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BOOK CLUB KIT



Dear Readers,

I first thought about writing this book when I lived in a quiet village surrounded by hills. At the end of each summer, controlled fires were set in the surrounding woods and farmland. Down in the valley, we mothers could smell the burning and see the flames as we stood together, waiting for our children to finish school. But the fires were never discussed and as I waited each afternoon I began to think about a protagonist who also wondered about the fires and about all the things that we see and never speak about.

That protagonist became Sunday Forrester, and the fires became Vita, Rollo, and the King, who possess the same qualities of both beauty and menace. I wrote Sunday as a character whose autism is just one of her many distinguishing qualities. Sunday sees the world in an original way and her authentic narrative is one that I could not find when I looked for it myself. I hope readers engage with Sunday and find her experience of motherhood, family, and friendships relatable; we all experience both challenges and joys within these relationships, regardless of our neurotypical or atypical status. Drawing attention to autistic traits is typically a narrative performed about us rather than by us and this, customarily, is where the process of dehumanization begins.

As a writer, it was initially challenging not to mask or prettify those parts of Sunday that make her different and, therefore, also make her vulnerable; as autistic people, we are so accustomed to either working at an unattainable conformity or to hiding ourselves. But these distinctions are the precise elements which form us, and which, most important, bring us the most profound joy. This is also true for Sunday, and I wrote not to expose or exoticize the inner life but to demonstrate the pleasure and value of this alternative experience.

Like all of us, Sunday is a product of her familial, societal, and cultural environment, and so, like us, she carries their biases and beliefs about herself and her failure to be neurotypical. The world of fiction, though, is magical enough for Sunday to be granted a narrative of change, which results in a state not only of self-acceptance but of something far more celebratory and quietly transformative. I wrote the book I could not find, and in doing so, I was able to give the protagonist the conclusion I wish for myself and for all the others who seek it, too. Thank you for reading my novel and I do hope you enjoy it.

All my best wishes,

Viktoria

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Sunday's childhood neighbours had a Larsen trap for capturing and killing birds. A trapped bird would sing on, calling friends to the cage and to their own demise. What do you think it means to have a little bird-heart?
2. The novel is set in an area of England known and named for its beautiful lakes. What effect does the lake have on Sunday and her family?
3. Sunday finds comfort and stability in her book on Italy. Why do you think Italian history and folklore function in this way for Sunday?
4. Does Sunday's narrative demonstrate benefits to being autistic? How do you think being autistic might also be challenging? Did you read anything about autism in the book which you found surprising or interesting?
5. The book explores privilege and what that means for those born with and without it. Do you think Vita, Rollo, and the King are purely beneficiaries of genetic, societal, and economic privilege? Do you think their gifts impair their development in some ways?
6. What does Sunday's interaction with the gold-painted street performer mean to you?
7. Do you think either Sunday or Dolly is any different at the end of the book than at the beginning? If so, who or what do you think influenced this change? Do you imagine Sunday's relationship with Dolly progressing after their meeting in the cafe?
8. If we returned to visit Sunday a year later, where would she be and what would she be doing?

