

THE HALF-ORPHAN'S HANDBOOK



BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Reader,

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for choosing *The Half-Orphan's Handbook* for your book club.

There is a clear moment in my past where I crossed the line from childhood to adulthood: the day I discovered my seemingly happy father was addicted to gambling and did not want to live. As the truth emerged, I was swallowed by the isolation of my experience. Upon his death, I suffered profound grief, stigma, and shame. But eventually, I wanted to know when it would be okay for me to laugh again. To enjoy life. To smile without guilt. But I couldn't find healing, so I wrote it.

This young adult contemporary book tells the story of sixteen-year-old Lila Cunningham, who, reeling from losing her dad three months before, unwillingly leaves Massachusetts to spend her summer at a Maine grief camp. Lila is positive that if she only knew why her father did what he did, she'd feel better. Absent that knowledge, she creates two unbreakable rules to protect herself from pain:

1. The only people who can truly hurt you are the ones you love. Therefore, love no one.
2. Stay away from liars. Liars are the worst.

At camp, Lila is surprised to find the beauty of a shared experience. Everyone there has lost someone, including Lila's unexpected crush: Noah Kitteridge, a mysterious, handsome kid with a penchant for verbal games. As summer goes on, Lila writes more rules to help her navigate her new life, but the handbook fails when she discovers some shocking secrets.

As I write this, we continue to lose people to suicide—an estimated 123 per day in the U.S. And statistics vary, but as many as 1 in 7 children lose a parent, sibling, or caretaker before age 20. I wrote this book for everyone who has been affected by some kind of loss and wants to find happiness again thereafter. I wrote it for the people who are lucky enough to become adults before they feel that first whisper of grief, because books shape our worldview.

This book explores the nonlinear nature of grief, rediscovering joy, and falling in love for the first time. It's also about friendship, humor, multidimensional truths, and navigating professional help. It is my hope that Lila's story can help us understand that things can get better.

Your support for my debut novel means the world to me. Please reach out anytime on socials or by email. I'd love to hear from you!

WITH GRATITUDE,

Joan



How long have you been writing?

Pretty much my whole life. I've always been a writer, though this is the first novel-length work I ever completed.

Why did you focus on mental health in this book?

In the plainest words possible, mental health impacts every aspect of human life. Prioritizing it is vital for every single person. For many people, mental illness is invisible, and society has equated that with being hidden. It needs to be talked about. As someone whose life and family has been impacted by mental illness in deeply profound ways, hope and resilience and equitable treatment mean a great deal to me. It's my hope this book (and some of my future work) helps to strip some of that.

Tell me about your writing schedule.

Fits, bursts, and starts, complicated (lovingly) by raising small kiddos. I write both by hand and using Scrivener and Word. (For those in the know, I am a plotter with light pantsing elements.) The first draft of this book took 5 or 6 months to write. It took me about a year of on-and-off revision before I felt ready to pitch it. I queried it in 2018, my agent sold it in 2019, the team at Macmillan Children's Publishing Group (Imprint and Feiwel and Friends) and I readied it for publication through 2020, with a culminating release of April 2021.

What are some themes in your writing?

I tend to gravitate to unanswerable questions. (Who's right in a morally gray situation? What happens when we die?) I write grief with a caveat that there is hope attached. This book was also born from the idea that we are not responsible for the actions of our family, and that choosing friends as (at least some of!) your family is a great thing. I write about money more than I thought I would, a choice that stems from knowing money was always, always, always tight at a very young age. I also tend to set books in New England. This book takes place in Massachusetts (suburban Boston and Cape Cod) and Maine.

INTERVIEW FAQs + CONTENT NOTES

How do you name characters, places, etc.?

So many different ways! I named my protagonist Lila because I liked the irony of giving a character who stubbornly clings to truths a name that sounds like "lie." Noah's last name, Kitteridge, stems from my love of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*. Camp Bonaventure is named after a hotel I stayed at in California when I was there for a writing conference. I had trouble coming up with Madison's name, so I closed my eyes, pointed to a map, and named her after Madison, Wisconsin.

What's something you didn't used to like, but do now?

Coffee, eggs, and being wrong. (Okay, the last one is STILL HARD but now I call it "learning.")

Favorite food/drink to have while writing?

Cashews, apples, peanut butter, water, limitless black coffee, Polar seltzer.

Do you have any nicknames?

Some family members call me Joanie. My middle school screenname was "Joanio." Occasionally my toddler calls me "middle human."

What do you like to do outside of writing?

Hang with family and our friends, learn, and travel. I love being outside, especially at the beach. I enjoy movies, shows, reading, black coffee, lists, interior design, and, surprisingly, baking. I love to dance and exercise. I've been a dancer since I was two, and now I teach it. I treasure my students.

Content Notes

THIS BOOK IS NOT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A SUICIDAL PERSON.
THERE IS NO SUICIDAL IDEATION IN THE NOVEL.

Content warnings include the death of a parent by suicide, references to other character family losses, addiction, and 9/11. Off-page content warnings include mention of a character with an eating disorder and drug addiction.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

developed with the team at

fierce||reads

1

Early in the book, Lila creates a handbook of rules. She adds to these rules throughout her time at camp. Why do you think she does this? If you had to write a rule for yourself, what would you write?

2

Lila believes knowing why her father died will bring her closure. When she learns the truth, does she find it?

3

Lila is acutely aware of the stigma of her father's suicide and its impact on her family, and she likens the term "stigma" to a "rabid fox." Mental health is all too often stigmatized. What are some actions people can take to destigmatize it?

4

Did your perspective on Lila's relationships with her family change during the book?

5

Who is Josie, and how does her relationship with Lila change over the course of the book? Have you ever had a relationship like theirs?

6

Describe the shared connections Lila makes with her fellow campers. Why do you think these are so meaningful?

7

One major theme in the book is the concept of truth versus lies. Why does Lila value truth so much? What does she learn about it?

8

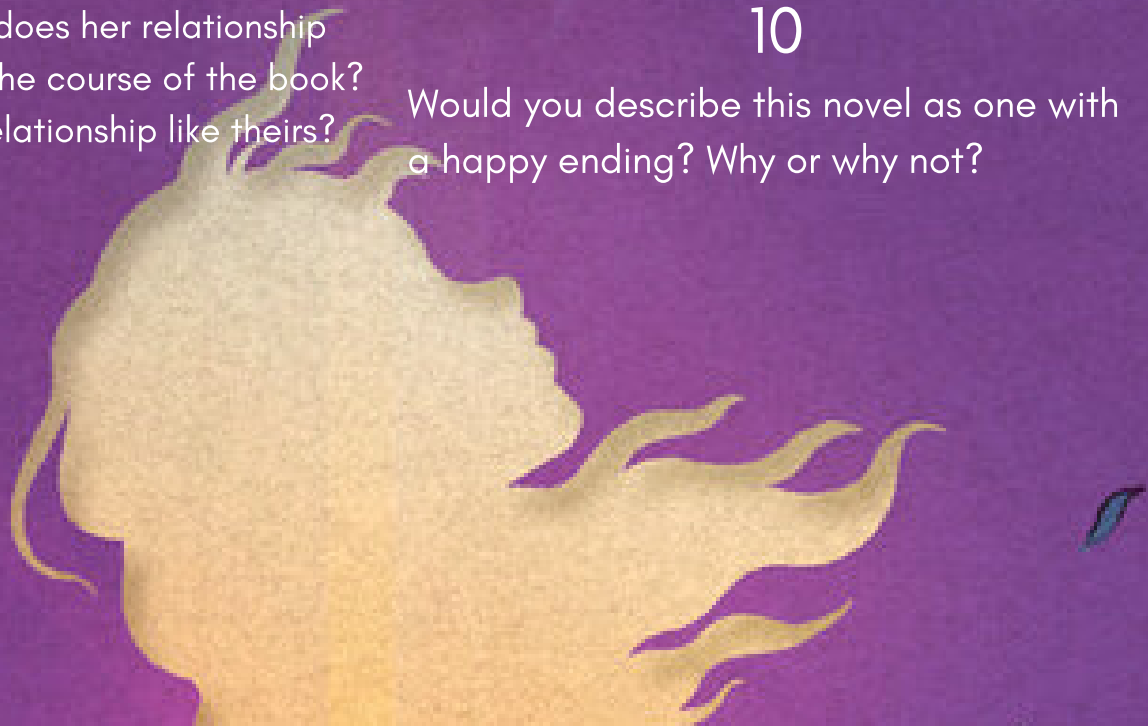
Lila describes her former life as being one with a "blessed absence of trauma," and she is fully aware of how much she's grieving. Which of Lila's actions in this novel appear to be the result of the trauma she has endured?

9

Did you realize Noah was hiding something? Were you surprised when you learned what he was hiding?

10

Would you describe this novel as one with a happy ending? Why or why not?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joan F. Smith is an author and dance instructor from Massachusetts. She does her best writing on airplanes, and her worst with no caffeine.

Joan studied creative writing and social science at Providence College and received her MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College. When she isn't writing, Joan teaches dance, travels, exercises, works in higher ed, mentors writers, and wrangles her kids.

She is the author of the young adult novel *The Half-Orphan's Handbook*, published by Macmillan's Imprint in 2021. Her writing has appeared in various publications such as *The Washington Post* and *Thought Catalog*. She lives in the Boston area with her husband and kids, where her daily requirement as a parent includes dance parties in the kitchen.

You can find more about Joan at joanfsmithbooks.com, and follow her on Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok @jf_smit.