

## A Book Club Guide to *Orphans of the Living*

### Discussion Questions:

1. *Orphans of the Living* has four main characters: Barney, Lula, Glen and Nora Mae. Which character did you like the most? Which character did you dislike the most? Why?
2. Even though this book takes place beginning more than 100 years ago, many of the characters' experiences are things modern-day Americans face too. Which of the Stovalls' experiences made the book feel current for you?
3. Each of the chapters in the book is told from the perspective of one of the four main characters (or several of them). Did you like this approach to reading the novel?
4. Barney lays out all of the missteps he believes he made in life as he and Glen walk along the beach in Monterey. Do you have sympathy for Barney and his desire to be a leader and a successful land owner? Or do you think he was blind to what really mattered?
5. Why do you think it took Lula so long to show love to her daughter Nora? Do you think you might have had the same reaction to a late-in-life child, given her circumstances?
6. Glen seems to have overcome his very difficult childhood better than his half-sister Nora. Why do you think this is?
7. Are there any quotes or passages of the book that stand out for you?
8. Did you like the ending of the book? Why or why not?
9. How did your experiences in childhood influence your understanding of the book's characters?
10. If you could ask the author one question about the book, what would it be?

### Author Q&A

#### **You fictionalized your mother's life for this novel. Why not just write it as a biography?**

**Kathy Watson:** My mother's story is such a powerful every-woman's tale from the early years of the 20th century. The racism and poverty her family experienced in the West and South at the time of her birth shaped so much of her life. Her own gender confusion, and her experiences of abuse and with abortion (beginning with her own mother's attempt to abort her) also affected many women in my own and succeeding generations. But I just didn't know enough, in great detail, to write it as a biography.

My relationship with my mother was never very healthy or robust, as she suffered a great deal from the trauma in her own childhood, and was diagnosed near the end of her life with borderline personality disorder. She was also addicted to prescription drugs—Valium and opioid pain killers—which were handed out by doctors with abandon to women in my mother's generation to treat "hysteria." She was an unreliable reporter, at best. She did tell me stories ... bits and pieces, here and there. When I was ten years old, she told me about trying on her brother's shirts and pants and pulling the shirttail through the

jean's zipper to pretend she had a penis. She thought, even as an adult and a mother, that all little girls would want a penis if they could have one. I have tremendous sympathy for her inability to reflect on what that experience meant to her. Writing this book has definitely helped me to understand her, and to forgive her.

But even without a full understanding of her life, I knew a good story when I saw one. I did months of research into her era, and into the lives of my grandparents, Barney and Lula, and my uncle, Glen. For instance, I knew that Glen was placed in a Montana orphanage, but I don't know which one. I could never find his records. I knew that he escaped by throwing a football over the fence. I knew he went on to play football for West Coast Army, and that he played in several Army Navy games at Berkeley. I knew that he worked for the Teamsters Union. The connecting dots, and the characters that bring them together, are completely fiction.

Even though these people existed, and I loved them, this is truly a work of fiction.

**You put yourself in this book in the last two chapters. What a novel idea!**

**Kathy Watson:** No, not novel at all! In 2016 I read *Moonglow*, a novel by one of my favorite American (and West Coast) writers, Michael Chabon. If you haven't read him, begin with *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, an historical novel which won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In *Moonglow*, he tells a fictionalized version of his own grandfather's story, and puts himself, as Michael Chabon, throughout the story. It so knocked me out! I read it at a time when I was beginning to imagine telling my mother's story. I couldn't see how to meld the truth I knew with fiction until I read *Moonglow*.

**I really want to know what happened next after your ride with Glen in the Cadillac in the last chapter.**

**Kathy Watson:** I have written a non-fiction "sequel" if you will to *Orphans of the Living*, a memoir about my childhood, my mother, and my years as a chef. It's tentatively called *Last Morning at Nora's Table*. Yes, I named my restaurant after my mother, hoping that her name would come to mean something happy and hopeful to me. And indeed, that kitchen saved my life. I'm still seeking an agent and publisher for this work at the moment.

**Behind-the-Scenes: Separating Fact from Fiction, Three Examples**

**Fact:** My mother said, "My father had a banana plantation in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec before I was born." I discovered my grandfather's early farming operation in Hanford, CA. I found a notice in the local paper of the trip he took to San Francisco, and then some months later, I found his name on the manifest of the SS *Mexicano*, on a voyage from Vera Cruz to Galveston. I learned about the ships that plied people and cargo from San Francisco down the West coast to Salina Cruz, and about the suicide of a passenger on one of those ships. I discovered the west-to-east rail line from Salina Cruz to the Gulf of Mexico, completed around that time. I researched United Fruit and their iron grip on bananas in Central and South America, and their use of Jim Crow tactics outside the U.S., something I had never heard about before.

**Fiction:** My grandfather did indeed have five wealthy brothers. He was the only "dreamer" in the bunch, lurching from from one disastrous affair to the next. But I made up his relationship with George (one of his actual brothers) as I assumed he had to get his money from *someone*. I created all the

characters in Mexico, including Luzelba, on the assumption that my grandfather must have had some romantic liasons before marrying my grandmother in his forties.

**Fact:** My grandfather did go to Mississippi ostensibly to grow strawberries, but like so many of his schemes, it didn't work out, and he moved the family onto a cotton and corn plantation, where they were the only white family. My mother told me that her father pulled the plantation overseer from his horse, and nearly killed him for abusing one of the Black sharecroppers. I knew they escaped on a night train bound for California.

**Fiction:** I have no idea who the Black sharecropper was that my grandfather was trying to protect, but when I found the newspaper advertisement placed by my grandfather and others seeking a pardon for Ira Williams, I connected the two. I also learned that there were during this time banks, of sorts, often owned and operated very secretively by Black women, since Black people had no access to the white banking system. So I created a Black woman banker who provided the money for my mother's family to purchase the train tickets. I could not imagine where else they would have found \$300, the price it would have cost for the tickets that year.

**Fact:** I knew Barney, my grandfather, would not send enough money to Lula in Montana for train tickets to bring Glen and Ray to Mississippi with the other children. I knew that my grandmother's Uncle Fred agreed to take them, and later placed them in an orphanage. I knew Glen escaped by throwing a football over the fence, and later played football for West Coast Army.

**Fiction:** I have no idea what Glen did between escaping the orphanage and his time in the Army at the Presidio in San Francisco, other than that he was stationed for a brief time at Fort Lewis in Washington state. But I somehow stumbled on the long-gone logging town of Maxville in Northeast Oregon. Maxville itself is a fascinating story. The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center in Joseph, Oregon, is a great place to learn more about it. The connection to the Southern U.S. was fascinating to me: owned by white Southerners who brought Black workers to Oregon. Everything I wrote about there is fiction, except for the actual logging practices, and the segregation. It seemed like such a fine way to continue this story line of race that winds throughout *Orphans*. I could imagine Glen hopping a freight west, and it seemed to fit so well into his story. Wouldn't it be something if it really happened that way?

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