



# ALL THE UGLY AND WONDERFUL THINGS

by Bryn Greenwood

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## *A Conversation with Bryn Greenwood*

### **What was the inspiration for this novel?**

I was driving through rural Kansas at sunset, and I saw a guy riding a motorcycle down a dirt road through a hay field. My curiosity was immediately piqued. Who was he and where was he going? In that instant, I just knew there was a little girl hiding in the hay. The first scene I wrote was Wavy and Kellen meeting at the edge of that meadow beside a wrecked motorcycle. I didn't know who they were, but it was obvious to me that they needed each other. Kellen was injured. Wavy was hungry. They were both terribly alone. I felt sure it had been weeks, if not months, since anyone had looked at either of them and acknowledged their humanity. After that, I worked backwards to figure out who Wavy was, who Kellen was, what their story was.

### **Your biography mentions that you're the daughter of a "mostly reformed drug dealer." How much of the story is inspired by your own childhood?**

My personal experiences definitely informed some of the details in the book. When I was a kid, my father was a meth dealer, and he lived on an armed compound in the country. As a result of his career choices, I witnessed a lot of wild things and met some unusual people. The other part of my life that I drew heavily on for this book was my habit of getting involved with much older men. Like Wavy, at the age of thirteen, I fell in love with and dated a man more than twice my age. To an outsider, that relationship probably looked inappropriate (and it was certainly illegal), but I have fond memories of my time with him. We had a

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loving, consensual romance that nurtured me more than a lot of my adult relationships have. That experience gave me insight into Wavy's motivations, and probably made me more inclined to deal sympathetically with Wavy and Kellen's situation.

**Was it your intention to write a story where conventional ideas of right and wrong are turned upside down?**

It's less about wanting to turn right and wrong upside down, and more about wanting to demonstrate how blurred the line between right and wrong can be. When it comes to *All the Ugly and Wonderful Things*, the line disappears altogether at some points in the book. Instead of offering moral guideposts, I'm asking readers to suspend their everyday perceptions of morality and sympathize with flawed characters. Often those characters are good people who make bad decisions. Things like poverty, addiction, and abuse lead a lot of people to make decisions that look immoral from the outside, but that make a kind of sense when you're in that situation. We may be horrified by Kellen's plans to marry teenaged Wavy, but it's the only solution he sees for rescuing her from her parents. There are other options open to Aunt Brenda, but she chooses not to exercise them until a crisis forces her hand. Personally, I sympathize with characters who are trying to figure out the least bad thing they can do. Characters in bad situations with limited options are always more compelling to me than characters who have clear boundaries and make neat, practical choices.

## *About the Author*

**Why did you decide to use so many narrators to this story, and how did you choose them?**

When I first learned to write short fiction, I was taught to reverse the roles of antagonist and protagonist, and write both versions. The goal was to understand all my characters, even the ones I might not naturally sympathize with. That continues to be part of my creative process. In terms of Wavy's story, I knew I couldn't rely on the central characters to give a complete view of her relationship with Kellen, so I went further afield than I usually do. Because I wanted to know what things looked like from all angles, I investigated the story through a lot of peripheral characters, which makes it feel almost like a documentary.

Although I ended up with sixteen narrators in the book, I actually wrote a lot more than that, including scenes from the points of view of Val, Liam, and Aunt Brenda. Wavy's parents didn't make the cut, because they were so focused on themselves that their narratives derailed the story I wanted to tell. Although Aunt Brenda is the natural antagonist to Wavy, her narrative turned out to be redundant. Aunt Brenda doesn't need to speak, because the average reader knows exactly what she's thinking. It's what we would be thinking if we were in her shoes.

**What do you hope readers will take away from this story?**

Above all, I hope my book makes people think seriously about the nature of consent and a child's right to bodily sovereignty. So often, when we speak about consent, we're talking about sex, but it's not the only kind of consent that matters. In



grappling with the issue of underage sex, people often overlook Liam forcing Wavy to eat, Brenda forcibly restraining Wavy, and all the other non-sexual ways in which Wavy's consent is violated in the course of the book. Kellen is the only one who regularly seeks her explicit permission for any kind of physical contact. The question of what rights children have is incredibly complicated and there are no easy answers. The subject haunts me, because I worry that a child who has no power to say yes also has no power to say no. Children are regularly abused, because our society fails to listen to them. Even when we do listen, we often don't believe children. That's the environment that allows predators in positions of authority to flourish.

Secondarily, I hope that readers will spend some time thinking about the nature of family. When our own families let us down, how do we deal with that? How do we constitute new families? How well do we do at accepting the families that people choose, as opposed to the ones they're born into?

## *About the Author*



## A Note to Readers

I often hear from readers who find Wavy and Kellen's early interactions sweet, but who are deeply troubled by how the relationship evolves. *Why can't their relationship stay platonic?* those readers ask.

When I'm writing, my characters frequently do what they want, without regard for what I think should happen. This was very true for Wavy and Kellen. For obvious reasons, I tried repeatedly to keep their relationship platonic until she was older. I threw women at Kellen. I tried to give Wavy other friends. I tried to motivate Aunt Brenda or Miss DeGrassi to get involved. None of it worked, because no one was willing to make the sacrifices Kellen made for Wavy, and there were too many external factors pushing them together.

Even as a child, Wavy is absorbing messages about how to survive in the world as a female. The primary lesson she learns from Val, Sandy, Dee, and even Aunt Brenda is simple: get a man. If you get a man, he'll take care of you. This is a pressing issue for Wavy, because her parents are failing so spectacularly to provide for her and Donal. As Kellen is the only adult regularly caring for her, it's hardly surprising that she decides to make him "her man." Of course, Wavy is at a disadvantage when it comes to securing Kellen. As most of us have experienced, when our friends get into a new relationship, they tend to wander away from us. The whiff of a woman's perfume on Kellen's coat does more than make Wavy jealous, it threatens her central position in his life. She can't afford to lose him, and the obvious way to keep him is to prove to him that she's a viable sexual partner.



Take Wavy's entry into puberty and awakening sexuality, her love for Kellen, and her need to keep him attached to her. Mix those all together and it's easy to understand how, at thirteen years old, she arrives at the night of Kellen's twenty-sixth birthday, prepared to offer him a sexual relationship.

How Kellen ends up there is also linked to his childhood. As much as we would like his feelings for Wavy to be paternal, they're not. *Paternal* for people like Wavy and Kellen is nothing good. In their world, a father is at best someone who neglects you, at worst someone who beats you. Kellen is trying to be better than the father he had, better than the father Wavy has. He's trying to be her friend. What starts out as an act of kindness to a neglected little girl becomes the closest friendship he's ever had. Kellen has had a lifetime of being an outsider, and Wavy is not just the first girl he's ever loved, she's the first person to love him since his mother died.

Of course, Kellen is also a young man who wants what most young men want: love, companionship, and sex. Wavy offers him the first two for many years, and when she offers him the third, maybe it seems like a natural development. She has become the center of his world, their relationship the only solid one in his life. On the night of his birthday, he's drunk and she's dressed up as a reasonable facsimile of a woman. His mistake is almost inevitable, if not entirely forgivable.

Afterwards, what happens follows the same set of guiding stars. When Kellen carries a naked and shivering Wavy up to her bedroom, he concludes that he has three options. I left it to the reader's

## *Behind the Novel*

imagination to decide which of these options he thinks is “terrible” and which is “too awful to consider.”

Kellen can cross a line that is clearly marked, even in his mind, as wrong. Wavy has offered him a relationship that includes sex, and there is no one in her life to protect her from that kind of predation, except Kellen.

The second option is for him to walk away. He can acknowledge that his feelings for Wavy are inappropriate and that her feelings for him make him a fox guarding a henhouse. Perhaps this would be the most moral choice for him, but if we imagine Kellen exiting Wavy’s life to avoid crossing that line, we must consider the consequences. He ensures that she gets an education, that she eats, that she has clothes and shoes, that her home is clean, that she’s protected from the dangerous people her father’s business has introduced into her life. If Kellen walks away, he leaves an enormous void in Wavy’s life. One that will either go unfilled, or will soon be occupied by a man with fewer scruples than Kellen.

There remains then the third choice: to slow the advance of Wavy’s overtures. Kellen can’t simply push Wavy away without reinforcing a deeply damaging message she has absorbed from her mother. Wavy believes she is dirty, and for Kellen to completely rebuff her would be devastating to her. His explanation that she is “too young” holds no water with Wavy, because she already has an adult’s responsibilities, and the women in her life are already giving her lessons on how to navigate a relationship with a man. Sandy gives her a makeover to make her more sexually attractive. Val



lectures her about the importance of birth control, on the assumption that she is already in a sexual relationship with Kellen. In Wavy's world, she is not too young to take this next step.

More importantly, Val's lessons remind Wavy that the world is ugly. Men only want one thing. Women only have one function. Therefore, the only reason Kellen wouldn't be open to an adult relationship with her is that she's undesirable or "dirty."

Ultimately, the responsibility for what happens rests on Kellen's shoulders. Someone with a less dysfunctional upbringing might have found more solutions than he does, but like many adult children of abuse, he is constantly operating under crisis conditions and he has terrible decision making skills. In the moment, seeing the awful thing that he's allowed to happen, he simply looks for the choice that will cause the least harm. From his perspective, that is to deploy the same methods of negotiation he's used with Wavy for as long as he's known her. To delineate and define boundaries and to seek mutual respect. The end result is not one we would wish for any young girl, but what part of Wavy's life is?

—Bryn Greenwood

*Behind  
the Novel*



## *Recommended Reading*

### ***The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter***

**Carson McCullers**

I recommend this with the caveat that this book broke my heart. At its center is a young girl from a large, poor family, and a deaf-mute who loses his lifelong companion. It's about small-town poverty and loneliness, and the desperate need people have for love and companionship.

### ***The Little Friend***

**Donna Tartt**

While Harriet is growing up in a very different environment than Wavy, this book spoke to me about the difficulties of being a child in a family that is disintegrating around tragedy. The Quinns' family tragedy is meth and abuse, while the Dufresnes' is the murder of Harriet's older brother.

### ***The Great Gilly Hopkins***

**Katherine Paterson**

A throwback to my own childhood reading, this is a story about a wounded girl who's hard to love. Gilly has been passed from foster home to foster home, until love and family seem like dangerous propositions.

### ***Methamphetamine: A Love Story***

**Rashi K. Shukla**

This is a very compassionate inquiry into the lives of people who use, manufacture, and sell crystal methamphetamine. It's not easy reading, but it's honest and it provides real insight into how people end up making and using meth.



***Winter's Bone***

**Daniel Woodrell**

A bleak, brutal story about the complications of family and meth. Sometimes when I think of Ree Dolly, I imagine an alternate reality in which there was no one to protect or buffer Wavy from her parents' lifestyle. It's a short read, like a punch to the face.

***Lolita***

**Vladimir Nabokov**

I recommend this not because it's similar to my book, but because it is dissimilar. Nabokov's prose is gorgeous, but the story itself is a reminder of how easy it is for adults to take advantage of unprotected children. Despite being the titular character, Lolita is an afterthought whose happiness is of little interest to the narcissistic narrator.

*Keep on  
Reading*



## Reading Group Questions

1. From the first moment we meet Wavy, her life is filled with rules. Most are her mother's rules, but some are hers. What rules are holding Wavy back and which ones does she use to construct a sense of safety? How do the rules change as she grows up?
2. Wavy's fears and her efforts to resist fear are major themes in the story. How does the refrain "nothing left to be afraid of" guide Wavy's life?
3. More than once, it's remarked that the kitchen door of the farmhouse is unlocked, and Wavy points out that there isn't even a key to that door. On a practical level, what does it say about Wavy and the people around her that this door is never locked? As a metaphor, what does it tell us?
4. Kellen is a murderer and Wavy knows this from an early point in her relationship with him. How is she able to know this while still considering him a good person? What things in her life have prepared her to accept two seemingly contradictory ideas? How do you feel about this paradox?
5. The book provides multiple points of view of Wavy and Kellen, including their own. How are your impressions of them altered by a narrator's biases? Who seems like the most reliable narrator? Who seems the least reliable? How do you decide whose opinion to trust?



6. Aunt Brenda's perspective is the one that most clearly correlates to our current social attitudes toward relationships like Wavy and Kellen's, but is she the hero of this story? To what degree do you sympathize with her?
7. Compared to Wavy, her cousins and her college roommate are ostensibly the product of "normal" upbringings. In what ways are they more emotionally healthy than Wavy? In what ways do they have similar emotional issues?
8. Until 2006, the state of Kansas had no law requiring a minimum age for marriage, as long as the underage bride or groom had parental or judicial consent. On occasion this produced child brides far younger than Wavy would have been. The law now sets the minimum age at fifteen, a year younger than the age of consent. How does marriage change our views of what would otherwise be statutory rape? What if Kellen's wish had come true, and he and Wavy had married after her fourteenth birthday? How would we view that relationship once it was sealed by law?
9. When we talk about "consent" we have a bad habit of restricting it to the question of sex, but what other types of consent are at play in the story? Stress is placed on Wavy's capacity to consent to a sexual relationship with Kellen, but what about her capacity to consent or refuse consent to other things?

10. Of the female role models in Wavy's life, which has the greatest effect on her? How do these role models color her views about herself and her relationships?
11. As much as we may wish for Wavy and Kellen's relationship to remain platonic, what do you feel contributes to its steady shift toward becoming first romantic and then sexual? What might have happened if it had remained platonic?
12. Amy narrates a large portion of Wavy's life, while only revealing parts of her own. How does she choose what to reveal and what to hide? And why might she prefer to tell Wavy's story over her own?
13. What is the dynamic between Wavy and Kellen as husband and wife at the end? Who do you see as the decision maker? The moral compass? What other roles have they taken on, and how comfortable are they in those roles? Considering their backgrounds, how likely are they to succeed in creating a healthy relationship and a "normal" family?