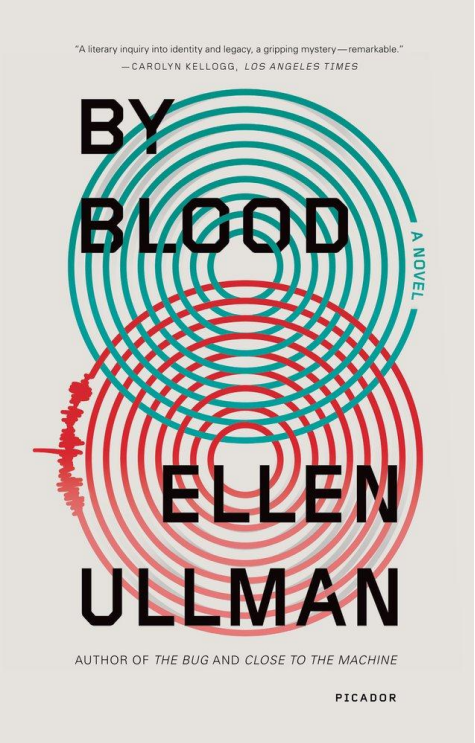
By Blood

by Ellen Ullman



1- Much of the narrator's character remains mysterious to us, even by the end of the novel. He tells us early on that he's a master in "the art of nonbeing" and indeed he often disappears entirely as we overhear the patient's sessions, his thoughts sometimes regulated to parenthetical asides, sometimes absent entirely. Does our understanding of the narrator change over the course of the book? If his telling this story is, in a way, a therapy session for him, what does he reveal about himself, if anything? Why does Ullman keep him a mystery to us?

2- How much of "the terrible darkness within me" is a product of the narrator's own imagination (like his paranoid fear that he is the Zodiac killer) and how much is true? When he reads over the transcripts of his life at the end of the novel, he says of his character, "a decent man" or "an ogre," "the committee would have to decide." Good or evil: which is he?

3- When the narrator finds a piece of the patient's mail, he discovers her name and address, but despite his obsession with her, never seeks her out, keeping her always unseen, at arm's length. Why?

4- Sound, and in particular the voice, holds immense weight in the novel — from the overheard voices of the therapy sessions, to Michal's tape-recorded story, to the recording of the Belsen survivors singing Hatikvah. The narrator calls the voice "that aspect which is last noted but finally most determinant of one's overall feelings about a person." Do you agree? How would the novel be different, or the same, if its eavesdropping took place on-line, with silent text and images?

5- The narrator begins the book with the Hypocratic defense, "I did not cause her any harm." Is he right? Did the narrator harm the patient — or Dr. Schussler? Did he help her?

6- In search of a past, the patient discovers her origins in the Holocaust. What does it mean that her life began in a place, and an event, designed, as Michal says, to "take away our personhood"? Has she traded one empty history — that of an orphan — for another?

7- Adoptees, the narrator says, are "very models of self-creation," able to invent from whole cloth a past and, therefore, a future. Able, in other words, to craft their own life story. As Dr. Schussler puts it, "Her attachment [to her adoptive parents] was not real. She had inherited nothing from them but experience, which can be discussed, analyzed, understood, changed." Both Dr. Schussler and the narrator envy the patient her freedom — do you?

8- Do you think we're supposed to feel sympathetic to the narrator? To pity him, to see himself in us — or is he a true monster, something entirely apart from the natural world, and from ourselves?

9- What does the city of San Francisco represent? What role does it play in the book, and how does it reflect, or influence the psyche of the characters — from its changing, often menacing weather and fog, to the "wild world" of the Castro's gay nightlife, to the looming threat of the Zodiac killer?

10- Contrast the narrator's visits to his office at night with those he makes during the day: "Market Street's seedy core," teeming with homeless panhandlers vs. "the whiteness of the lobby: a bleach against the stain of my dark thoughts." Are his visits, or the patient's sessions, different at night than they are during the day? Do we see or learn more about them under cover of darkness than we do in the light?

11- When the patient first discovers her Jewish past, she explains "I don't know any Jewish people. I have no idea what it means to say, I'm a Jew." She wonders whether to call them 'Jews' or 'Jewish.' By the end of the story, however, she argues with Michal, "a Jew is something I am!" Where does that change in attitude, and understanding of Jewish identity come from? How does the patient's relationship to her heritage evolve, especially after traveling to Israel and meeting Michal and Leni?

12- The narrator envies the patient's "mysterious origins," so why does he give her a family? "I had given her the gift she had come to want above all else: knowledge of her mother, and — much more — freedom from her," he explains. Is it more freeing to have a history — something to escape, as Dr. Schussler does her father's Nazi past or Patty Hearst, turning from wealthy heiress to kidnap victim to "rifle-weilding Tania" — or to be an empty canvas? "Knowledge is not a relief" the narrator says. Do you agree?

13- Why do you think the narrator and the patient remain unnamed while other characters' names — and how they change, from Patti to Tania, Maria G. to Michal Gershon — are so important?

14- Did you find the narrator's ghoulishness, his paranoia of gargoyles and crows, these elements of classic, San Francisco noir, tongue in cheek? Humorous? Should we laugh at the narrator, or fear him?

15- Early in the book, the narrator describes his situation as "like a person who had happened upon a novel fallen open at random." How much does our position echo his own? Does the novel feel a coherent whole — do the characters in it? — or does it remain, ultimately, random and mysterious? Did you finish the book satisfied, confused, or both?

About the Author

Ellen Ullman is the author of a novel, *The Bug*, a *New York Times* Notable Book and runner-up for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the cult classic memoir *Close to the Machine*, based on her years as a rare female computer programmer in the early years of the personal computer era. She lives in San Franciso.

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