

ALEX KIESTER

THE
TRUTH
ABOUT

BEN

AND

JUNE

A NOVEL



BOOK CLUB
KIT

THE TRUTH ABOUT BEN AND JUNE

BEHIND THE BOOK



Throughout my entire adult life, whenever the topic of children comes up with a girlfriend of mine, I'm always struck by her sense of certainty about it. Every woman, it seems, knows whether or not she wants to be a mother. My sister, for example, has known for a long time that parenthood isn't right for her. On the other hand, each of my close friends has at least one child, and for all of them, this wasn't so much an effortful decision as a given.

Sometimes, when I compare this certainty to my own ambivalence about entering into parenthood, I feel as though something inside me is...well, *broken* isn't quite the right word, but it's not far off. *Misshapen* perhaps.

In most capacities, I know what I want from life. From the age of seven, I knew I wanted to be a writer. Sure, I entertained dreams of acting and cowgirling too, but writing was the constant. And there was no question I was going to marry my husband, one of the kindest men I've ever met. Yet, I've never known whether or not I want kids. Some days, I do. Some days, I don't. And as it's undoubtedly one of the biggest decisions a person can ever make, ambivalence about it can be terrifying.

Over the years, I've dealt with this fear like any writer would—by pawning it off onto unsuspecting fictional characters.

The Truth About Ben and June began as a simple scene between a married couple, who has just discovered the woman is pregnant, and they are deciding whether or not to have the baby. While these characters later became Ben and June, at the time, they were nothing more than the two sides of my brain. One side was of the opinion that it was heartless to bring a human into a world that we are killing off, a world that is home to hate crimes and loss and pain. The other side argued that having a child is a vote for humanity and the future, a vote for hope.

The owner of the former voice eventually evolved into June, and as I spent more and more time with her, I realized that it wasn't just climate change or the inherent pain of being alive that was preventing her—or me—from the wholehearted desire to have a child. To start, the consequences of having a baby would be dire and long-lasting to June's career. As a professional dancer, her body is her artistic medium and carrying a baby full-term would almost certainly end the career she's worked her entire life for. While this isn't my circumstance, the unknown of how parenthood would affect my beloved vocation sometimes fills me with apprehension.

On top of this, there's the toll that a pregnancy, birth, and taking care of an infant could have on a woman's mental health. I have personally struggled with anxiety for years, and because of this, I have a haunting dread that if I do have children, my postpartum experience will be plagued with heightened mental health issues. In this, June didn't share my fears, but yet again, she bore the burden of them. In giving postpartum anxiety to her, I was able to explore what a worst-case scenario of the disorder might look like and live out my fear from a distance.

Essentially, when it came to the idea of having a baby, poor June was the receptacle for all my existential dread.

As a writer, I'm often asked if I consider my craft a form of catharsis, if writing about my demons is the same as exorcising them. Unfortunately for me, the answer is no. Five years and a novel later, I still struggle with ambivalence about whether or not I want to be a parent and the fear that comes with that. Yet, while writing this novel didn't magically solve my issues, it did allow me to gain a better understanding of them.

The day I received the jacket copy from my publishing team, I read over it, excited and a little bit nervous to see how my three-hundred-plus-page book had been distilled into less than three hundred words. While I never would have guessed that these first champions of my novel could teach me something new about it, they proved me wrong. As I read the last line of the copy, which dubs the book "a heartfelt reminder that we create our own destiny," I finally recognized what I'd been circling around in the five years of writing it. Perhaps the opposite of ambivalence isn't, as I'd always assumed, certainty. Perhaps the opposite of ambivalence is choice. For me, the thought is a liberating one.

In addition to being a love story and a mystery, a portrait of marriage and parenthood, friendship and grief, it's *this* idea that's at the heart of my novel—the idea of choice. *The Truth About Ben and June* explores the complicated feeling of regret, the preoccupation with what could have been, and also the hope that comes from making choices based on grace and courage. Love isn't something that just happens to you, Ben, June, and I all found out throughout the course of this novel; it is something you get to choose every day.

Over the last five years submerged in writing it, my book has been a companion to me, an exploration, a mirror. It is both thrilling and humbling to finally hand it over and discover what it will mean to you. Thank you for reading the story of Ben and June. I hope you love it—and them—as much as I do.

Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. At the start of the novel, Ben holds June solely accountable for abandoning him and Mikey, but as he learns more about what June has been going through, he begins to recognize his own culpability as well. What were your initial perceptions of Ben and June and how did these change throughout the book?
2. Whenever Ben and June reflect on the night they first met, they both agree that the circumstances were “so unlikely, so highly fortuitous, surely, they were meant to be together.” By the end of the novel, however, it is not fate but rather an active, conscious choice that holds their marriage together. Which concept of love—fate or choice—do you find more romantic?
3. Throughout the novel, June develops a fixation on her alternate reality of Medea, the Greek sorceress portrayed in the famous Martha Graham ballet. What do you think are the harms and benefits of dwelling on what-could-have-beens? Do you have an alternate reality you ever think about?
4. On page 143, June tells Liam, “I think I might have too much empathy for [Medea]. Like, does it make me a monster to be rooting for a murderer?” Medea is a historically controversial character, both a victim and an offender. What were your thoughts on her? How accountable did you hold her for her actions?
5. Later, on page 146, Liam says to June, “Maybe that’s just what marriage is. Just constantly over- and under-estimating your partner, seeing them through your own gaze, never quite seeing them for who they really are.” Do you think it’s possible to see anyone as they truly are?
6. June spends much of the book trying to make her mother proud by pursuing a position at the Martha Graham Dance Company. Could you relate to the feeling of confusing someone else’s priorities with your own? How do you balance your dreams and decisions with those of the people around you?
7. Upon learning June is pregnant, Ben assumes she will want to take a break from her job to stay at home with the baby. It takes him reading her journal to understand that in doing this, he was reinforcing a problematic gender paradigm—one that says a man’s sole value is to provide while a woman’s sole value is to nurture. Have you had any coming-of-consciousness moments in your own life?
8. Out of the four new moms in the book—June, Kirsten, Sydney, and Reese—two of them are eventually diagnosed with postpartum anxiety and/or depression. Despite the prevalence of these disorders, it was difficult for both women to get their conditions recognized and diagnosed. Why do you think that is? What can we do as a society to better help new mothers who are suffering from a postpartum disorder?
9. Throughout the novel, June sees a woman whom she believes to be her deceased mom, but is later revealed to be Kirsten. Yet, there are two instances in which these apparitions cannot be attributed to her: the time June sees her mom disappear into their home bathroom and the time June hears her mom’s voice just as she is about to take her own life. To what do you attribute these “visits”? Why do you think the author would have wanted to leave these scenes ambiguous?
10. Throughout the novel, Ben and June both hide many truths from each other, and it is honesty which brings their marriage back to life at the end. Why do you think it was so hard for them to be truthful with each other? Do you think their week of honesty together saved their future? What do you think the two of them will do next?

Dear Reader,

As a professional dancer, music is a big part of June’s world, and I’ve created **“June’s Favorite Playlist”** in hopes that it will transport you into it. Some of the songs are inspired by direct passages in the book, like the one on page 173, which reads: “June would create choreography for one song—usually Lizzo or Beyoncé, but sometimes something more obscure—and then she’d teach it to her students.” Others are songs I imagine Michelle would have played at her famous potlucks, while the last six I chose to mimic the emotional beats of the book’s final act. I hope you enjoy this glimpse into the music behind the novel.

Happy listening!

Alex



Photo credit: Holly Cardiff Thomas

June’s Favorite Playlist

On Spotify at:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/20OIXqtEhz1sQN9SxlanO4>

1. **“Dedicated to the One I Love”**
—The Mamas & The Papas
2. **“How Long Will I Love You”**
—Joe Boden, Sam Sweeney, Ben Coleman
3. **“The Whole of the Moon—2004 Remaster”**
—The Waterboys
4. **“Pink Moon”** —Nick Drake
5. **“California”** —Joni Mitchell
6. **“Who Knows Where the Time Goes?”**
—Fairport Convention
7. **“Fire and Rain—2019 Remaster”**
—James Taylor
8. **“Into the Mystic—2013 Remaster”**
—Van Morrison
9. **“Cello Song”** —Nick Drake
10. **“These Days”** —Nico
11. **“Hold On”** —Tom Waits
12. **“Boulder to Birmingham—2003 Remaster”**
—Emmylou Harris
13. **“The Air That I Breathe—2008 Remaster”**
—The Hollies
14. **“Heroes—2017 Remaster”**
—David Bowie
15. **“Paris 1919”** —John Cale
16. **“Reelin’ in the Years”** —Steely Dan
17. **“Me and Bobby McGee”** —Janis Joplin
18. **“I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)”** —Whitney Houston
19. **“You Don’t Own Me (feat. G-Eazy)”**
—SAYGRACE, G-Eazy
20. **“Alone Again Or—2015 Remaster”**
—Love
21. **“Good as Hell”** —Lizzo
22. **“Blues Run the Game”** —Nick Drake
23. **“Mama, You Been on My Mind—Studio Outtake—1993”** —Jeff Buckley
24. **“Livin’ Thing”** —Electric Light Orchestra
25. **“Love On Top”** —Beyoncé

MICHELLE MAXWELL'S POTLUCK-INSPIRED BRUSCHETTA WITH GOAT CHEESE

12 oz cherry tomatoes, quartered
1 tbs olive oil
½ tsp salt
⅓ cup balsamic reduction
1 fresh loaf of bread, sliced, or your cracker of choice
½ cup fresh basil, chiffonaded
8 oz goat cheese, softened
½ tsp garlic powder or granules

Preparation

In a bowl, toss tomatoes with olive oil and salt.

If using bread, toast the slices.

In another bowl, add garlic powder to goat cheese. Whip with a fork until smooth. Spread cheese on bread or crackers, top with tomatoes, fresh basil, and a drizzle of balsamic reduction.

For a more casual serving style, serve whipped goat cheese in a bowl, topped with tomatoes, basil, and balsamic, and enjoy as a dip.



“THE JUNE”

FOR A GLASS

1.5 oz vodka
4 oz unflavored sparkling water
2½ tsp lime juice
2½ tsp simple syrup
8-10 fresh mint leaves
5 fresh raspberries for garnish
Lime rounds for garnish

FOR A 32 OZ PITCHER

8 oz vodka
18 oz unflavored sparkling water
2 oz lime juice
2 oz simple syrup
1 bunch of fresh mint leaves
6 oz fresh raspberries for garnish
Lime rounds for garnish

Preparation

Muddle mint leaves in the bottom of a glass or pitcher.

Drop in ice. Add vodka, lime juice, and simple syrup, then mix thoroughly. Finally, pour in the sparkling water, add the raspberries, and stir.

Garnish glasses with lime rounds and enjoy.

To turn the cocktail into a mocktail, replace vodka with the same amount of sparkling water.



For information and resources on postpartum disorders,
visit Postpartum Support International
at www.postpartum.net.

From their website:

In an Emergency

National Crisis Text Line:

Text HOME to 741741

from anywhere in the USA, anytime, about any type of crisis.

National Suicide Prevention Hotline & Website:

1-800-273-8255

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Call or text our HelpLine:

Call 1-800-944-4773 (4PPD)

English & Spanish

Text in English: 800-944-4773

Text en Español: 971-203-7773

