

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Reader,



Thank you so much for choosing *The Most Fun We Ever Had* for your book club. I'm thrilled to be sharing this novel with you, and I very much hope you enjoy the time you spend with the Sorenson family.

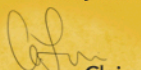
This is a novel about love: love in its many forms—marital, familial, sexual, platonic—and its many degrees—passionate, unrequited, reluctant. My goal was to write a family novel—not a dysfunctional family novel (though the Sorensons have their own fair share of dysfunction!), but the story of a family bound by good and genuine love.

The story on these pages begins and ends with David and Marilyn Sorenson kissing beneath a ginkgo tree; therein we weave between the past and the present to explore the evolution of a single family. *The Most Fun We Ever Had* is the decades-long chronicling of a madly-in-love married couple, their four complicated daughters, and an orphaned teenage boy who enters the fray with the power to unravel everything. Over the course of the novel, we follow the family through some of the loudest and quietest moments of their lives—births and deaths and everything in between. In the present arc, we see a family during a particularly fraught year, and in the past arc, we explore how that family came to be, and how all of the individual parts comprise a haphazard whole. For me, the heart of this book has always been David and Marilyn—their marriage is the life-giving tree of the family, a blessing and a curse to all who enter its orbit; their love not only creates their daughters, but defines who the daughters are and how they interact with the world, with men, and with each other.

One of the greatest pleasures for me as a reader is the feeling of accompaniment, of being recognized—the sensation of “Oh! I'm not alone!”—and I write with the hopes of connecting with others. It is my sincerest hope that you find that feeling somewhere within the pages of *The Most Fun We Ever Had*. Whether you relate to David's crazy love for his wife, or to Grace's reluctance to plunge into adulthood, or to Wendy's tendency to say the first thing (and usually the worst thing) that comes to her mind, I hope that you experience at least a moment of recognition, of feeling accompanied in the world.

Thank you again for giving this book your time. I very much hope you enjoy it.

All my best,



Claire



discussion questions

1. Ginkgo leaves and trees show up many times during the course of the novel—during the opening scene and when David and Marilyn first fall in love, just to name a couple. How do ginkgoes function as a symbol in the book? What do they represent?
2. Who is your favorite character in the novel? Who are you most similar to?
3. By the end of *The Most Fun We Ever Had*, we've seen decades of David and Marilyn's marriage unfold through many ups and downs. What do you see as the key to their successful and enduring marriage?
4. Do you think the way Wendy surprised Violet with Jonah was ethical? Do you think Violet's reaction was warranted?
5. Were you surprised by Violet's secret that gets revealed toward the end of the novel? How would you react if you were Wendy?
6. Many readers share that reading *The Most Fun We Ever Had* was an emotional experience. What was the most emotional scene for you to read? Why?
7. The narration switches between the perspective of each family member throughout the course of the book. What did this style add to the novel as a whole? How would the book be different if the author only focused on one character?
8. The book starts and ends with Marilyn's perspective. Why do you think the author made this choice?
9. In what ways is the Sorenson family like your own family?
10. What did you think about the book's ending? What do you think will happen to the Sorenson family after the book ends?
11. What other books, movies, and TV shows does this novel remind you of?



A CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE LOMBARDO

How long did it take you to write *The Most Fun We Ever Had*? What did you enjoy the most about the process? What did you enjoy the least?

Including editorial work, this novel took me about five years to write, and I have to confess that I had a lot of fun (pun unintended) working on it. I feel very lucky that I get to do the thing I love as a job—I know most people don't get to say that. I derive a lot of energy from writing fiction, and I find a real joy in the process of writing, and it is, for the most part, smooth sailing, so long as I have a rough idea in my head of what I'm doing. I don't always know where scenes are going—in fact, I often have no idea—but I'm content to just exist in the room with the characters and see what happens.

The least enjoyable parts were the times of deep uncertainty, particularly in terms of structure—the equivalent of sitting in front of a math problem and not having the slightest idea of how to start working on it (and sometimes knowing that even if you solve it, you might have to scrap the whole project). That's how I felt about the structure of this novel at times—I'd be sitting before an eight-hundred-page Word document, or three hundred colored Post-It notes, each representing a scene, and become utterly overwhelmed by how to begin. But that pure terror would eventually subside and the process would become fun again.



This is your debut novel. What has been the most surprising part of the publishing process so far?

The element that has yet to stop astounding me is how many people are advocating for this book, to the point where something that's historically a pretty lonesome gig—writing, that is—becomes a group effort in a really lovely way. And that's one of the most wonderful things about the publishing industry I've encountered thus far—that at its core, it's comprised of people who love words and books (the best kind of people, in my opinion!).

Which character or plot point came to you first?

I started writing this as a short story about Violet—a woman whose picture-perfect life is upended by a secret resurfacing. But I quickly became more interested in the satellite characters in her life—namely, her aggressively contented parents—and from there the story just kept getting bigger and bigger. Wendy and Violet's contentious relationship was always a part of the story as well. And once I had the two of them, it seemed kind of natural to throw in two more sisters, because it's a dynamic I know well.

**"I don't care how gorgeous your prose is if you aren't writing
WITH EMPATHY AND WITH HEART."**

You're one of four sisters and grew up in the Chicago area. How much did you draw on your own life experiences to write this book?

Plot-wise, I drew almost nothing at all from my own experience (or that of my family). But much of the nuance of this story—the relationship dynamics, the tensions, the unspoken rivalries and affections—certainly comes in part from my experience growing up in a large family. I'm the youngest of five kids—I have a brother, too—and I've always been a pretty intense observer, so to some degree I've been inadvertently researching this novel for my whole life!

I was also an avid babysitter as a teenager (and a nanny in my twenties), and that experience provided additional inspiration in terms of sibling interactions, the hilarity of child dialogue, and the weird nuances of domestic life.

There are a lot of great Midwestern novels, but I would argue not enough. What's unique about writing a book set in the Midwest? What makes a Midwestern novel different?

The Midwest is such a unique landscape, and there's so much to mine therein—the isolation (relative to the East Coast, certainly) and the expansiveness, the natural landscape (from the lakes to the trees to the . . . I'll stop before I accidentally write a folk song) and the dramatic delineation of the seasons. There are also the particular sensibilities that one associates with Midwestern inhabitants—friendliness, sure, and modesty, but also passive aggression, and I had fun playing with these preconceived notions when writing scenes with the Sorensens, all of whom are, like me, lifelong Midwesterners. You learn a lot about mining story from what *isn't* being said when you grow up in the Midwest, and about how to infer things based on tone, and what it means when someone says “everything's fine.” (Spoiler: everything is usually *not* fine.)

I have a lot of love for the Midwest, though, and I miss it when I'm away from it. I'll yell at you about how great Iowa City is until I'm laryngitic.

And as an aside, some of my favorite Midwestern novels: *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *Love and Shame and Love* by Peter Orner, Jane Smiley's *Last Hundred Years* trilogy, Sue Miller's *Family Pictures*, Lorrie Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs*. I could go on, but that's just off the top of my head.

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

That nobody is quite who they appear to be? That our parents may not be actively trying to ruin our lives? That you'll rarely regret choosing to be kind? Some combination of those things?

Honestly, I hope that the biggest universal takeaway from this book is that comedy and tragedy are constant companions. That almost no moments in an average human life are singularly happy or sad—it's always a mix of the two, or one immediately followed by the other. That's something I hope I rendered in this novel—the actual, true human experience, that sometimes you feel like garbage during moments that are supposed to be unequivocally happy, or start cracking up right in the middle of something awful. It's all on a kind of continuum, and that's something I'm really interested in exploring in fiction and just as a person in the world.

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Which was the hardest character or scene to get right?

I wanted to strike a particular balance with Wendy—she's a walking contradiction to some degree, the novel's prickliest character but also, at times, its most expansively loving. And in this way, Wendy is a representation of all of us—the multitudes we contain, the conflicting emotions and opinions we experience, the battles we fight internally about whether or not to take the high road. Wendy was the most difficult to write at times, but also (again, pun unintended) the most fun, because she has no filter, and the circumstances of her life have rendered her brutally honest. This is a far cry from my own reserved Midwestern temperament, so it was a total delight to inhabit the mind of a character who says whatever she wants, fallout be damned.

I'm thinking of one scene with Wendy and Jonah, but it's toward the end of the book and might give away plot points, so I'll just say that generally the hardest scenes to write were the ones—like I mentioned above—that have to hit a really specific note somewhere between comedy and tragedy, and between irony and sincerity. To depict true, genuine love or loss without falling into melodramatic territory is a tricky thing. One way I try to approach finding that sweet spot is with humor, or non sequitur, or with my own earnestness—I think if the writer is genuinely experiencing life alongside her characters, her own emotions can't help but bleed a little onto the page.

If you were leading a book club discussion of *Most Fun*, what would be the first question you asked?

Maybe, "Which one are you?" That's been a delightful game to play with everyone I've talked to who's read the book. There's a big existential difference between being a Wendy and being a Violet . . .

Who are your favorite families in fiction?

Oh, there are so many! Bernadette Fox & co. in *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*. The fabulously unruly Goldman family in *Brother of the More Famous Jack*. The Keanes in Alice McDermott's *After This*. The three generations in *Middlesex*, which I mentioned above. The Bridge family in *Mr. Bridge* and *Mrs. Bridge*—they're not especially likable, but lord are they well-rendered.

Which authors or books influence your work the most?

I love authors who have a knack for the aforementioned balance between levity and gravitas—the understanding that nothing is simply funny or simply tragic, that everything is some combination of the two. And this goes back to Shakespeare, Chekhov, Saul Bellow. And you see it now with contemporary writers like Lydia Davis or Lorrie Moore or Etgar Keret.

Empathetic fiction—that's always at the forefront for me. I don't care how gorgeous your prose is if you aren't writing with empathy and with heart. Certain books I had to avoid when I was working on *The Most Fun We Ever Had* because I worried I'd fall into the despair of "I'll never be able to do it as well!" Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*. Any of Maria Semple's novels. Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*. Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*. And one thing that all of these works have in common is deep and vibrant characterization. I love character-driven fiction, stories that make me feel like I'm in the company of actual people, people who I feel for and empathize with and who I'm sad to leave when I have to put the book down.

A VERY SORENSON COCKTAIL RECIPE

There's plenty of drinking in *The Most Fun We Ever Had*, so we had to create a themed cocktail! Every ingredient represents one of the sisters, and it's quite refreshing (with a touch of fizzy drama).



THE YELLOW GINKGO

1 oz gin

(This represents Wendy,
a strong base that packs a punch)

2 oz vinho verde

(A touch of fanciness for Violet)

3 oz lemonade

(Liza, adding some sweetness to
make everyone's lives easier)

1 lemon slice for garnish

(Of course the garnish represents
Grace, poor Grace...)

Fill a cocktail glass with ice cubes. Add the gin, vinho verde, and lemonade and give it a good stir. Squeeze a bit of juice from the lemon slice into the glass, and add it as a garnish to your glass.

THE MOST FUN PLAYLIST



Claire created this playlist to keep you company while you read. It's filled with songs about Chicago, family, love, and so much more. Below are some songs featured on the playlist, but head to [Spotify](#) to hear more!

I Am Trying to Break Your Heart • Wilco

Sweet Home Chicago • Buddy Guy, Junior Wells

Summer Noon • Tweedy

Dance Little Sister • The Rolling Stones

Family Affair • Sly & The Family Stone

Tennessee Waltz • Sam Cooke

Old Man • Neil Young

You Are My Face • Wilco

I'll Be Around • Yo La Tengo

Sweet Thing • Van Morrison

You've Got a Friend • James Taylor

Kooks • David Bowie

Lake Shore Drive • Aliotta Haynes Jeremiah

You Make Loving Fun • Fleetwood Mac

Picture In A Frame • Tom Waits

The Obvious Child • Paul Simon

Strangers • The Kinks

