrey, help Cam to accept her own daughter?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Bird is the author of seven previous novels, most recently *How Perfect Is That*, *The Flamenco Academy*, and *The Yokota Officers Club*. She lives in Austin, Texas.

## SUGGESTED READING

*Back When We Were Grownups*, by Anne Tyler; *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby; *Imperfect Birds* by Anne Lamott; *Little Children* by Tom Perrotta; *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse; *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Gap Year*]

# *Daughters of the Revolution*

Carolyn Cooke

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Who is the main character in this novel? Why are the EV sections told in first person?
2. There are several unusual character names here: God, Heck, Mei-Mei, EV, Pilgrim. What is the metaphorical significance of the names?
3. For God, “loss was one theme: the headship of the school, the battle over girls, memory, prostate, lung, teeth, foreskin.” What are some other themes in the novel?
4. What does the title mean? Who are the daughters of the revolution?
5. Discuss the class issues raised throughout the book. What effect does money have in determining one’s place in society as opposed to gender or ethnicity?
6. Why isn’t the story told chronologically? Discuss how the author plays with time.
7. What do you imagine happens to Archer Rebozos in the years following the accident?
8. Goddard Byrd swears that the Goode School will admit girls “over my dead body.” Is God a misogynist?
9. God sees a phrase written in graffiti: “Are we not drawn onward we few drawn onward to new era?” What does it mean? Mrs. Rebozos points out that it’s a palindrome. Why is this significant?
10. Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* comes up again and again over the course of the novel. Carole Faust compares herself to the whale, calling herself a “fearful symbol.” What point is the author making with this connection? What is the role of literature in the novel?
11. In what ways does Carole represent the radical changes of the 1960s?

12. EV says, “Mei-Mei thought my father’s death was a story about accidents, threats, loss, abandonment, risk. ‘Be careful,’ she used to tell me . . . ‘Don’t die.’ ” It sounds like she thinks her father’s death was about none of those things. What did it mean to her?
13. Several times, we are told that Mrs. O’Greefe had her own nipple grafted onto her forehead. What is the significance of this act?
14. Discuss EV’s trip to the Caribbean island, which ends with the news of her roommate’s murder. What does the reader learn during this section of the book? Why is the reckless EV safe while the cautious Jess dies?
15. Mei-Mei points out the similarities between Pilgrim and God. Why does EV choose a man like Pilgrim?
16. After she has sex with Pilgrim, Mei-Mei wonders if she had ever been a good mother to EV. Do you think she was? Why does she sleep with Pilgrim?
17. Why does God get circumcised? How does it bring about his downward spiral?
18. Discuss the character of Mrs. Graves. Why is she so devoted to God? What does she get out of their relationship?
19. In her speech at the end of the novel, Carole says that God is “the secret of my success.” How so? Do you think he knew this?
20. When Mei-Mei tells Carole about Heck’s accident and the life jacket, EV is shocked, because it “changed our whole story into a story about power and economics, about our lesser equipment and poorer tools. I’d misunderstood everything.” How does this one detail make such a difference? Why hadn’t Mei-Mei told EV about it before?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Cooke’s short-story collection, *The Bostons*, was a winner of the 2002 PEN/Robert Bingham award for a first book and a runner-up for the PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award. Her fiction has appeared in *AGNI*, *The Paris Review*, and *Ploughshares*, and in two volumes each of *The Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. She teaches in the MFA writing program at the California Institute of Integral Studies and lives in San Francisco.

## SUGGESTED READING

*Old School* by Tobias Wolff; *Testimony* by Anita Shreve; *Skippy Dies* by Paul Murray; *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld; *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville; *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad; *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* by Susan Sontag; *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*Daughters of the Revolution*]

# ***Red Hook Road***

Ayelet Waldman

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. *Red Hook Road* hinges upon an almost unimaginable and unfathomable tragedy. Was it easy or difficult for you to accept the book's premise?
2. Think about this statement by Mary Lou, the librarian at the Red Hook Library: "Half the relationships I know are really support groups in disguise." How does Mary Lou's assessment apply to the relationships in *Red Hook Road*?
3. Talk about Iris and Jane. Are they similar to one another in any way? What was at the root of Jane's intense dislike of Iris?
4. During Iris's visit, Connie says, "Most of us could use an asylum sometimes. A refuge from the world." Talk about all the different forms of sanctuary taken by key characters. Do these "escapes" help anyone deal with their grief?
5. What is your definition of "family?" Does marriage play a part in forming familial bonds, or is family created purely through blood connections? What does family mean to different characters in *Red Hook Road*?
6. During "The Second Summer," Ruthie wants to turn the family's traditional Fourth of July party into a celebration of the lives of Becca and John. What did you think of Ruthie's idea? Can you understand why Iris rejected it?
7. Think about the comfort that people take in following traditions; can rituals help people, like the Copakens and Tetherlys, move forward after a setback, or even a tragedy? Did having the party each summer after Becca and John's deaths ultimately help or hurt Ruthie?
8. Discuss Iris's father, Mr. Kimmelbrod, particularly the hardships he endured as a young man. In "The Second Summer," Kimmelbrod reproaches himself for not offering Iris more comfort after the unveil-

- ing at the cemetery. Do you think that experiencing great sadness automatically equips a person to console others?
9. Mary Lou the librarian offers this piece of advice as Ruthie considers whether to return to Oxford: “Nothing one does in one’s twenties, short of having a child, is irrevocable,” (page 196). Was this advice something Ruthie wanted to hear, needed to hear, or both? Do you agree with Mary Lou’s sentiment?
  10. Consider Samantha’s role in Iris’s life. Would Iris have felt the same way toward Samantha had Becca not died? Was Samantha a representation of the daughter that Iris lost, or the daughter Iris never was herself?
  11. Did you guess that Iris would circumvent Jane and approach Connie with the idea of moving Samantha to New York City to pursue her musical studies? Had you been in Iris’s position, would you have done the same thing?
  12. Reread the book’s Prelude and Coda, which describe parts of John and Becca’s wedding before they get into the limousine. What was the author’s intent in opening and closing the novel in this way, do you think? Did this device enhance your reading of *Red Hook Road*?
  13. Were you surprised when Daniel left Iris? Given the depths of their sadness and the state of their marriage at the time Daniel moves out, did you expect Iris would have been less shocked than she was?
  14. Talk about Iris’s decision to list Becca by her maiden name on the grave marker, despite Becca’s decision to change her last name to Tetherly after she and John married. What does this decision say about Iris, and her relationship with her late daughter? Do you agree with what she did?
  15. Throughout the book we learn about Becca and John through flashbacks and remembrances by some of the book’s characters. Would you have preferred to learn about them first-hand, in real time?
  16. What does music represent in *Red Hook Road*? Is it a source of joy or sorrow? A way to hide, or a means of expression?
  17. Did you identify with any of the characters? Which one(s), and why? Do you feel it was necessary to have experienced tragedy in order to appreciate what each of the characters in *Red Hook Road* goes through as they deal with their losses?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ayelet Waldman is the author of *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*, *Daughter's Keeper* and of the Mommy-Track mystery series. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Believer*, *Child Magazine*, and other publications, and she has a regular column on Salon.com. She and her husband, the novelist Michael Chabon, live in Berkeley, California with their four children.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Red Hook Road*]

# *The False Friend*

Myla Goldberg

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. *The False Friend* is set into motion when Celia remembers her friend Djuna after having managed to block out those memories for twenty years. What is it about where Celia is in her life or her relationships that may have brought this memory to the surface? Does this sort of sudden recollection make sense to you, or was it difficult for you to accept the book's opening premise?
2. Why are Celia's parents so reluctant to talk to Celia about Djuna? Does this seem representative of their larger relationship with their daughter? Representative of their relationship with each other?
3. How common is the sort of friendship Celia and Djuna had as girls? In what ways did their friendship and their clique seem strange or familiar to you?
4. In what ways does Celia's relationship with her mother differ from her relationship to her father? Is one relationship healthier than another, or are they just differently functional/dysfunctional?
5. To Celia, Jensenville is a place that she can only bear to visit briefly and seldom. To Celia's parents and to people like the town librarian, Jensenville is a fine place to live. What do you think of Jensenville? What makes some people want to flee their hometown and others want to stay?
6. Do you agree with how Noreen and Warren dealt with Celia as a girl in the aftermath of Djuna's disappearance? Do you think they could or should be blamed for Celia's subsequent repressed memories?
7. Though Jeremy's drug addiction and recovery is only addressed indirectly in the novel, in what ways is it an important aspect of the larger story of this family?
8. Huck liked to tease Celia that "they could have been spared years of heartache had they met earlier, but Celia disagreed. Her prior love life

- had been too binary, the replication or repudiation of her parents consuming its earliest daisy petals.” In what ways does Celia’s relationship with Huck resemble the relationships within her family? In what ways is it different?
9. When Celia spontaneously arrives at Leanne’s house to apologize, she is told that her appearance there is only “more harm done.” Was Celia right to attempt to apologize to Leanne in person? Both Jewish tradition and the 12-step program (just to name two) assert that true forgiveness can only be achieved when we apologize to the person we have wronged. Do both parties always benefit equally?
  10. What does the future hold for Huck and Celia? How do you think Celia’s trip to Jensenville will affect their relationship?
  11. When Celia visits Djuna’s mother as an adult, it is very different from the experiences she remembers as a girl. Who do you think has changed more, Celia or Djuna’s mother?
  12. No one agrees with Celia’s version of what happened to Djuna on the wooded road twenty years ago. Who is right? Can that question be answered?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myla Goldberg is the author of the bestselling *Bee Season*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book in 2000 and made into a film, and, most recently, of *Time’s Magpie*, a book of essays about Prague. Her short stories have appeared in *Harper’s* and *McSweeney’s* and on Failbetter.com. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The False Friend*]

# *Lord of Misrule*

Jaimy Gordon

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What does Maggie's arrival at Indian Mound Downs establish about the way things work at the track? What do Medicine Ed and Deucey's reactions to Maggie demonstrate about the pecking order at the track?
2. Why do Ed and Deucey put up with the deprivations and humiliations of their daily routines? What comforts or satisfactions does hanging out at the track provide?
3. What aspects of Maggie's past and character account for her attraction to Tommy? What qualities make him appealing to her? What are the implications of her recognition that "He wasn't quite right in the soul, really"?
4. Deucey tells Maggie, "I wrote the book on two-faced false-hearted luck, girlie, anything you want to know about going it on your own at the races, come to me". What roles does Deucey assume in Maggie's life? What does she teach Maggie, either directly or by example, about being a woman in a man's world?
5. In what ways does Medicine Ed embody the characteristics of race-track habitués at every level, from owners to grooms, petty crooks to inveterate fans? What does he demonstrate about the opposing pulls of actual experience and the fantasies and hopes that shape our lives?
6. Gordon has discussed the similarity between Medicine Ed and Two-Tie, describing them as "lonely and childless old men deeply tired of the daily work they do, facing their last years without the protection of family" [National Book Foundation interview with Bret Anthony Johnston]. What reasons does Two-Tie offer for the way his life turned out? In what ways does his Jewish background shape his identity and influence his worldview?
7. At the beginning of the novel, Maggie projects a girlish innocence and an eagerness to experience life. How does she change over the course

- of the novel? What light do her musings at the end of the novel shed on what she has lost and gained? What do her reactions to Tommy's deterioration reveal about the woman she has become?
8. In a review in *The Washington Post* [November 16, 2010] Jane Hamilton wrote, "[Gordon's] four horse characters—Mr. Boll Weevil, Little Spinoza, Pelter and Lord of Misrule—are bursting with personality." From their names to their histories to their performances in races, how does Gordon bring out the distinctive qualities of each horse? Does she avoid anthropomorphizing them? What does the novel show about the gap between human assumptions and the horses' innate intelligence and their accommodations to the regimens and expectations imposed by humans?
  9. One critic called Maggie's "relationship with horses the most erotic one in the book" [Bob Hoover, *Philly.com* 11/27/10]. Do the descriptions of Maggie's tending to the horses support this judgment?
  10. Luck is a central theme in *Lord of Misrule*. For Tommy, "[luck] came because you called to it, whistled for it, because it saw you wouldn't take no for an answer." According to Maggie, "A person had to see himself, or herself, as lucky not just once in a while, but plugged into a steady current of luck, like an electrical appliance. . . . People who thought they couldn't lose—Joe Dale Bigg, for one—were some kind of machinery." How are these different approaches or concepts reflected in the actions taken by Tommy and Bigg? Are any of the characters able to resist or defeat the whims of luck and chance? If so, what allows them to do so?
  11. Most of the novel is written in the third person. How does Gordon make the thoughts and the conversational styles of each character distinct? Discuss her use of racetrack slang and nicknames, invented words, and dialect in bringing to life an unfamiliar milieu and its denizens.
  12. Why does Gordon switch to the second person in the chapters devoted to Tommy? What are the benefits and the limitations of this unusual narrative voice? Does it bring Tommy into sharper focus? How does his self-image differ from the perceptions of others and in what ways does it confirm them? What do the intimate tone, uninhibited language, and graphic sexual descriptions of these sections add to the novel?
  13. Does the structure of the novel—the chapter-by-chapter focus on particular horses and races—enhance the reader's involvement with the story? Does it help to illuminate the diverse factors that influence the characters' actions? How does it affect the progress of the plot and the build-up to the final race?

14. Gordon weaves many literary and religious allusions into the story. The name of Hansel's horse, the Mahdi (the redeemer of the world in Islamic religion), is one example; what other references can you identify? What literary motifs or narrative traditions are evoked in the accounts of the horses' lineage; Tommy's obsession with a long-lost twin and the "might-could-be twin brothers" Mr. Boll Weevil and the Mahdi; the description of Lord of Misrule; and Two-Tie's relationships with Maggie and Donald?
15. Gordon's writing style—her use of metaphor, poetic imagery, literary and religious allusions and references—is unusual in a novel about lowlifes and violent acts. Do you find the seemingly incompatible juxtaposition effective?
16. The world of thoroughbred horse racing has been the subject of several popular books and films, including Laura Hillenbrand's bestselling *Seabiscuit*. What does *Lord of Misrule* share with other depictions of racing you have read or seen? What new insights does it provide into the racing community?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jaimy Gordon teaches at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. She is the author of three previous novels, *Bogeywoman*, *She Drove without Stopping*, and *Shamp of the City-Solo*, and has published poetry, plays, short stories, and essays. She has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, and an Academy Award from the American Institute of Arts and Letters.

## SUGGESTED READING

Bill Barich, *Laughing in the Hills*; Malcolm Braly, *On the Yard*; Nicholas Evans, *The Horse Whisperer*; Dick Francis, *Crossfire*; Laura Hillenbrand, *Seabiscuit*; William Murray, *Dead Heat*; William Nack, *Secretariat*; Peter Shaffer, *Equus*; Jane Smiley, *Horse Heaven*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Lord of Misrule*]

# *To the End of the Land*

David Grossman

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What one word would you use to describe the central theme of this novel? Is it a political novel?
2. In an interview, Grossman said about grief, “The first feeling you have is one of exile. You are being exiled from everything you know.” How do both grief and exile figure into this story?
3. Throughout the novel is the notion of tapestry, of threads being woven. What does that tapestry signify?
4. What do you think was Grossman’s intent with the prologue? What did this opening lead you to expect from the rest of the novel? Was it significant to you as a reader, later in the story, to have known these characters as teenagers?
5. Ora says, “I’m no good at saving people.” Why does she say this? Is it true?
6. What function does Sami serve in the novel? What do we learn about Ora through her interactions with him?
7. Why does Ora consider Ofer’s reenlistment to be a betrayal? Why do his whispered, on-camera instructions affect her so strongly?
8. Discuss Adam’s assertion that Ora is “an unnatural mother.” What do you think he means by that? What does Ora take it to mean?
9. Ora tells Sami to drive “to where the country ends.” His reply: “For me it ended a long time ago.” What does he mean by that? How does this change your interpretation of the novel’s title?
10. What is the significance of Ofer’s film, in which there are no physical beings, only their shadows?
11. In both Adam and Ofer, the influence of nature vs. nurture seems quite fluid. How is each like his biological father, and how does each resemble the man to whom he is not related by blood?

12. What role does food play in the novel? What does vegetarianism, especially, signify?
13. Ora says to Avram, “Just remember that sometimes bad news is actually good news that you didn’t understand. Remember that what might have been bad news can turn into good news over time, perhaps the best news you need.” What is she hoping for here? Does her advice turn out to be accurate?
14. Why does Ora refuse to go back for her notebook? As a reader, could you identify with Ora’s actions? What about elsewhere in the novel?
15. What do we learn about Ora, Ilan, and Ofer through the story of Adam’s compulsive behavior? What is “the force of *no*”?
16. Discuss the significance of whose name Ora draws from the hat. Did she choose that person intentionally? How might the lives of Ora, Ilan, and Avram have been different if the other name were drawn?
17. Why does Ora react so strongly to what happened with Ofer in Hebron? How does it relate to what happened to Avram as a POW? Why does her reaction lead to the implosion of her family?
18. When Ora says to Avram, “Maybe you’ll even have a girl,” what is she really saying?
19. Discuss the final scene of the novel. What does Avram’s vision signify? Was Ora’s motivation for the hike wrong, as she fears?
20. How did Grossman’s personal note at the end change your experience of the novel? What seems possible for Ora and Avram, and the other characters in the book, at the end of the story?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Grossman was born in Jerusalem. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, nonfiction, and children’s literature. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and has been translated into thirty-six languages around the world. He is the recipient of many prizes, including the French Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, the Buxtehuder Bulle in Germany, Rome’s Premio per la Pace e l’Azione Umitaria, the Premio Ischia International Award for Journalism, Israel’s Emet Prize, and the Albatross Prize given by the Günter Grass Foundation.

## SUGGESTED READING

*Midnight Convoy and Other Stories* by S. Yizhar; *A Tale of Love and Darkness* by Amos Oz; *Once Upon a Country* by Sari Nusseibeh; *Friendly Fire* by A. B. Yehoshua; *Wittgenstein's Nephew* by Thomas Bernhard; *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert; *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *To the End of the Land*]

# *Private Life*

Jane Smiley

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How would you describe this novel in one sentence?
2. Smiley's epigraph for the book is a quote from Rose Wilder Lane. Why do you think she chose this particular line?
3. What is the purpose of the prologue? How did it color your interpretation of what followed?
4. Over the course of this novel—which stretches across six decades of American history—how does the role of women change? How might Margaret's life—and marriage—have been different were she born later?
5. This is a book that begins and ends with war—starting in a Missouri that is just emerging from the destruction of the Civil War, concluding in California on the eve of World War II. Margaret's personal life is also punctuated by historical events, the San Francisco Earthquake among them. How does this history affect the lives of the characters? How does Margaret's story offer the reader a different perspective on the larger life of the nation?
6. Smiley writes, "Margaret began to have a fated feeling, as if accumulating experiences were precipitating her toward an already decided future." Do you think her fated feeling proved accurate? Was marrying Andrew a choice she made, was the decision that of both of their mothers, or was it dictated by the time and place?
7. Lavinia tells Margaret, "A wife only has to do as she's told for the first year." When does Margaret finally take this advice? Why? Do you think this is good advice or manipulative?
8. Compare Lavinia's advice with the counsel in the letters Margaret finds from Mrs. Early to Andrew. Whose is more useful? More insightful? Do you find Mrs. Early's behavior toward Margaret and her mother deceitful?

9. What does Dora represent to Margaret? If she could trade places with her, do you think Margaret would? How does Dora think of Margaret? Do Margaret and Dora have anything in common? If not, what do you think brings them together?
10. Margaret and Andrew are both devastated by their son Alexander's death, yet they react in different ways. How does Andrew's perspective on this tragedy—that of a scientist and a man who believes in logical explanations—differ from Margaret's? How does Alexander's death change their marriage? Might things have been different if he had lived? Why or why not?
11. Thinking about Alexander's death leads Margaret to think about her brothers and father and the way they died. Why do you think *Private Life* opens with descriptions of their deaths? Margaret thinks that their deaths must have been worse for her mother than Alexander's was for her; do you agree?
12. What is the nature of Dora's relationship to Pete? What do they get from each other? Pete and Andrew are both liars, yet very different men—but they also seem to get along. What, if anything, do you think they share? And how are they different from each other?
13. Discuss Andrew's theories of the universe, and his academic dishonesty. Can you think of a modern-day analogue? If he were exposed today, what would happen to him?
14. Andrew Early is a scientist who is described to us at first as a genius. But it turns out to be more complex than that, and for as many of his ideas that are right (the earthquake, the moon craters) others are wrong (ether, double stars). Do you think it's at all accurate to describe him as a "genius"—or even a "mad genius?" How does "science" augment the overall story the novel is telling?
15. What role does Len Scanlan play in the novel, and in Margaret's evolving perception of her husband and his work? Why doesn't Margaret tell Andrew about Len's indiscretions with Helen Branch?
16. Margaret falls in love with a family of birds—coots—that live in a nearby pond. Why do you think they grow to mean so much to her? What is the significance of the coots to this story of a marriage?
17. Japanese art plays a significant part in the novel. What does it represent to Margaret? How does it tie Margaret to the Kimura family?
18. At several points in the novel, Margaret gets a glimpse of how others see her. But how does she see herself? Is her self-image more or less accurate than Andrew's?
19. Reread the passage about Dora's reflections on human beings, birds, and freedom. What is Margaret's reaction? How has Dora changed in

- the course of the novel? How does this compare to the ways in which Margaret changes?
20. Is Pete the great love of Margaret's life? What effect does he have on her and the decisions she makes? If Andrew discovered the truth of this relationship, would he feel as wronged by her as she feels by him?
  21. Why does Andrew denounce the Kimuras and Pete? Does he have an ulterior motive?
  22. Do you think Andrew's reports are taken seriously—is he responsible for the Kimuras being arrested, or was their fate inevitable given the time and place? Does Andrew's behavior add a new dimension to your understanding of the World War II internment?
  23. When Margaret tells Andrew that *The Gift* is a picture of Len Scanlan, what does she mean?
  24. At the end of the novel, Margaret recounts to her knitting group a hanging she witnessed as a young girl and can recall in detail. "I do remember it now that I've dared to think about it," she tells them. "There are so many things that I should have dared before this." What do you think she means by this? What do you think of the last line of the book: "And her tone was so bitter that the other ladies fell silent." What is the significance of the hanging to Margaret's story, to her life, and to "her" book?
  25. What do you take away from the story of Margaret's entire life? How does this novel compare to accounts in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels that center around women's lives?
  26. Jane Smiley has revealed that the characters of Margaret and Andrew are very loosely based on "my grandfather's much older sister [and] her husband, an eccentric family uncle . . . infamous in the physics establishment." Yet most of the story's details are fictional. Does knowing this change the way you see Margaret and her story?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Smiley is the author of numerous novels, including *A Thousand Acres*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, as well as four works of nonfiction. In 2001 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She received the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature in 2006. She lives in Northern California.

## SUGGESTED READING

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *A Reliable Wife* by Robert Goolrick, *The Postmistress* by Sarah Blake, *Fortune's Rocks* by Anita Shreve, *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*, *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather, *In Ghostly Japan* by Lafcadio Hearn, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *A Beautiful Mind* by Sylvia Nasar, *Intuition* by Allegra Goodman, *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Private Life*]

# *The Best of Times*

Penny Vincenzi

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. The role of chance in our lives is a major theme in this novel. Given the outcomes of the accident for the main characters, how do you interpret the difference between chance and fate in the book? Do you believe in fate?
2. There are many depictions of women in the novel, both young and old. Did you find the female characters true to life? Who did you relate to most?
3. The accident is the pivotal moment in the plot when the characters' lives collide and are changed forever for better or worse. In that moment, which character did you find yourself sympathizing with most and why? Do you have any real anecdotes about traumatic life-altering moments that you'd like to share?
4. In the beginning, many of the characters such as Jonathan, Toby, and Abi are portrayed as morally ambiguous. Which characters did you find most difficult to categorize and why? Did anyone surprise you by how they changed in the aftermath of the crash?
5. In many ways, the accident is just as traumatic for those characters who were not on the M4. Did you sympathize with any of them more than with the crash victims?
6. Penny Vincenzi is known for creating large casts of characters and alternating quickly between them. Did you like the continuously shifting narration? Did you find that this style successfully contributed to the tension and suspense in the novel?
7. Everyone makes mistakes sometimes, and terrible mistakes play a large role in this novel. When Daisy gets hit by a car, did you agree with how Jonathan responds to his son Charlie's guilty confession? Do you think it is fair to blame a person for something he/she could never have pre-

- dicted? Do you think the treatment of the issue of blame is handled well in the novel?
8. Were you surprised that Georgia fled the scene of the accident? Did this storyline successfully add an element of mystery to the plot for you?
  9. It's often said that love is a fickle thing. In the case of Barney and Amanda, for instance, how much did chance have to do with their ultimate break-up? Do you think they would have stayed together, if Barney hadn't met Emma at the hospital?
  10. An allusion to the famous first line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the title of this novel could be interpreted as ironic. Do you think some of the characters' lives were ultimately changed for the better? Was this realistic to you? Do you believe that something good always comes out of something bad?
  11. The final part of the novel is entitled "Moving On". Were you convinced that each character successfully moved on? Were you unsure how any of the relationships would fare in the future? If so, which one?
  12. *The Best of Times* is Penny Vincenzi's sixth novel published in the United States. Have you read any of Penny's previous books? If so, how does this one compare?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Vincenzi is the author of several major bestsellers, including *Sheer Abandon*. Before becoming a novelist, she worked as a journalist for *Vogue*, *Tattler*, and *Cosmopolitan*. She lives in London.

## SUGGESTED READING

Maeve Binchy, *Heart and Soul*; Barbara Delinsky, *The Secret Between Us*; Sebastian Faulks, *A Week in December*; Eileen Goudge, *Domestic Affairs*; Jane Green, *The Beach House*; Elin Hilderbrand, *Barefoot*; Kate Morton, *The House at Riverton*; Anne Rivers Siddons, *Sweetwater Creek*.

[Click [here](#) to return to main section for *The Best of Times*]

# *The Wave*

Susan Casey

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why do you think there isn't more news coverage on sunken freighters, tankers, and bulk carriers? Do tragedies at sea strike a different chord in the popular imagination than say, a plane crash?
2. What's the difference between surfing a wave and surviving it? What drives people to extreme situations and how does one draw the line between determination and courting disaster?
3. Many big wave surfers, like Laird Hamilton, are married with children. How do you think they rationalize putting their lives on the line for what many would consider sport?
4. Why do you think the psychological beating is often worse than the physical injury for surfers? Do you think Brett Lickle's mishap towards the end of the book helped him see what was really important in life or psychologically cripple him?
5. Surfers and scientists have different methods of judging a wave's intensity. Is one rubric more accurate than the other?
6. Susan Casey found a strong female presence in the scientific community that seems to be lacking in the surfing world. Why do you think surfing—and tow surfing in particular—seems to be so male-dominated? What drives more men than women to extreme sports?
7. Why is respect for the waves so important? What happens if you lose this respect?
8. Many surfers in the book refer to themselves as “watermen.” They're not simply athletes or thrill seekers—they almost have a sixth sense when it comes to the water. What can we learn from these watermen in terms of how they regard and intuit the ocean? What responsibility, if any, do you think these adventurers have to the ocean and to one another?

9. Historically speaking, massive geological events occur frequently, but humans generally remember devastating natural disasters within their lifetimes. Do you think this ability to forget events such as the Lisbon tsunami of 1755 and move on is part of what makes our species so resilient? Or do these sorts of memory lapses leave us ill-prepared to deal with future disasters?
10. After Susan Casey witnesses a sixty-eight foot wave at Killers, she remembers Laird Hamilton's assertion—"If you can look at one of these waves and you don't believe that there's something greater than we are, then you've got some serious analyzing to do." How has your perception of the ocean—and those who study it and ride its waves—changed after reading *The Wave*?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Casey, author of *New York Times* bestseller *The Devil's Teeth: A True Story of Obsession and Survival Among America's Great White Sharks*, is editor in chief of *O, The Oprah Magazine*. She is a National Magazine Award-winning journalist whose work has been featured in the *Best American Science and Nature Writing*, *Best American Sports Writing*, and *Best American Magazine Writing* anthologies; and has appeared in *Esquire*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Fortune*, *Outside*, and *National Geographic*. Casey lives in New York City and Maui.

## SUGGESTED READING

Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men Against the Sea*; Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man and the Sea*; Gary Kinder, *Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea: The History and Discovery of the World's Richest Shipwreck*; Laird Hamilton, *Force of Nature: Mind, Body, Soul, And, Of Course, Surfing*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Wave*]

# *I Remember Nothing*

Nora Ephron

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the title essay, Ephron writes, “. . . I have been forgetting things for years, but now I forget in a new way.” How do the examples she uses capture the difference between her past and present ways of forgetting?
2. Does Ephron’s list of the symptoms of old age mirror your own experiences or things you have observed in older friends or relatives? What other common signs of aging can you think of? How much of what we remember—or forget—is shaped by its relevance to our personal lives and history? What does Ephron’s inability to identify the celebrities in *People* magazine, for example, reflect about the different interests that naturally develop as we get older? How does this relate to Ephron’s list of what she “refuses to know anything about”?
3. Ephron writes about the start of her career as a writer in “Journalism: A Love Story.” Does the essay explain the rather unusual subtitle she has chosen? What does the atmosphere she encountered at *Newsweek* show about the times? How does Ephron respond to the limitations automatically imposed on her and the “institutionalism of sexism . . . at *Newsweek*”? To what extent do lucky breaks and useful connections play a role in the careers of most young people, including Ephron herself? How significant is her background—and her mother’s example—to Ephron’s confidence and drive?
4. “The Legend” offers a colorful portrait of Ephron’s childhood surrounded by Hollywood and literary celebrities, including her mother, a highly successful screenwriter, and the noted *New Yorker* writer, Lillian Ross. Discuss the various implications of the title. What does the anecdote at the heart of the essay, as well as the vignette about her graduation, convey about Ephron’s feelings for her mother? How does she capture the ambivalence experienced by a child of an alcoholic?

5. “My Life as an Heiress” provides more glimpses into the dynamics of Ephron’s family. How does she use humor and exaggeration to explore the relationships among her siblings—and the unexpected and less-than-admirable qualities triggered by the anticipation of an unexpected financial boon?
6. What does “Twenty-five Things People Have a Shocking Capacity to Be Surprised by Over and Over Again” reveal about human nature and our tendency to accept conventional beliefs despite lots of evidence to the contrary? What particular needs, emotions, or prejudices perpetuate our “capacity to be surprised”? Which entries resonated with you? What would you add to her list?
7. “Pentimento” chronicles the rise and fall of Ephron’s relationship with the controversial playwright Lillian Hellman. What qualities, personal and professional, initially make Hellman attractive to Ephron? What does Ephron’s description of their relationship—“‘Friends’ is probably not the right word—I became one of the young people in her life”—convey about the way Hellman perceived herself and her importance in the literary community? Why does Ephron search for reasons to explain her ultimate rejection of Hellman? What do Ephron’s regrets show about how the passage of time alters our views of the infatuations and disappointments, as well as the missed opportunities, of the past?
8. “The Six Stages of E-Mail” is a very funny chronicle of Ephron’s evolving reactions to e-mail. Do you share her mixed feelings about e-mail and more recent (and, perhaps, more intrusive) technological advances like Facebook and other social networks? Have these new forms of communication made life easier or more complicated? To what extent have they become a less-than-satisfactory substitute for old-fashioned phone calls and face-to-face conversations?
9. In one of the most moving pieces in the collection, Ephron describes the traditional Christmas dinners she shared with friends for twenty-two years and the changes that occur when Ruthie, one of the participants, dies. How does the grief the others feel manifest itself? Discuss the repercussions of their attempts to move beyond (or compensate for) her absence, including its affect on the tone of their conversations as they plan the meal; Ephron’s resentment of losing her usual role of providing desserts; the group’s impatience and annoyance with the couple invited as replacements for Ruthie and her husband; and even the inclusion of Ruthie’s recipe for bread and butter pudding. What does “Christmas Dinner” reveal about the particular pain of losing friends as you get older?

10. Ephron turned her 1980s divorce from Carl Bernstein into the hilarious bestseller *Heartburn*. In “The D Word” she revisits that break-up and also recounts her divorce from her first husband in the 1970s. What do her accounts of each divorce illustrate about the issues she—and other women of her generation—faced? What light does she shed on the difficult challenges parents face when contemplating divorce? Which of her points do you find the most and the least convincing? She describes her second divorce as “the worse kind of divorce.” How do the details she offers provide a sense of the emotional toll of her husband’s deceptions and her reactions to them?
11. Ephron writes, “The realization that I may only have a few good years remaining has hit me with a real force. . . .” How do her memories of her younger years inform her feelings of loss and how do they shape her approach to the years to come?
12. Several essays are entitled “I Just Want to Say” and go on to explore a specific topic. What do these pieces have in common? What do they and her short, funny, and to-the-point personal revelations like “My Aruba,” “Going to the Movies,” “Addicted to L-U-V,” and “My Life as a Meatloaf” contribute to the shape and impact of the collection?
13. Reread the lists (“What I Won’t Miss” and “What I Will Miss”) at the end of *I Remember Nothing* and create your own versions highlighting what you cherish—as well as you’d gladly give up.
14. If you have read *I Feel Bad about My Neck*, what changes do you see in Ephron’s outlook and perceptions over the course of time between the two books?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nora Ephron is the author of *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, *Heartburn*, *Crazy Salad*, *Wallflower at the Orgy*, and *Scribble Scribble*. She wrote and directed the movie *Julie & Julia* and received Academy Award nominations for Best Original Screenplay for *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, *Silkwood*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*, which she also directed. She lives in New York City with her husband, writer Nicolas Pileggi.

## SUGGESTED READING

Tina Fey, *Bossypants*; Sloane Crosley, *How Did You Get This Number*; Carrie Fisher, *Wishful Drinking*; Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually)*; Laura Notaro, *I Love Everybody (and Other Atrocious Lies)*; Anna Quindlen, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*; David Sedaris, *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*; Melinda Rainey Thompson *SWAG: Southern Women Aging Gracefully*; Judith Viorst, *I'm Too Young to Be Seventy*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *I Remember Nothing*]

# *The Tiger*

John Vaillant

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Tiger* is a riveting book, with the momentum of a thriller and the depth of insight of an extended philosophical meditation. How does Vaillant create suspense throughout the book? What are the major insights he offers about tigers and the larger issues that come into focus through his investigation of the killing of Vladimir Markov?
2. What historical forces have contributed to the desperate conditions facing the people of the Primorye? How understandable/forgivable is their poaching?
3. Vaillant writes: “What is amazing—and also terrifying about tigers—is their facility for what can only be described as abstract thinking. Very quickly, a tiger can assimilate new information . . . ascribe it to a source, and even a motive, and react accordingly.” In what ways does the tiger that kills Markov engage in abstract thinking?
4. Does Markov deserve the fate that befalls him? Is it fair to say that he brought on his own death by stealing the tiger’s kill or by shooting at the tiger?
5. What kind of man is Yuri Trush? In what ways is he both fierce and thoughtful, authoritarian and at the same time sensitive to the desperation that makes people of the Primorye break the law? How does his experience with the tiger change him?
6. Vaillant attributes the attitude of entitlement of Russian homesteaders, at least in part, to biblical injunctions: “1: Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. 2: And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth. . . . 3: Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.” What are the consequences of this way of viewing our relationship to the earth and other animals?

7. Chapter 18 begins with an epigraph from *Moby-Dick*. What are the parallels between Trush's hunt for the tiger and Ahab's pursuit of the whale and between the behavior of the tiger and that of the whale in these stories?
8. After he helps to kill the tiger, native people tell Trush he's now marked by it, that he now bears, as Vaillant puts it, "some ineffable taint, discernible only to tigers." When an otherwise tame and placid tiger tries to attack him at a wildlife rehabilitation center, Trush wonders if "some sort of a bio field exists. . . . Maybe tigers can feel some connection through the cosmos, or have some common language. I don't know. I can't explain it." Is this merely a fanciful conjecture, or could it be true that tigers can sense the presence of someone who has killed one of their kind? If true, how would it change our views of animal consciousness?
9. Vaillant suggests that, like captive tigers, most of us "live how and where we do because, at some point in the recent past, we were forced out of our former habitats and ways of living by more aggressive, if not better adapted, humans. Worth asking here is: Where does this trend ultimately lead? Is there a better way to honor the fact that we survived?" How might these questions be answered?
10. Vaillant argues that "by mass-producing food, energy, material goods, and ourselves, we have attempted to secede from, and override, the natural order." What are the consequences of this desire to separate ourselves from nature?
11. What makes tigers both so frightening and so fascinating? What mythic value do they have for humans? In what ways are they an important part of the ecosystem?
12. What does the book as a whole suggest about our relationship to nature, particularly to the animals that share the earth with us?
13. It is a precarious time, not just for the Amur tiger, but for all tigers. Poaching and the destruction of tiger habitat pose major challenges to the survival of the species. What would be the significance of the loss of the tiger? What positive steps have been taken to protect it?
14. What changes in human behavior need to happen in order to preserve the (Amur) tiger and similar species? How likely is it that humans will make such changes?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Vaillant is also the author of *The Golden Spruce*. He has written for *the New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Outside*, and *National Geographic*. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with his wife and children.

## SUGGESTED READING

V. K. Arseniev, *Dersu the Trapper*; David Grann, *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*; Anna Reid, *The Shaman's Coat: A Native History of Siberia*; Dan Morrison, *The Black Nile: One Man's Amazing Journey Through Peace and War on the World's Longest River*; George Page, *Inside the Animal Mind: A Groundbreaking Exploration of Animal Intelligence*; Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature Through History*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Tiger*]

# *The Grace of Silence*

Michele Norris

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Michele Norris discovered family secrets because elders in her family started divulging stories in the wake of Barack Obama's election. What were conversations about race like during the 2008 election? Was there a difference between public and private discussions? Have those conversations changed in the last two years?
2. How did family secrets affect life in the Norris home? What does Norris mean when she says she was "shaped by the weight of silence"? In your own family, have you had the experience of finding out something about a family member that you never knew? Alternatively, have you ever been the keeper of such secrets?
3. In the airport, Norris watches two women misjudge her father as a drunk rather than a very ill man, but chooses not to confront them. How is her decision related to being a "model minority"? Do you understand Norris's belated desire to be the black girl some white women are conditioned to fear most? What do you think of her statement that "Blacks often feel the dispiriting burden of being perceived willy-nilly as representing an entire race"?
4. While Norris feels certain that the white women's reaction is informed by race, she cannot be absolutely sure: "Here is the conundrum of racism. You know it's there, but you can't prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, how it colors a particular situation." Have you experienced times when you thought race was a factor but were unable to prove it? What choices have you made to address or ignore the possibility of racist behavior?
5. Norris's mother and uncle have different perceptions of her grandmother Ione's work as a traveling Aunt Jemima. While her mother has mixed emotions, her uncle says, "I know a lot of people are ashamed of that image but I am not. . . . She put that costume on and she was a

star.” Norris finds a similar range of reactions when she delves into the history of Aunt Jemima. The owner of Mammy’s Cupboard restaurant says, “Sometimes I don’t understand why black folks don’t claim her, because she was theirs first. She’s still theirs, isn’t she?” What’s your answer to that question? What does the Aunt Jemima image mean to you? Does the upgrade to her image destigmatize the logo? What are other examples of complicated images in American commercial life?

6. The Norris family were “block busters” in Minneapolis. Do you live in a community that was or still is segregated by race or class? Why do you think the neighbor who was a displaced person was so unwelcoming to the Norris family?
7. Belvin and Betty Norris were sartorial activists, dressing to impress in all circumstances. Do you understand why? Do you find yourself doing the same thing? Why do you think certain groups put so much emphasis on outward appearances such as clothes or cars?
8. Norris writes that she was deprived of the story of her father’s shooting not only because of family silence, but “because the collective story of the black World War II veteran had been slighted.” Before reading *The Grace of Silence*, did you know the history of black veterans during and after World War II? What affect do you think this period had on civil rights in America and what does it mean that it is rarely discussed these days, if at all?
9. Why do you think Belvin Norris never talked about his encounter with Birmingham police with his wife or children? Do you think he would have talked about it if asked? How does his silence compare to Betty Norris’s reluctance to talk about her mother’s Aunt Jemima job?
10. While Norris didn’t know the story of her father’s arrest, her cousin had “heard about it from his father during a cautionary ‘never look a cop in the eye’ conversation that black men often have with their teenage sons.” Black communities refer to DWB (driving while black) as shorthand for police profiling. The recent immigration law in Arizona also singles out a particular group. Do you think such profiling is a problem in America? Do you agree with its use in any situation?
11. Why do you think Belvin Norris returned to Birmingham so often with his family despite his violent encounter? Has your family or anyone in it had to exile themselves from a place? Did you or they return to that place, or avoid it completely?
12. Norris makes the point that white officers in Birmingham in the 1940s and ‘50s earned less than what they would make in the mills or the mines. They had to provide their own flashlights and pistols, and they were led by a man—Bull Conner—who was overtly racist. Does know-

- ing more about the officers' situation affect how we understand their actions?
13. Julia Beaton says to Norris: "I have no white American friends. I just don't care for them. I just don't trust them. I have always told my sons and my grandsons not to bring a woman in this house who does not look like me." What was your reaction to Beaton's statements? Do you respond differently to her, as an older black woman, than you do to the older white men and women that Norris also interviews? Should we judge her words less harshly than we might a white person saying "I just don't trust black people"?
  14. Aubrey Justice tells Norris that "In some ways it seems like things were better when the races had their own." Norris reflects, "I wonder whether Justice might not be speaking the truth, at least in part. You can't visit my grandparents' neighborhood in Ensley and avoid asking, Did integration work as planned?" Was Birmingham's black community better off in some ways during segregation? Is that true for other communities? Who is responsible for the changes that have come to neighborhoods like Ensley?
  15. Have you lived in a neighborhood or worked in an environment or attended a school that went through the initial stages of integration? What was your experience as the integrator or member of the majority culture?
  16. Davis Shull laments, "Nowadays everything is racist. No matter what you say. You can't tell the truth without being racist. You can't say anything." Political correctness is an enormous focus in American life. Does it leave any room for real conversations about race? What role does such correctness play in stories like Shirley Sherrod's, and also in situations like Joe Biden describing Obama as "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy"? Was Attorney General Eric Holder right when he said, "Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards"? Do you understand what Holder meant when he suggested that "to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul"?
  17. There is often the assumption that white people are responsible for the persistence of racism. There is less emphasis, Norris writes, on exploring "the legacy of distrust black parents pass on to their children." Is there an imbalance in the way we see the legacies of race in America?
  18. Take some time to discuss racial stereotypes. What characteristics (lazy, driven, violent, studious, etc.) are attached to certain racial and religious groups: blacks, Jews, Muslims, Asians, Latinos, whites, etc.? Do

different groups hold the same images of each other—would a white man see the same stereotypes as a black woman or a Latino teenager? Consider as well the role of race and gender in those stereotypes.

19. Norris asks a powerful question at the end of *The Grace of Silence*: “What’s been more corrosive to the dialogue on race in America over the last half century or so, things said or unsaid?” Discuss your responses.
20. “All the talk of a postracial American betrays an all too glib eagerness to put in remission a four-hundred-year-old cancerous social disease. We can’t let it rest until we attend to its symptoms in ourselves and others.” Norris’s work demands that we look at our own lives and consider how honest we are with ourselves and how open we are with each other. Are you able to talk about race with friends? Are you honest with yourselves about your own prejudices? What legacies have your families and communities bequeathed to you? What have you passed or want to pass on to your children? Have you ever been accused of being a racist? Why does that label carry such stigma?
21. The question at the heart of Norris’s memoir is “How well do you know the people who raised you?” Carry this question home with you and, as Norris states, “take the bold step and say: Tell me more about yourself.” Stay at the table even if the conversation is difficult, and prepare yourself to listen. “There is grace in silence, and power to be had from listening to that which, more often than not, was left unsaid.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Norris, host of *All Things Considered*, is cowinner of the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award for The York Project: Race and the ‘08 Vote and was chosen in 2009 as Journalist of the Year by the National Association of Black Journalists. She has written for, among other publications, *The Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. As a correspondent for ABC News from 1993 to 2002, she earned Emmy and Peabody awards for her contribution to the network’s 9/11 reporting. She has been a frequent guest commentator on *Meet the Press*, *The Chris Matthews Show*, and *Charlie Rose*. Norris lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and children.

## SUGGESTED READING

*The Black Girl Next Door*, Jennifer Baszile; *Mudbound*, Hillary Jordan; *But for Birmingham: Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*, Glen Eskew; *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, Grace Elizabeth Hale; *The Breakthrough*, Gwen Ifill; *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas Blackmon; *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, Tim J. Wise; *Zeitoun*, Dave Eggers; *Listening Is an Act of Love*, Dave Isay.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Grace of Silence*]

# *Hellhound on His Trail*

Hampton Sides

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *Hellhound on His Trail*, Hampton Sides examines a notorious moment in American history—the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., by James Earl Ray—and provides many never-before-revealed details about Ray, King, and the fateful events leading up to April 4, 1968. To fully appreciate the context of this tragic event in our nation’s past, your discussion group might consider reading about the civil rights era in the 1960s and the larger issues that surrounded King’s death.
2. Which characters came alive for you in *Hellhound on His Trail*? Did you learn anything new about some of the figures involved in this period of American history, or have you come to think about certain individuals in a different way based on what you’ve read about them?
3. In his “Note to Readers,” Hampton Sides writes, “All writers sooner or later go back to the place where they came from.” Having been a child living in Memphis when Martin Luther King was shot, do you think Sides separated himself from the events he reported on in this book? Consider this question in context to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 or the tragic attacks of 9/11: Is it possible to be a journalistic observer of an occurrence like this when it happens in your hometown?
4. Every fact and incident in *Hellhound on His Trail* is impeccably sourced, yet it has the narrative drive of a thriller. What did you think of the author’s treatment of the subject matter? When reading about a major historical event such as this one, do you prefer a narrative like the one Sides has constructed, one that re-creates the immediacy of the time, or a more straightforward timeline of events? How might this book differ from other nonfiction titles you may have read on the subject?
5. There are many who believe that James Earl Ray was part of a larger conspiracy and was set up to be the “fall guy” for King’s assassination.

Based on the evidence the author presents in *Hellhound on His Trail*, do you believe Ray was the sole person responsible for King's death? If so, why do you think theories of a conspiracy have persisted?

6. Talk about Ray's escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City and his time on the lam before arriving in Memphis. Would he have been able to remain as anonymous today as he did then? Talk about how society has changed since 1968: are people more or less trusting of loners like Ray nowadays?
7. In Chapter 2, the author describes King as having reached a point in his career where he had "slipped in stature, even among his own people." Were you aware of this dip in King's popularity, and if so, was it surprising to you? Talk about history's perpetuation of legend: in highlighting the achievements of a man such as King, do any cracks in his reputation become repaired, or disappear, over time?
8. Chapter 4 details FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's vendetta against King and his determination to expose King's personal transgressions. But while Hoover and his staff regularly tried to leak salacious details to the press, in Sides's words, "the media never took the bait." Why do you think this was the case? How has the media evolved in the last 50 years, especially in matters regarding the private behavior of public figures?
9. Consider the political rise of George Wallace during this period, and the number of people—including James Earl Ray—who were galvanized by his presidential campaign, particularly his pro-segregationist, if not outright racist, positions. Does Wallace bear some responsibility for King's assassination?
10. Do you see parallels between any of today's political movements and George Wallace's campaigns for office?
11. The manhunt that organized in the hours and days after King's assassination was epic; most notably, more than 3,000 FBI agents took part, and it cost upwards of \$2 million (which, adjusted for inflation, would be more than \$13.6 million today). Considering how much Hoover despised King, was it startling that he mobilized the bureau to such an enormous extent to find his killer?
12. Martin Luther King "believed nonviolence was a more potent force for self-protection than any weapon," (page 159). Given the threats he routinely faced—including the firebombing of his home in 1956 and being stabbed by a deranged woman in 1958—why did King nonetheless ban his staff from carrying guns or other weaponry?
13. "The bureau was well aware of the existence of bounties on King's head," (page 343). By not better protecting King in light of these threats, and for not realizing the impact his death would have on the nation, should the FBI have shared the blame for King's death?

14. Book Two of *Hellhound on His Trail* opens with this quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "For murder, though it hath no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ." Why did the author choose to include this quote? What do you think this quote says about Ray?
15. Was it surprising to read about how easily Ray was able to slip out of Memphis after the shootings? Could he have been stopped sooner? Do you think Ray could have gotten away with his crime if he committed it today?
16. As Ray flees Canada for Europe, his desperation becomes acute and he begins to make mistakes that leave him exposed. Why was he able to remain on the run for as long as he did? Think about his two critical errors in London as he entered Heathrow Airport to board a flight to Brussels. Considering his meticulousness at other points while in hiding, why did Ray try to walk through customs with two slightly different passports and a loaded gun in his pocket?
17. Shortly after Ray pled guilty to killing King and was sent to prison, he began to recant his involvement in the assassination and asked to be put on trial. And in the late 1990s, members of King's family—notably his son Dexter and his wife Coretta—came out publicly to urge that Ray have his day in court. Should Ray have been given a trial?
18. "Throughout James Earl Ray's life, the despair was panoramic. The family suffered from exactly the sort of bleak, multigenerational poverty that King's Poor People's Campaign was designed to address." Consider this paradox that the author highlights. What led Ray to his life of crime? If King's efforts had made a difference in the life of someone like Ray, would Ray have taken another path in life?
19. What would have happened if Ray himself was murdered, much like John F. Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, was killed by Jack Ruby? What benefits, if any, have come from Ray's remaining alive (until 1998) and speaking out? If Ray had died in the act of killing King, would the collective reaction of the country—riots, unrest—have been the same?
20. There are many labels that have been applied to James Earl Ray, among them: insane, criminal, racist, loner, oddball. How would you characterize him?
21. What do you believe would have happened to the civil rights movement had King lived? Would anything be different today?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of Memphis, Hampton Sides is editor-at-large for *Outside* magazine and the author of the international best-seller, *Ghost Soldiers* (Doubleday), which was the basis for the 2005 Miramax film, *The Great Raid*. *Ghost Soldiers* won the 2002 PEN USA award for non-fiction and the 2002 Discover Award from Barnes & Noble, and his magazine work has been twice nominated for National Magazine Awards for feature writing. Hampton is also the author of *Americana* (Anchor) and *Stomping Grounds* (William Morrow). A graduate of Yale with a B.A. in history, he lives in New Mexico with his wife, Anne, and their three sons.

## SUGGESTED READING

*At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years* (1965-68) by Taylor Branch; *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*; *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* by David Garrow; *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Gerald Posner; *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years* (1954-63) by Taylor Branch; *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years* (1963-65) by Taylor Branch.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Hellhound on His Trail*]

# *The Warmth of Other Suns*

Isabel Wilkerson

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Warmth of Other Suns* combines a sweeping historical perspective with vivid intimate portraits of three individuals: Ida Mae Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Pershing Foster. What is the value of this dual focus, of shifting between the panoramic and the close-up? In what ways are Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster representative of the millions of other migrants who journeyed from South to North?
2. In many ways *The Warmth of Other Suns* seeks to tell a new story—about the Great Migration of southern blacks to the north—and to set the record straight about the true significance of that migration. What are the most surprising revelations in the book? What misconceptions does Wilkerson dispel?
3. What were the major economic, social, and historical forces that sparked the Great Migration? Why did blacks leave in such great numbers from 1915 to 1970?
4. What were the most horrifying conditions of Jim Crow South? What instances of racial terrorism stand out most strongly in the book? What daily injustices and humiliations did blacks have to face there?
5. In what ways was the Great Migration of southern blacks similar to other historical migrations? In what important ways was it unique?
6. After being viciously attacked by a mob in Cicero, a suburb of Chicago, Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have seen many demonstrations in the South, but I have never seen anything so hostile and so hateful as I’ve seen here today.” Why were northern working-class whites so hostile to black migrants?
7. Wilkerson quotes *Black Boy* in which Richard Wright wrote, on arriving in the North: “I had fled one insecurity and embraced another.” What unique challenges did black migrants face in the North? How did these

- challenges affect the lives of Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster?
8. Wilkerson points out that the three most influential figures in jazz were all children of the Great Migration: Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and John Coltrane. What would American culture look like today if the Great Migration hadn't happened?
  9. What motivated Ida Mae Gladney, George Starling, and Robert Foster to leave the South? What circumstances and inner drives prompted them to undertake such a difficult and dangerous journey? What would likely have been their fates if they had remained in the South? In what ways did living in the North free them?
  10. Near the end of the book, Wilkerson asks: "With all that grew out of the mass movement of people, did the Great Migration achieve the aim of those who willed it? Were the people who left the South—and their families—better off for having done so? Was the loss of what they left behind worth what confronted them in the anonymous cities they fled to?" How does Wilkerson answer these questions?
  11. How did the Great Migration change not only the North but also the South? How did the South respond to the mass exodus of cheap black labor?
  12. In what ways are current attitudes toward Mexican Americans similar to attitudes toward African Americans expressed by Northerners in *The Warmth of Other Suns*? For example, the ways working-class Northerners felt that Southern blacks were stealing their jobs.
  13. At a neighborhood watch meeting in Chicago's South Shore, Ida Mae listens to a young state senator named Barack Obama. In what ways is Obama's presidency an indirect result of the Great Migration?
  14. What is the value of Wilkerson basing her research primarily on first-hand, eyewitness accounts, gathered through extensive interviews, of this historical period?
  15. Wilkerson writes of her three subjects that "Ida Mae Gladney had the humblest trappings but was perhaps the richest of them all. She had lived the hardest life, been given the least education, seen the worst the South could hurl at her people, and did not let it break her. . . . Her success was spiritual, perhaps the hardest of all to achieve. And because of that, she was the happiest and lived the longest of them all." What attributes allowed Ida Mae Gladney to achieve this happiness and longevity? In what sense might her life, and the lives of George Starling and Robert Foster as well, serve as models for how to persevere and overcome tremendous difficulties?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isabel Wilkerson won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing as Chicago bureau chief of *The New York Times*. The first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism and the first African American to win for individual reporting, she has also won the George Polk Award and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. She has lectured on narrative at the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University and has served as Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University and as the James M. Cox Jr. Professor of Journalism at Emory University. She is currently Professor of Journalism and Director of Narrative Nonfiction at Boston University. During the Great Migration, her parents journeyed from Georgia and southern Virginia to Washington, D.C., where she was born and reared. This is her first book.

## SUGGESTED READING

Eric Arnesen, *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents*; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, *12 Million Black Voices*; James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*; Toni Morrison, *Jazz*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Warmth of Other Suns*]

# *Fragile*

Lisa Unger

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the novel's title. Who are The Hollows's most fragile residents? Ultimately, who are the most resilient ones?
2. What makes Jones and Maggie a good couple? How would you have reacted to Jones's revelations if you had been Maggie? What life lessons—for better or worse—do they impart to Rick?
3. What accounts for Travis's hatred of women? What spurred the cycles of violence in the Crosby family?
4. How did your opinion of Marshall shift throughout the novel, from his session with Maggie in chapter three to the powerful closing scenes? What does it take to defeat the emotional grip of an abuser?
5. How does Elizabeth cope with the responsibilities she accumulated after shepherding students for most of her lifetime? What does she teach Maggie about motherhood?
6. In chapter nine, Lisa Unger describes the way Maggie, Melody, and Denise behaved in high school. Did they change very much over the years? Did high school predict your life accurately?
7. Is Melody a good mother? What attracted her to Graham? How did the truth compare to your theories about him?
8. Facebook plays a role in the race to rescue Charlene, but was it a healthy resource for her friends? Does it enhance or distort reality?
9. In his pivotal phone call to Maggie, Marshall asks, "How do you know if you're a good person?" How would you have answered this question?
10. How does The Hollows reflect the personalities of the people who live there? What makes it a charming place to live? How does the landscape, rugged yet scenic, make it a place where secrets can exist in plain sight? How does its proximity to New York City affect the characters' dreams?

11. Through Wanda, Charlie finally finds the courage to believe in himself. What enables him to accept Wanda's love? How does his story reflect the way the novel unfolds?
12. Who is ultimately responsible for what happened to Sarah? Could anything or anyone have prevented the circumstances that led to her death?
13. Would Tommy Delano have received better treatment in the twenty-first century?
14. Do you think of your family, or your community, as being open and candid, or do they have a lot to hide? Discuss a time when you discovered something potentially damaging about a loved one's past. How did you handle it? Has your own past ever haunted you?
15. Discuss *Fragile's* connections to the other Unger novels you have read. How do her characters approach the line between good and evil?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Unger is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Beautiful Lies* and *Black Out*. Her novels have been published in more than twenty-five countries. She lives in Florida with her husband and daughter.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Fragile*]

# *Damaged*

Alex Kava

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. The novel opens with a map, dated Saturday, August 22, detailing Hurricane Isaac's wind speed, travel speed, and projected path. What mood does this prelude create?
2. How does the author set up the reader's interest in and sympathy for Danny Delveccio, the surfer who sleeps in his Chevy Impala, and Charlotte Mills, the eccentric, beachcombing widow? How does this technique impact your reading of Joe Black's character?
3. Why is Maggie's boss, Assistant Director Raymond Kunze, angry with her over the Potomac serial killer case? Is he justified? Is Maggie simply being paranoid when she ponders whether Kunze "splattered her with the killer's brains . . . to do just that—splatter her" and considers that perhaps what he wants is to psychologically "shove her and see if she'd fall"? Why would she persist in this seemingly abusive work climate when her work is considered brilliant across several government agencies?
4. Maggie's internal struggle about her first helicopter ride—"A refusal or even hesitancy would be a mistake, especially with this macho group"—is reminiscent of Liz's inner monologue as she prepares to jump at the start of the novel: "Liz kept her hesitation to herself" and refuses to let her aircrew see "even a hint of her reluctance." What challenges do these women face in two male-dominated fields? Do they hold their own through the course of the novel? Does each garner the respect they want from their male colleagues by the end? What are the other female characters in the novel like?
5. Scott Larsen's weak character keeps him in thrall to the wily charms of smooth operator Joe Black. He's thrilled to drink with Joe, to make Joe laugh, to be dubbed affectionately as "Dude" by Joe. When does this crush first begin to wane? What sends it totally over the edge?

- Does Scott ever fully recognize the depth of Joe's betrayal? Is Scott an irredeemable character?
6. At what point do Maggie and Liz truly connect? Do you predict that Liz Bailey will make an appearance in the coming Maggie O'Dell novels?
  7. This novel was written before the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, although its publication date was a few months after the accident. How did your knowledge of the oil spill affect your reading of the novel, with its repeated references to "emerald-green waters . . . sugar-white sands"?
  8. Platt's theory that the mystery illness felling wounded soldiers stems from biomechanical implements tainted by donor decomposition is the first and only plausible theory anyone has proposed. Why does Ganz dismiss it immediately and so thoroughly?
  9. Maggie and Platt walk a delicate line between friendship and romance. Does their relationship develop over the course of the novel? Is either of them psychologically equipped for intimacy?
  10. Despite the Florida Panhandle being at the storm's bull's-eye, there are repeated references in the novel to New Orleans being "where all the media is." What is the author's intent with this crack?
  11. What does Maggie refer to as "her leaky compartments"? What is her strategy for handling them? What do you think would solve the issue?
  12. At what point does Liz realize she's made the grade with Wilson, Ellis, and Kesnick?
  13. As the novel closes, Trish and Mr. B cook dinner for the hungry neighbors, side by side in the Coney Island Canteen. Since his rescue, "Trish hadn't left his side." How do you explain this total turnaround by Liz's angry, aloof sister?
  14. What was your reaction to the last few lines of the novel and the enormity of the task now facing Maggie O'Dell and her colleagues? What does the author seem to be saying about the plight of the FBI profiler?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alex Kava's two stand-alone novels and seven novels featuring FBI profiler Maggie O'Dell have been published in more than twenty countries, appearing on the bestseller lists in Britain, Australia, Poland, Germany, and Italy. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America and International Thriller Writers. Kava divides her time between Omaha, Nebraska, and Pensacola, Florida.

## **SUGGESTED READING**

Alex Kava, *A Perfect Evil*; *Split Second*; *The Soul Catcher*; *At the Stroke of Madness*; *A Necessary Evil*; *Exposed*; *Black Friday*; Lee Child, *61 Hours*; *Worth Dying For*; *Persuader*; *The Enemy*; *The Hard Way*; *One Shot*; *Gone Tomorrow*; *Bad Luck and Trouble*.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Damaged*]

# ***Absalom, Absalom!***

William Faulkner

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Any reader bewildered by the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* will realize immediately that its greatest challenge lies in its complex narrative structure, and as with *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, you must learn how to read it as you go. How many narrators are there, and what is their relationship to one another? What are the sources of their authority as tellers of the Sutpen story? What, so far as you can make out, “happened,” as opposed to what is conjectured by the various narrators? Why might Faulkner have chosen such a challenging narrative form, despite the difficulties it presents for his readers?
2. At the center of the novel is the gigantic figure of Sutpen—a man who drives himself to extraordinary lengths in the pursuit of his “design.” Sutpen means different things to different people: to Rosa, he is a monster, but one she would have married, whereas to Colonel Compson, he is a human being with sympathetic characteristics. How does your view of Sutpen change as the web of his story emerges? How do you come away from the novel feeling about him? Is he evil? innocent? superhuman? mad? heroic? Does Sutpen’s history, which he has told to Colonel Compson, justify his behavior?
3. Why do the various tellers of the story interpret and embroider the tale so differently? What is Faulkner telling us about the human need to order and interpret the past? How does each teller affect your response? Whose version of events do you find most attractive, most compelling? Whose version makes most sense to you? Is “truth” largely irrelevant?
4. Faulkner’s original title for the novel was “Dark House,” and as in much of his work, we see in *Absalom, Absalom!* strong elements of the gothic literary convention: a ruined and possibly haunted house, a demonic hero, family secrets, hints of incest, a melodramatic plot,

an overwhelming mood of decadence and decay. Yet in its depth and intensity, the novel clearly transcends the often trivial melodrama of much gothic fiction. How does Faulkner's use of gothic elements contribute to the novel's dramatic effect?

5. Consider Faulkner's brilliant development of the character of Charles Bon, the son that Sutpen has cast off. In both Quentin and Shreve's retelling and in Miss Rosa's, he is a figure of romance, while in Mr. Compson's version he is an opportunist, using both Judith and Henry to revenge himself upon his father. Which of these perspectives is more satisfying to you, and why? Why is the element of doubt about Bon's motivation—even about the extent of his knowledge about his origin—so crucial to Faulkner's plan?
6. The book's title is taken from the biblical story of Absalom, son of King David, told in the second book of Samuel—a dynastic tale of incest, rebellion, revenge, and violent death. How is your perspective on the novel enlarged after reading the Absalom story? How does the biblical tale inflect the novel's themes of incest, dynastic hopes and failures, rivalry between father and son? How does David's grief at the death of Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33) compare with Thomas Sutpen's seeming lack of feeling for his sons—or for anyone else?
7. Charles Bon is at heart of the incest plot, and it is the dual threat of incest and miscegenation that ruins Sutpen's great design. How do incest and miscegenation mirror each other? What is it that makes these two forms of mixing blood—endogamy and exogamy—so taboo? Do you agree that it is the thought of miscegenation, rather than incest, that Henry can't endure? Why do rage, self-loathing, and masochism play such a large role in the stories of Charles Bon's two direct descendants, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon and Jim Bond?
8. What do you think of Mr. Compson's theory of the incestuous triad formed by Henry, Bon, and Judith, described as follows: "The brother . . . taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride"? Does Faulkner assume that a strong incestuous component is part of the psychology of every family? Or only of extremely unusual families like the Sutpens?
9. The concept of racial hierarchy is at odds with the domestic intimacy in which blacks and whites lived together in the South. During the Civil War, Judith, Clytie, and Rosa live together as sisters, eating the same food, working side by side. But when Rosa returns to the house in 1909, she warns Clytie not to touch her: "Let flesh touch with flesh,

and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too.” How does the novel expose the mental convolutions by which people tried to maintain the notion of an essential difference—a species difference—between black skin and white, even among members of the same family? What, in these circumstances, do you think of Clytie’s loyalty and her efforts to protect Henry?

10. To what degree do you see the self-destructiveness displayed by just about all of the figures in this novel as Faulkner’s deliberate allegory of the South?
11. Many critics have commented that Faulkner takes his stylistic eccentricity to its most involuted and exaggerated extremes in *Absalom, Absalom!*, making inordinate demands upon the reader’s attention and patience. An anonymous reviewer for *Time* magazine called this book “the strangest, least readable, most infuriating and yet in some respects the most impressive novel that William Faulkner has written.” What use does Faulkner make of repetition, circularity, accumulation, and confusion? Are there aesthetic and intellectual reasons he takes his rhetoric and syntax to such exhaustive lengths, or do you feel that his style is too self-indulgent?
12. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel about the meaning of history, and about the extreme pressure of the past, particularly in the South, upon the inhabitants of the present. More importantly, it is about the doubtful process of coming to know, reconstruct, and come to grips with history. Mr. Compson says to Quentin, “We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales . . . we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting . . . performing their acts of simple passion and violence, impervious to time and inexplicable.” Why does Quentin, who is unrelated to Sutpen, seem to understand the tale as bearing directly upon his own identity and fate? If history is “a dead time,” as Mr. Compson calls it, why does it command so much mesmerized attention in this novel?
13. *Absalom, Absalom!* shares certain characteristics with classical tragedy, and Faulkner uses Mr. Compson to make the connection clear. He alludes to Aeschylus’s great play *Agamemnon* with his discussion of the name of Sutpen’s daughter by a slave, suggesting that Sutpen might have meant to call her Cassandra rather than Clytemnestra. Elsewhere, Mr. Compson sees the story as a dramatic tableau, with “fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager.” Aristotle noted that a certain blindness, a character flaw he called hamartia, was common to tragic heroes. What are the flaws in Sutpen that contribute to his tragedy? If Sutpen is a character who stands for pure, unswerving will, what role does fate play in the story?

14. Why does Faulkner have Quentin tell his story to Shreve McCannon, a Canadian, in a room at Harvard in January, 1910? Why does this reconstruction of a uniquely Southern tale take place on Yankee soil? What is the meaning of the relationship between story and setting, as contained in the following phrase: “that fragile pandora’s box of scrawled paper which had filled with violent and unratiocinative djinns and demons this snug monastic coign, this dreamy and heatless alcove of what we call the best of thought”? What do you make of the book’s final line, in which Quentin hysterically insists that he doesn’t hate the South?
15. In the last few pages of the novel we learn at last, as in a mystery, what Quentin’s role in the story has been. He has entered into the final chapter of the nightmare of the Sutpen family with his own eyes, accompanying Miss Rosa to Sutpen’s Hundred, where he sees the dying Henry. He seems unable to emerge from this experience into ordinary life. Why does the past have such hallucinatory power for Quentin? What does his meeting with Henry mean to him? Do you see Clytie’s burning of the house, with herself and Henry in it, as a final purgation of the family curse? Why then does this history seem to be a nightmare from which Quentin is unable to awaken?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Absalom, Absalom!*]

# *As I Lay Dying*

William Faulkner

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Which are the most intelligent and sympathetic voices in the novel? With whom do you most and least identify? Is Faulkner controlling your closeness to some characters and not others? How is this done, given the seemingly equal mode of presentation for all voices?
2. Even the reader of such an unusual book may be surprised to come upon Addie Bundren's narrative, if only because Addie has been dead since earlier in the book. Why is Addie's narrative placed where it is, and what is the effect of hearing Addie's voice at this point in the book? Is this one of the ways in which Faulkner shows Addie's continued "life" in the minds and hearts of her family? How do the issues raised by Addie here relate to the book as a whole?
3. Faulkner allows certain characters—especially Darl and Vardaman—to express themselves in language and imagery that would be impossible, given their lack of education and experience in the world. Why does he break with the realistic representation of character in this way?
4. What makes Darl different from the other characters? Why is he able to describe Addie's death when he is not present? How is he able to intuit the fact of Dewey Dell's pregnancy? What does this uncanny visionary power mean, particularly in the context of what happens to Darl at the end of the novel? Darl has fought in World War I; why do you think Faulkner has chosen to include this information about him? What are the sources and meaning of his madness?
5. Anse Bundren is surely one of the most feckless characters in literature, yet he alone thrives in the midst of disaster. How does he manage to command the obedience and cooperation of his children? Why are other people so generous with him? He gets his new teeth at the end of the novel and he also gets a new wife. What is the secret of Anse's

- charm? How did he manage to make Addie marry him, when she is clearly more intelligent than he is?
6. Some critics have spoken of Cash as the novel's most gentle character, while others have felt that he is too rigid, too narrow-minded, to be sympathetic. What does Cash's list of the thirteen reasons for beveling the edges of the coffin tell us about him? What does it tell us about his feeling for his mother? Does Cash's carefully reasoned response to Darl's imprisonment seem fair to you, or is it a betrayal of his brother?
  7. Jewel is the result of Addie's affair with the evangelical preacher Whitfield (an aspect of the plot that bears comparison with Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*). When we read Whitfield's section, we realize that Addie has again allied herself with a man who is not her equal. How would you characterize the preacher? What is the meaning of this passionate alliance, now repudiated by Whitfield? Does Jewel know who his father is?
  8. What is your response to the section spoken by Vardaman, which states simply, "My mother is a fish"? What sort of psychological state or process does this declaration indicate? What are some of the ways in which Vardaman insists on keeping his mother alive, even as he struggles to understand that she is dead? In what other ways does the novel show characters wrestling with ideas of identity and embodiment?
  9. This is a novel full of acts of love, not the least of which is the prolonged search in the river for Cash's tools. Consider some of the other ways that love is expressed among the members of the family. What compels loyalty in this family? What are the ways in which that loyalty is betrayed? Which characters are most self-interested?
  10. The saga of the Bundren family is participated in, and reflected upon, by many other characters. What does the involvement of Doctor Peabody, of Armstid, and of Cora and Vernon Tull say about the importance of community in country life? Are the characters in the town meant to provide a contrast with country people?
  11. Does Faulkner deliberately make humor and the grotesque interdependent in this novel? What is the effect of such horrific details as Vardaman's accidental drilling of holes in his dead mother's face? Of Darl and Vardaman listening to the decaying body of Addie "speaking"? Of Vardaman's anxiety about the growing number of buzzards trying to get at the coffin? Of Cash's bloody broken leg, set in concrete and suppurating in the heat? Of Jewel's burnt flesh? Of the "cure" that Dewey Dell is tricked into?
  12. In one of the novel's central passages, Addie meditates upon the distance between words and actions: "I would think how words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing

goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other; and that sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.” What light does this passage shed upon the meaning of the novel? Aren’t words necessary in order to give form to the story of the Bundrens? Or is Faulkner saying that words—his own chosen medium—are inadequate?

13. What does the novel reveal about the ways in which human beings deal with death, grieving, and letting go of our loved ones?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *As I Lay Dying*]

# *The Sound and the Fury*

William Faulkner

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel's title is taken from a monologue spoken by Shakespeare's Macbeth, who has attained the throne of Scotland through murder and has held it through the most brutal violence and tyranny; at this point in the play he has just heard that his wife has killed herself. Sated with his own corruption and looking forward to his imminent defeat and death, he says: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,/ To the last syllable of recorded time/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!/ Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more. It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing." Why do you think Faulkner chose a phrase from this passage for his title? How is this passage applicable to the novel? Do you find the novel as pessimistic and despairing as Macbeth's speech?
2. In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner makes use of the stream of consciousness technique, which was also used earlier in the 1920s in such experimental works as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. He further complicates matters for the reader by scrambling, as it were, the time frames referred to by the narrating consciousness of the opening section of the novel. How do you learn to find your way in Benjy's chapter? How many time periods are interspersed? What are some of the events Benjy is remembering? If Benjy is the "idiot" of Macbeth's speech, in what ways can he be seen, nonetheless, as both a sensitive and sentient observer of his family?
3. All of the novel's crucial events are registered in Benjy's section and are later recapitulated or expanded upon by other narrators, for Benjy is in many ways the central and most important narrating consciousness. Faulkner said of Benjy, "To that idiot, time was not a continuation, it

was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is [now] to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn't know whether he dreamed it, or saw it." What are some of the effects of the opening section upon your experience of the Compson family story? Why would Faulkner choose Benjy to introduce the reader to his story? What is Benjy's importance in a novel that is dominated by memory rather than action?

4. Which characters, if any, serve as registers of emotional and moral value? In whom do we find love, honor, loyalty, strength? Is Jason the embodiment of the opposite traits? How does Caddy's daughter, Quentin, fit into the scheme of value here? What about Mrs. Compson? Do Benjy's perceptions function as a sort of touchstone for the reader?
5. Each of the four sections has a date rather than a chapter number. Note that three of the narratives take place on three sequential days in April of 1928 though they are not presented in chronological sequence. The second of the four, Quentin's narrative, is dated June 2, 1910—the day he drowned himself at the end of his first year at Harvard. With each section the narrative voice becomes more coherent, and we finish with a fairly straightforward and traditional third-person voice. Why do you think Faulkner has chosen to present things in this way and in this order?
6. What are the reasons for Quentin's decision to drown himself? Why does Faulkner choose to have Quentin narrate his own section, even though he has been dead for nearly eighteen years? What do you see as the meaning of his dual obsession with his sister's virginity and the loss of the family honor? Why does he attempt to make, in a crucial conversation with his father, a false confession of incest? Given Quentin's state of mind at the time, what do you think of Mr. Compson's response to him?
7. For her brothers, Caddy is the traumatic absence at the center of their experience. For Faulkner, Caddy was the image around which the novel took shape; she was "the sister which I did not have and the daughter which I was to lose," and it all began with the image of "the muddy bottom of a little doomed girl climbing a blooming pear tree in April to look in the window" at the funeral of her grandmother. While Caddy is presented as maternal, erotic, promiscuous, and imperious, she is also unknowable, given that she can only be glimpsed in the rather unreliable narrations of her brothers. Does she appeal to you as a sympathetic character? Is Caddy's fall the cause of the family tragedy or is she just another child-victim of the abdication of parental

- responsibility? Why do Caddy's brothers each have a narrative voice, while Caddy has none?
8. Jason is an embittered young man with a nasty sense of humor. Nonetheless, he is the querulous Mrs. Compson's favorite, the son upon whom she depends. He imagines people saying of his siblings, "one of them is crazy and another one drowned himself and the other one was turned out into the street by her husband. . . ." Do you think he succeeds in preserving the appearance of normality that is so important to him? How would you describe Jason's mode of thinking and reasoning? What are some of his activities and preoccupations? What is the effect of his narrative's mood and voice, following as it does upon Benjy's and Quentin's?
  9. What role does Dilsey play in the novel? Why does the narrative of the fourth and final section focus upon her, and why do you think Faulkner chose not to give her a narrative in her own voice? What is the significance of the black community and its church in the final section? The novel ends on Easter Sunday; how does this turn to an overtly Christian context work for you as a reader?
  10. The novel takes into its scope a number of serious philosophical and psychological issues—the meaning of time, for instance, and the psychopathology of the family—but it does not devote itself to a cohesive exploration of any of them. What, then, would you say this novel is "about"? Think again about the *Macbeth* quotation—life is "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing." What does Faulkner's tale, told four times, signify? What does it achieve? In what ways does the novel focus our attention upon the problem of representing consciousness realistically within the novel form? How does *The Sound and the Fury* change or affect your experience as a reader of novels?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Sound and the Fury*]

# William Faulkner

## COMPARATIVE READING GROUP GUIDE

### COMPARING *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*, *AS I LAY DYING*, AND *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

11. In all three of these novels the family is central to structure, plot, and meaning. It is the source of grief and identity as well as the locus of all individual psychic struggles. Do you see all of Faulkner's characters eternally trapped within their familial roles? How do the families differ in each of these novels, and how are they similar? How do the particularly important symbolic roles of the mother and the father differ from book to book?
12. Faulkner tries to make himself disappear in these works. Instead of using the traditional third-person narrator that most readers associate with the author, he directs a chorus of voices that intertwine, complement, and contradict one another. As readers, we must rely on what we learn from the characters themselves as to time, place, plot, and matters of cause and effect. Why do you think Faulkner prefers to make his characters speak "directly" to his readers? How does this technique affect your ability to believe in the worlds that exist in these novels? How would more direct intervention by an authorial voice change your experience?
13. In which of these works do you think Faulkner's style, his use of language, and his formal innovations are most finely tuned, most powerfully worked out? In which do you feel that his stylistic quirks are most annoying, most distracting?
14. All of these novels question our assumptions about time as regular, linear, sequential, predictable. What are some of the ways in which time is disrupted in these works?
15. The Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) plays a central role in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) as well. Does Faulkner want readers of *Absalom, Absalom!* to assume that Quentin's involvement in the Sutpen story is one of the reasons for his suicide, which takes place three

- months later in *The Sound and the Fury*? Do you see a seamless characterization of Quentin and Mr. Compson in the two books?
16. Faulkner is interested in the causes and effects of extreme psychological pressures, as we see in Quentin and Benjy Compson, Henry and Thomas Sutpen, Rosa Coldfield, Vardaman and Darl Bundren, and many other characters in these novels. What are some of the forms that psychopathology takes in Faulkner's world?
  17. Faulkner has often been accused of an extremely misogynistic representation of women. Consider Caddy Compson, Dilsey, Dewey Dell and Addie Bundren, Judith Sutpen, Rosa Coldfield, the wife of Charles St. Valery Bon, and other female characters in these three novels. How would you describe Faulkner's notion of the feminine, as compared with the masculine? Do you agree with the critic Irving Howe that "Faulkner's inability to achieve moral depth in his portraiture of young women clearly indicates a major failing as a novelist"?
  18. Is the work of Faulkner necessarily different in its impact depending upon whether one is from the North or the South, whether one is black or white?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main William Faulkner section]

# *The Charming Quirks of Others*

Alexander McCall Smith

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview Alexander McCall Smith was asked which fictional character he most identifies with, and he answered, “Isabel Dalhousie and I agree on just about everything. She seems to think as I do.” Which one of his characters do you most identify or agree with?
2. One of the early reviews called *The Charming Quirks of Others* “a powerful demonstration of McCall Smith’s ability to dramatize the ways everyday situations spawn the ethical dilemmas that keep philosophers in business.” (*Kirkus Reviews*) Describe some of the dilemmas in the book and discuss what you would have done in Isabel’s or another character’s place.
3. The novel opens with Isabel and Guy Peploe discussing gossip. How does this conversation allude to later events in the book? What is your feeling on gossip? Is it harmless and/or pointless? Does it have real purpose in social settings?
4. Do you agree with Isabel when she considers that “people were only too ready to believe things that were manifestly untrue” and that people are happy to hear others cast in a negative light? Do you think we all do this despite our better judgment?
5. The author discusses the dilemma of a working mother in this novel. “I could spend all my time with Charlie, which is what I would love to do. But would I be any happier? And would it make any difference to Charlie?” Discuss this, and how child rearing is extremely important for a mother, but so is working and feeling responsible for something outside the home. If you have children, did you go to work while

- raising them or did you stay home, and how did you come to your decision to do one or the other?
6. Isabel often acts on her intuition; sometimes it leads her to the truth, sometimes not. What is your opinion about acting with your gut, or on simple intuition? Discuss some situations where your intuition was correct, and some where it was not.
  7. Discuss the theme of forgiveness in the novel.
  8. What do you think the author is saying about different kinds of love in the novel (loving your children, your partner, your friends, all of humanity)?
  9. What do you make of the title? If we look at others faults as charming or positive, would it be easier to accept or put up with them? And if we openly accepted our own faults, would it be easier to accept others faults? What does Isabel think?
  10. Isabel is jealous of Jamie and his friendship with a fellow musician. How does she overcome her jealousy? What are other ways people overcome jealousy? Are there situations where one should simply accept your jealousy and address it head on?
  11. Discuss the importance of songs and poetry in this and in all of Alexander McCall Smith's novels. What role does music and poetry play in the novels and in life?
  12. Who are some of the poets that Alexander McCall Smith often quotes in his novels, especially in this Isabel Dalhousie series? Who are some of your favorite poets?
  13. Another important cultural element in Isabel's life, in addition to music and poetry, is art. Various artists are mentioned and this novel focuses on a particular piece of art by Scottish painter Raeburn. How is art tied to Isabel's life and this novel? Why is Isabel generous with this particular painting of her ancestor?
  14. How do art and music help Isabel deal with the ethical issues that pop up in the novels and with the detective work she does "helping" others?
  15. Isabel wishes for happiness for Harold Slade, whom she really does not care for and who is a bit of a bully, and she states, "Although it's harder to love, it's always better." Do you agree? Discuss a situation you've been in where this worked for you.
  16. Do you agree with the final phrase of the book, "Loving anything with all your heart always brings about understanding, in time." How does this sentence epitomize or summarize the novel for you?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *The Charming Quirks of Others*]

# *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*

Alexander McCall Smith

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. *The New York Times Book Review* has noted, “As always in Alexander McCall Smith’s gentle celebrations of life in this arid patch of southern Africa, the best moments are the smallest.” Discuss how this is true. Does your reading of these novels inspire you to appreciate the small, precious moments and things in your own life?
2. Why is Precious Ramotswe so attached to her little white van, even after it is long gone? What is it about certain physical objects for us? Do you have one particular object, large or small, that you are especially attached to? Why? Is it the object itself that you cling to or is it to the memories that you have associated with it?
3. Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is always referred to as “that fine man” or “that excellent man, proprietor of Tloweng Road Speedy Motors.” What makes him fine and excellent? And why is his job always attached to his name, even by his wife?
4. How much importance do you put on efficiency? Why does Mma Ramotswe think that, “if efficiency were the only value in this life, then we would be content to eat bland, but nutritious food everyday.” What other values are equally, if not more important in this life—in work and in play?
5. It is very clear, over the course of the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series, that “Charlie (Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni’s apprentice) did not follow the old Botswana ways.” What does this mean? What are the “old Botswana ways”? Who does follow them?
6. In *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*, Mma Ramotswe says, “Each of us had something that made it easier to continue in a world that sometimes, just sometimes, was not as we might wish it to be.” What is that

- you need to get your mind off anxieties or problems in your own life—“a drive in the country . . . a quiet cup of tea”? Why do we all need these small pleasures to release us from looming problems and issues?
7. Mma Ramotswe remembers witnessing with her father a group of birds being attacked by a snake, and he encouraged her not to do anything. Why? What lesson was he teaching young Precious?
  8. Mma Ramotswe periodically quotes from Clovis Anderson’s *The Principles of Private Detection*. One she particularly believes in and repeats is “the more you listen, the more you learn.” What is it about this book and the pithy sayings it offers that appeals to Mma Ramotswe in moments of indecision? Do you have a book you turn to when you need reassurance or pleasure?
  9. There is much talk of beef stews and pumpkins and cake in these novels, and in one instance in *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*, Mma Ramotswe thinks about dinner and says, “Life was very full.” Describe some of the dishes you remember in the novel.
  10. Do you think Mma Ramotswe makes the right decision to turn to Mpho’s mother when the little boy shares the secret of the crime he committed? What would you have done in this predicament?
  11. Discussions about the differences between men and women come up quite a bit in the novels, and in this novel in particular. What are some of the stereotypes that various characters discuss? Do you agree with them?
  12. Mma Ramotswe appreciates the people in her life: her husband, her assistant detective/friend, her father. “That we have the people we have in this life, rather than others, is miraculous, she thought, a miraculous gift.” Discuss the people in your life that you are most thankful for and why.
  13. Discuss how Grace Makutsi and Mma Ramotswe react differently to Charlie and his problem. Why is Grace more judgmental than her boss? Why do you think Mma Ramotswe is more successful in dealing with Charlie?
  14. Mma Ramotswe appreciates the people in her life: her husband, her assistant detective/friend, her father. “That we have the people we have in this life, rather than others, is miraculous, she thought, a miraculous gift.” Discuss the people in your life that you are most thankful for and why.
  15. *The Christian Science Monitor* has written that in the No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency novels, “Kindness is paramount.” Do you agree with this? And what do you think Alexander McCall Smith is trying to promote by writing these “kind” novels?

16. Discuss the titles of each of the chapters and the title of the book. What do these offer to the experience of reading the novel? Do you think Alexander McCall Smith has fun coming up with these titles?
17. Mma Ramotswe walks around her garden every morning and evening, noticing the flowers, trees, and birds. She also revels in the beauty of the Botswana countryside. Discuss the importance of nature in this novel.
18. Alexander McCall Smith is clearly a master wordsmith. Why do you think he chooses to use relatively simple language and plot lines in his novels? How does the language and rhythm correspond to the message of the novels? Connect this to one of the final sentences of the novel, “simple questions—and simple answers—were what we needed in life.” What is Alexander McCall Smith saying about life?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section  
for *The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party*]

# ***Corduroy Mansions***

Alexander McCall Smith

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. This book was originally published online in serialized chapters. Do you find it flows differently than other novels by Alexander McCall Smith? If so, how?
2. Alexander McCall Smith said of *Corduroy Mansions*: “These stories are character-based: what interests me is what makes the characters tick rather than intricate and potentially confusing plots.” Pick your favorite character and explain what you think makes him or her tick.
3. Freddie de la Hay is given as much personality as the humans in this story, yet his previous owner only refers to him as a social experiment. What do you think about training a dog to wear a seat belt and be a vegetarian?
4. Which of the characters do you most identify with? Is this also your favorite character?
5. Marcia seems to be manipulating William’s living situation to fit her needs. Is this because she is lonely? Does she have William’s best interest at heart?
6. Eddie is not a positive character in this story. How much of Eddie’s behavior appears to be typical of an early-twenty-something? Are William’s opinions guided too much by Marcia? What is your opinion of Eddie by the end of the book?
7. The problem of the Poussin painting garners different reactions from the characters involved with it. William sees a moral quandary in dealing with his son. Marcia doesn’t even think of the moral implications. What would you do if you were William?
8. Caroline wishes to help James discover the truth behind his proclivities, but she also wants to date him. Do you think Caroline is more self-interested or more altruistic?

9. As Jenny leaves Basil Wickramasinghe's apartment, she overhears his visitor asking if Jenny is "a sympathiser." What could this mean? Do you think he is involved in an illegal activity?
10. Jenny works for the odious Oedipus Snark. The MP clearly does not treat her well, nor any other woman with whom he interacts. Why do you think Jenny works for him? Why does Barbara Ragg stay with Snark?
11. Oedipus seems a little *too* interested in Barbara's new book. What would he do with the tale of a Yeti? How would public reaction to the announcement of finding a Yeti help his career?
12. Berthea Snark is writing a distinctly non-hagiography of her son. What does this say about her as a mother? Why do you think she's doing it? Why do you think she named him Oedipus?
13. Terence Moongrove is a bit absentminded. Does his sister, Berthea, overreact to his eccentricities, or is she simply protecting him? What could they learn from each other?
14. Barbara Ragg's new beau seems too good to be true. Do you trust Hugh? How is your opinion of Hugh influenced by Barbara's previous poor instincts with men?
15. Many of the characters in this book have feelings of loneliness. Name one and explain what his or her loneliness has driven that person to do. Who finds a way to dispel the feeling, and how is it done?

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *Corduroy Mansions*]

# *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

Stieg Larsson

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Who do you consider the novel's protagonist, Lisbeth or Mikael? Why?
2. What point was Larsson trying to make with the themes running through this novel? How do issues such as violence against women, journalistic integrity, and more general notions of trust tie in with each other throughout the book?
3. What function do the sex-crime statistics on each section's title page serve?
4. Reread the passage from Mikael's book. What is its significance in terms of the plot?
5. Henrik tells Mikael, "If there's one thing I've learned, it's never engage in a fight you're sure to lose. On the other hand, never let anyone who has insulted you get away with it. Bide your time and strike back when you're in a position of strength—even if you no longer need to strike back." Over the course of the novel, who puts this advice to the best use? How, and why?
6. How does the involvement of several Vanger brothers with Swedish fascist groups cloud Mikael's investigation into Harriet's disappearance? What role does Harald play?
7. Why does Henrik become an investor in *Millennium*? Does his plan succeed?
8. Discuss the character of Lisbeth. Some think she is a "perfect victim," others find her intimidating, and Mikael wonders if she has Asperger's, but the reader is allowed to see exactly how her mind works. How do you see her? How do you think she sees herself?
9. What do you think about the way Lisbeth turns the tables on Bjurman? Is it admirable, or a sign that she's unstable?

10. Lisbeth says her new tattoo is “a reminder.” Of what?
11. Several times in the novel, Mikael’s journalistic ethics are challenged. Do you consider him to be ethical? In your opinion, is anyone in the novel truly honorable? If so, why?
12. After reserving judgment for most of his investigation, Mikael determines that Harriet was, in fact, murdered and that he’s hunting for a killer. What prompts this decision? How does this affect the rest of his investigation?
13. Discuss the role of parents in the novel. Who is a good parent, and why? How might Harriet’s story have changed if her mother had behaved differently? What about Lisbeth’s? Is Mikael a good father?
14. Blackmail is used several times in the novel, for different ends. Who uses it most effectively, and why?
15. Mikael tells Lisbeth that to him, friendship requires mutual respect and trust. By those standards, who in this novel is a good friend? Is Mikael? What about Anita?
16. Discuss Henrik’s request that Mikael never publish the Vanger story. Is it a reasonable request? Does Mikael’s acquiescence change your opinion of him? Do Lisbeth’s demands mitigate his ethical breach?
17. What ultimately drives Lisbeth to take action against Wennerström on her own? Does she go too far?
18. Reread Mikael’s statement about the media’s responsibility. Can you think of a situation in the American media that is analogous to the Wennerström affair?
19. Discuss the ending. Was it satisfying to you? Why or why not?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stieg Larsson, who lived in Sweden, was the editor in chief of the magazine *Expo* and a leading expert on antidemocratic right-wing extremist and Nazi organizations. He died in 2004, shortly after delivering the manuscripts for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and the third novel in the series.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*]

# *One Day*

David Nicholls

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. To what extent do Emma's thoughts and assumptions about Dexter and Dexter's sketch of Emma rely on facile stereotypes they each harbor? In what ways do they embody more measured reflections? How accurate are their assessments? Does their initial encounter make the reader more sympathetic to one of the characters? In what ways might the reader's gender, experiences, and prejudices affect their feelings about Emma and Dexter?
2. What determines the path Emma follows in her post-university years? In addition to being a wonderfully comic interlude, how does her stint with Sledgehammer Theater Cooperative enrich the portrait of the time in which the novel is set? Is Emma's explanation of why she ended up working at the tacky Mexican restaurant—"there was a recession on and people were clinging to their jobs. . . . the government had ended student grants"—honest? Have circumstances and "the city defeated her" or is she responsible for her own plight?
3. In his unsent letter Dexter writes, "I think you're scared of being happy. . . . that you actually get a kick out of being disappointed and under-achieving, because it's easier. . . ." How do Dexter's insights into Emma compare to her own? Is he more perceptive about her than he is about himself? Does Emma underestimate her talents and potential? Despite its carefree tone, does Dexter's letter betray certain doubts or misgivings about himself?
4. Does Dexter's meteoric rise in television change the fundamental dynamics between Dexter and Emma? What aspects of their relationship remain unchanged? What influences the things they say and, perhaps more importantly, what they don't say, during their afternoon on Primrose Hill? Were you surprised to find them vacationing together

- in Greece the following year? Who is more aware of—and affected by—the sexual tensions and temptations they both experience?
5. Is Dexter's idle vision of his future realized during "the late twenties" (chapters six through nine)? In what ways is the actuality of his life an ironic comment on his expectations? Does he act in ways that undermine his happiness? Discuss, for example, his visit to his parents; his humiliating debut on *Late-Night Lock-In*; his hostile, crude manner at dinner with Emma; and his glib excuses and rationalizations for his actions. What glimpses are there of his more vulnerable side? Do they make him a more appealing character?
  6. "At twenty-seven, Emma wonders if she is getting old." Do Emma's feelings about both the satisfactions and regrets that come with being "grown-up" ring true? What explains Emma's relationship with Ian? Is she willingly deceiving herself (and Ian)? Despite her impatience with him and his desperately unfunny comedy routines, does she have genuine feelings for Ian?
  7. At the disastrous dinner on July 15, 1995, Emma declares, "Dexter, I love you so much. . . . and I probably always will. I just don't like you any more. I'm sorry." Does Dexter recognize why his behavior leads to this break? Does he care? Could the dinner have ended differently?
  8. Compare Dexter's reaction to his agent's report on how he is perceived and Emma's reaction to her unsuccessful interview with a publishing executive. What do they reveal how each of them approaches life's ups-and-downs?
  9. "Now that she was actually involved in an affair—its paraphernalia of secret looks, hands held under tables, fondles in the stationery cupboard—she was surprised at how familiar it all was, and what a potent emotion lust could be, when combined with guilt and self-loathing." What does the affair with Mr. Godalming reflect about Emma's state of mind as she approaches her mid-thirties? What satisfaction does it give her? To what extent is she influenced by the romantic notions and expectations society imposes on unmarried women?
  10. When he meets Sylvie Cope, Dexter thinks, "And yet, despite all this, the downturn in professional fortunes, he is fine now, because he has fallen in love with Sylvie, beautiful Sylvie. . . ." In what ways does the affair open Dexter's eyes to new possibilities and a different way of life? What flaws in their relationship does he fail to grasp fully and why? What consequences does this have on the course of their marriage?
  11. What is the significance of the wedding Dexter and Emma attend? What do they learn about themselves and each other that surprises, pleases, or unsettles them? What do their conversations represent in

- terms of their personal development as well as the evolution of their friendship?
12. What does the rendezvous in Paris share with Emma and Dexter's trip to Greece nine years earlier? What impact does Emma's success as an author and Dexter's failed marriage have on the "balance of power" between them? Discuss the factors—including age, their individual circumstances, and the length of their friendship—that contribute to their willingness to be more honest and open with each other.
  13. Do Emma's musings about where life has taken her resonate with you? What do Emma and Dexter at forty have in common with the people they were on graduation night? How does Nicholls simultaneously capture the ways people change and the persistence of individual characteristics through the passage of time?
  14. What demands does the unusual structure of *One Day* make on the reader? Discuss how the yearlong gaps between chapters; the focus on sometimes-mundane happenings rather than "big" events; and the alternation between Dexter's and Emma's journeys within each section increase your curiosity and engagement with the novel.
  15. Callum is casually mentioned as mutual friend in Chapter 2 and chapter 6 and Ian makes his first appearance simply as Emma's co-worker in Chapter 3; both will become significant figures. What other secondary characters become more important than the protagonists—and the reader—anticipate? What do these "surprises" reflect about the way lives unfold?
  16. What does *One Day* share with traditional boy-meets-girl stories you are familiar with from books or movies? What does it suggest about the relationship between love and happiness?
  17. How well does the novel capture society and culture over the twenty-year period? What specific details (references to books, television programs, political events, etc.) help bring the different periods to life? In what ways do the characters embody the qualities, good and bad, of their generation?
  18. Throughout the novel, Dexter and Emma withhold or suppress their feeling for one another. Is one of them more guilty of this and, if so, why? What role does fate (e.g. Dexter's unsent letter, missed phone calls, etc.), along with the characters' assumptions and misinterpretations, play in the plot? The final section of the novel is introduced with a quote from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and in the acknowledgments Nicholls says, "A debt is owed to Thomas Hardy." If you are familiar with *Tess* or Hardy's other novels, discuss how his works might have influenced Nicholls in writing *One Day*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Nicholls is the author of the novels *Starter for Ten* and *The Understudy*. He wrote an adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* for the BBC and has written several other screenplays.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for *One Day*]

# *I Don't Know How She Does It*

Allison Pearson

## **READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. At 1:37 a.m. on an average night, Kate Reddy has just returned from a business trip to Sweden and is banging store-bought mince pies with a rolling pin so that they'll look homemade for her daughter's school Christmas party. She then goes out to the trash bins to hide the pie boxes so that Paula, her nanny, won't tell the other nannies that Kate cheated on the pies. She cleans up the kitchen and then takes a long time brushing her teeth so that her husband will fall asleep before she comes to bed (if they don't have sex, she can skip a shower in the morning and possibly have time for Christmas shopping on the way to work). How does this sequence, along with the "Must Remember" list that follows it, work to set the comic pacing for the novel? How successful is the opening chapter in getting the reader to sympathize with Kate and her daily challenges?
2. When Kate arrives late for work, she needs to come up with what her friend Debra calls "a Man's Excuse"—something that does not have to do with sick children or an absent nanny, preferably something involving car repairs or traffic. Is Pearson accurate in describing a business world that has little patience for the out-of-office responsibilities of working mothers?
3. Kate has two good friends, Debra and Candy, with whom she exchanges comical e-mail messages. What do these messages convey about the ways women console, support, and entertain one another? What do they convey about the subculture of office life?
4. "There is an uneasy standoff between the two kinds of mother which sometimes makes it hard for us to talk to each other. I suspect that the nonworking mother looks at the working mother with envy and fear because she thinks that the working mum has got away with it, and the working mum looks back with fear and envy because she knows

that she has not. In order to keep going in either role, you have to convince yourself that the alternative is bad.” How do Kate’s vexed interactions with local “Mother Superiors” reflect the truth of this statement?

5. Pearson has said of her book, “It’s a tragedy at the pace of comedy.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree?
6. Musing on her relationship with her unreliable father, Kate thinks, “Daughters striving to be the son their father never had, daughters excelling at school to win the attention of a man who was always looking the other way, daughters like poor mad Antigone pursuing the elusive ghost of paternal love. So why do all us Daddy’s Girls go and work in places so hostile to women? Because the only real comfort we get is from male approval.” Is this an adequate explanation for Kate’s ambition? How did her family’s instability and poverty shape her psyche?
7. How is the romantic distraction posed by Jack Abelhammer important in further illuminating Kate’s position? Is the outcome a forgone conclusion, or did she just make the right choice for herself?
8. “If you give Chris Bunce five million years he may realize that it’s possible to work alongside women without needing to take their clothes off.” Is Pearson right in suggesting that many workplaces tolerate the sexism of some male workers? How satisfying is Kate and Momo’s revenge upon Bunce?
9. Why has Pearson chosen to include the character of Jill Cooper-Clark, who dies of cancer at age forty-seven? Why is Jill’s memo to her husband (“Your Family: How It Works!”) so poignant? What has Jill’s friendship meant to Kate? How does it shift the novel’s comic events to a more serious context?
10. In an essay in a British newspaper, Pearson remarked, “Children may behave like liberals—they believe they should be allowed to do what they want—but what they really like, what makes them feel safe, is essentially conservative. . . . My ideals told me that men and women could both go out to work and be truly equal. My children told me something more complicated, something I really didn’t want to hear. Their need for me was like the need for water or light: it had a devastating simplicity to it. It didn’t fit any of the theories about what women were supposed to do with their lives, theories written in books often by women who never had children.” How does this statement resonate with the experiences detailed in the novel? Is this a novel that is too close to reality for comfort because Pearson tells us things we know but don’t want to acknowledge?

11. Which is a greater strain on Kate and Richard's marriage—the children, Kate's job, and her frequent travel, or her romantic interest in her American client? What does Pearson mean when she writes, "Any woman with a baby has already committed a kind of adultery"? How does the novel underscore the ways in which the arrival of children irrevocably changes the relationship between husband and wife?
12. A recent newspaper article noted that of *Fortune* magazine's fifty most powerful women, one-third have husbands who stay at home with the children. Would Kate's problems be solved if her husband left his failing architecture firm to become a stay-at-home father? Does the novel suggest that Kate needs to let him reassume the primary economic role if their marriage is to survive? Does Pearson suggest that people are still offended by the idea of a woman who makes more money than her husband? Why?
13. Some of the novel's funniest moments have to do with clothing, as when, in her haste, Kate has overlooked some detail of her dress. She gives a major presentation wearing a red bra under a sheer white blouse; she pulls on black tights in the train on the way to Jill's funeral without realizing that they have Playboy bunnies up the backs of the legs. How does Pearson use these moments to show how important details of dress are in the working world, and how wrong things can go when women don't have butlers or wives to look after their clothing?
14. With their aggressive moral superiority, the women Kate calls "Mother Superiors" seem to believe they have made the right choice in staying home with their children. When Kate is tried at the imaginary "Court of Motherhood," why is she always on the defensive? Is this internalized "court of motherhood" something that plagues all mothers, not only those who work outside the home?
15. As Kate herself says, "Giving up work is like becoming a missing person. One of the domestic Disappeared. The post offices of Britain should be full of Wanted posters for women who lost themselves in their children and were never seen again." Is Kate's decision to leave her job a disappointment or a relief?
16. The book ends with the question "What else?" at the end of another "Must Remember" list. Is Kate's life qualitatively better since she left her job and moved away from London? With the final page, does Pearson imply that Kate's life is essentially un-changed, or that it is about to take off in an exciting direction in which she will dictate the terms of her working life?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Pearson graduated from Cambridge University. She taught in an inner-city London school, worked in a mental hospital, and sold advertising before becoming a journalist. Pearson was named Critic of the Year and Interviewer of the Year in the British Press Awards, is a weekly columnist in the London *Evening Standard* and is a member of the BBC's *Newsnight Review* panel. She lives in London with her husband, the *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane, and their two children.

[Click [here](#) to return to the main section for  
*I Don't Know How She Does It*]