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THE SECOND HOME

by Christina Clancy

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A Conversation with the Author

You cover a lot of ground in this novel—both the secrets we hide from and the joys we share with our siblings, the way place leaves an impression on us, and what it’s like to lose our parents in time. Did something in particular inspire this very expansive and emotional story?

My grandparents retired to a home in South Wellfleet that had been in my mom’s side of the family since the 1890s. Because my mother had no aunts, uncles, or cousins, they were the pillars of a very small clan, and all the grandkids (including me) loved to visit them each summer. It was a real shock when they died less than a week apart from each other. In the wake of this sudden loss, I remember my mother saying that she and her sisters, who lived in distant cities, were the next generation, and it was up to them to *decide* to remain a family. I was fascinated by that sentiment because, until then, I’d always thought that family was just . . . family. Over the years, I’ve seen how the house they’d lived in, which my aunt now owns, has facilitated our feelings of connection. I wanted to write about how vulnerable a family is to change, and how purposeful we need to be about maintaining familial bonds when it’s healthy to do so. I also wanted to explore the nature of family itself—the families we are given and the families we choose, or are chosen by.

What scenes were the most painful—or pleasurable—for you to write?

As you would probably guess, the scene between Ann and Anthony was incredibly difficult and delicate to write. I really like Ann as a character and wanted to protect her, but I could also see how naïve she was, despite her confidence. She was tantalized by Anthony’s power and bravado, and didn’t see the real danger in their flirtation. I’d actually stopped working on the book for a while because I’d overheard someone say that they never read novels that deal with rape as a plot device, but then the #MeToo movement happened and I couldn’t go a day without discovering that a politician or celebrity had



assaulted or raped someone. For many women, rape *is* their story, and it affects the people who love them. I'm so grateful for all the women who came forward with their stories; they emboldened me to write that hard scene, and the scene where Ann finally confronts Anthony about what he'd done. I admire Ann's can-do attitude; she was dealt a hard hand, but she still manages to go to undergrad and graduate school and she raises an awesome kid.

The most pleasurable scenes to write were the ones that brought characters together, like when Poppy and Brad meet, when Ann and Maureen become friends, and the scenes where reconciliations occur between the siblings. I especially loved writing the scenes where Avery and Noah find a way to communicate by passing notes to each other in their "portal."

You cover several decades in the novel. Why was it important for you to have us meet Ann and her siblings in their teen years, and then again in their thirties?

They say that early drafts of a novel are for the author, not the reader (yet), and I definitely had to tell the story to myself first. Initially, Poppy, Ann, and Michael were adults and time moved only forward. I'd challenged myself not to write backstory, but the more I wrote, the more I felt I needed to understand what had happened to cause the family to fall apart and to understand their attachment to the house and the horrible feelings of loss they experienced when their parents died. I gave myself a writing exercise to explore the characters in their teen years, and they absolutely insisted their way into the novel. I decided to try splicing the chapters so that the reader would be jolted backward and forward. That started to feel schizophrenic, so I reorganized the book into two parts with a prologue and it felt, at last, like that was the right order of telling for the reader.

Why Wellfleet and Milwaukee? What spoke to you about those locales that have such diverse characters and landscapes? Were you drawn to either in a very personal way?

A friend from Milwaukee recently confessed that she thought Cape Cod was "out of her league." I could totally identify with that sentiment. Although our family had

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a long history in Wellfleet, as a Midwesterner, I always felt like an outsider on the Cape, and on the East Coast. I thought everyone I encountered there came from old money and ate their food with monogrammed silver. When I'd say I was from Wisconsin, they'd either look confused or mention *Laverne and Shirley*, cheese curds, bowling, or beer. Their reactions reminded me of that old *New Yorker* cartoon with the view of the world from Ninth Avenue, with a map that shows the middle of the country as an inconvenient strip of land between New York and the Pacific Ocean. But I absolutely love Milwaukee! It is such an authentic place, and home to wonderful, smart people, gorgeous architecture, Lake Michigan, and ethnic neighborhoods with rich histories. I suppose this novel is an opportunity for me to take readers there, and to show how the characters internalize the ways in which other people regard, or disregard, place.

What was your "second home"? Is there a summer escape or family vacation setting that has rich memories attached for you?

My "second home" was Wellfleet growing up, but now I have a second home of my own: a rustic three-season cottage on Lake Beulah in East Troy, Wisconsin. My husband's family is from that area—I joke that he's East Troy royalty because his grandfather and great-grandfather served as mayors, and his family owned the hardware store on the town square that is now the home of a wonderful bookstore, InkLink Books. I'm as happy on the lake as I am near the ocean. Our kids are divided: my daughter says she's more interested in Cape Cod, and my son loves to water ski and he was a camp counselor at YMCA Camp Edwards on the lake, so he's more the lake guy. I guess this means there will be no fighting over our own second home! East Troy is the setting for my next book.

What do you hope readers take away from this book? What issues or scenes do you imagine book clubs will spend ample time discussing?

When I tell people about the book, they seem to really connect with the idea of the second home. It seems there are lots of "third spaces" for families, whether they are grand estates, cottages, or even a campsite in the woods.

I hope readers will connect with and discuss the power of special places where our memories and even our identities are formed, and the ways in which they can become contested. I'd love for readers to think about what family means to them. Even if they have unhappy family lives, they might find that they can find and form new, reconfigured families with people who are important to them, just as the characters have. I would imagine that readers will be disturbed by the scene between Ann and Anthony and can have nuanced discussions about the shame and damaging implications of sexual assault. I think they'll also discuss how and why Ann and Michael were manipulated by Anthony. Finally, I hope the novel compels readers to think about and discuss the feeling of being at home with themselves, wherever they are—whether that's in a home, a second home, or on an airplane traveling to their next adventure.

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*Get to
Know the
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1. “Cape Cod felt like a hazy dream the rest of the year, a place suspended forever in beach days filled with sunshine and warmth.” (1) Do you have a place from your younger years that inhabits your memory in this way? How does the youthful memory compare to the reality?
2. “Upon returning to their home in Wellfleet, Ann felt her parents’ radiant energy in everything she saw as she paced the house to stay warm: the chipped wine glass left in the sink, the sloppily folded beach towels and stained pillowcases, in her mother’s cookbooks, her father’s telescope, even in the bulb digger where they’d always hidden the skeleton key that unlocked the back door.” (1) Imagine walking into a house—what would “tell” of your own parents, what would signal that they were the most recent inhabitants? When you are gone, what objects might reflect your presence?
3. “It smelled like rotten eggs at low tide, but that was a smell she loved in the same primal way that she’d loved the smell of Noah’s sweet bald head when he was a baby...every molecule in her body seemed to change.” (3) What senses are activated by a special place or person? What powers can smell have?
4. How do each of the Gordon children explore and deal with the loss of their parents? Did you consider any of their reactions healthy or unique?
5. Michael’s background is very different from that of Ann and Poppy. What intense experiences has he already had before joining the Gordon family? What misconceptions did outsiders hold about what Michael might bring into their lives?
6. “She loved Michael, so why did she feel so selfish? She wanted to tell Michael that the house was theirs, and summer was her time with her father.” (45) Can you track Poppy’s emotions in this adolescent outburst? What is she wrestling with here? How do Ann’s complicated feelings toward Michael manifest over the course of the novel?
7. What role does family—the ones we’re born into and the ones we create—serve? What are some assumptions we might make about families like the Shaws?

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Questions*



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8. "He signed quickly, before he could change his mind. And just like that, he became a nobody." (138) What does this mean, for Michael to become a "nobody"? Did you feel empathy for Michael's choice? Which adults could have handled the situation differently?
9. "Just look at us. One of your kids is missing, the other is a burn out, and I'm a teenage mom. Great job, you guys!" (153) What did you make of the Gordon family? Are their secrets and struggles commonplace?
10. The Shaw family is, on its surface, quite different from the Gordons. Do they share any similarities? Did you feel sympathy for Maureen? What about for the Shaw boys?
11. Discuss the role and impact of secrets in this novel. Are they inherently destructive, or are some secrets worth keeping? Why do Ann and Michael hold on to their secrets, and why is Connie's illness not openly shared with Poppy?
12. How is Anthony able to manipulate both Ann and Michael? What kind of power does he hold over each of them?
13. "She felt like a part of her drowned in that pond." (110) As a reader, what was it like to read Ann's rape scene and the unraveling that followed? Why does Ann blame herself for what happened that night, and everything that came after?
14. "Poppy was the victim of collateral damage." (267) Discuss Poppy's trajectory from unsupervised teen with risky behaviors to globe-traveling yoga teacher and commitment-phobe, to mother. What makes Poppy resist responsibility and returning home? What changes for her?
15. In what ways do children and grandchildren change the dynamics of a family?
16. How does Ann's confrontation of Anthony affect her? Discuss the emotion and drama of this scene, and the impact on you as a reader. Did this meeting play out as you expected?
17. Explore what Wellfleet means to each of the main characters in the novel—what did it represent for Connie and Ed, for Michael and, ultimately, for the sisters? Why are they drawn to it? What are they nostalgic for?

18. “We should have figured this out. Should have assumed the best about each other, not the worst.” (330) Why is Ann so late to forgive or welcome Michael back into her life? In what specific ways did they each feel betrayed?
19. “Is that what houses really were, containers for families? And once the containers were gone, the people inside were just set loose in the world, particles.” (239) A theme throughout the novel is that houses hold our histories. How does this play out on the page, and has it proven true in your life?
20. “It was still theirs, still in the family, still vulnerable to the elements, still requiring upkeep. It was an anchor, yes, but one that held her in place.” (337) How is a house an “anchor” and what does that mean for these characters moving forward?



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