
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

AN
UNEXPECTED
GUEST



A novel by

ANNE KORKEAKIVI



A CONVERSATION WITH ANNE KORKEAKIVI

The entire present action of your novel takes place in less than twenty-four hours. This compressed time frame lends a delicious tension to the book. How did you come up with the idea? Were you influenced by Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, which also uses the organization of a single night's dinner party to plumb deeper waters?

The idea for *An Unexpected Guest* came to me while on a visit to Paris in the mid-2000s. I was walking down a street in the 7th arrondissement called the Rue de Varenne, thinking over the day's headlines, which were rife with worries over terrorism and with political scandals, and I thought: What would happen if the spouse of one of these politicians was caught out with a terrible secret? What would be the repercussions of that? At some point early on, I recognized the similarity between the story I was forming and how, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf managed to talk so profoundly about post-WWI malaise while writing about something as seemingly commonplace as putting on a dinner party.

So, yes, I felt privileged to be able to pay homage to that. Virginia Woolf was a genius. But, when it comes down to it, the twenty-four-hour timeline is really handy. As you say, it abets the tension, and it also gave me a clear structure within which to work. And, very importantly, it supports the suggestion that every day can be a microcosm of either every day before it or every day after. The book talks a lot about making choices.

The protagonist, Clare, has mastered the art of maintaining appearances after twenty years of marriage to a high-ranking diplomat but has been

haunted by a secret the entire time. William Faulkner famously said that good writing features “the human heart in conflict with itself,” and you apply that here with Clare’s troubled consciousness. Can you talk about what you hoped to achieve through the character of Clare?

If ever there were a human heart in conflict with itself, it would be Clare’s! She really has some things to work out. However, people aren’t perfect. I’m a big proponent of hope.

Why did you choose Paris as the setting of your novel?

I know Paris well, but since I wasn’t living there, I could travel its streets in my mind without feeling the fetters of any of the tiresome distractions of daily life. I didn’t want to be writing, “The linden trees showered white blossoms over Rue such-and-such . . .” and be reminded that I needed to pick up the dry cleaning on that street. Anyhow, it takes a pretty long time to write a novel, so why not choose a location you’ll enjoy spending time in—at least in your imagination—every day? Of course, having the Rue de Varenne, where the idea for the novel came to me, as the novel’s physical epicenter perfectly fits the story: home to multiple diplomatic missions and residences, and to the Rodin Museum, with as deceptively calm an exterior as Clare’s. I learned after that it also was the site of both of Edith Wharton’s homes in Paris.

As mentioned, the forward trajectory of the novel takes place in one day, but necessarily uses flashbacks to fill in information about Clare’s past. How did the structure of the novel evolve? Do you outline? Is it trial and error?

The structure of the novel didn’t really evolve in the process of writing; the twenty-four-hour timeline, the recurrent memories that function like flashbacks, etc., were all there from the start.

Clare is a person who lives in the past and present simultaneously because of how the former haunts her, and the structure was designed from the get-go to reflect this. That's not to say that I didn't write numerous drafts to get other things right.

How did you gain such insight into the world of those in the Foreign Service? Do you have experience in that world, or did you do special research?

The very first thing I did was to entice a friendly acquaintance who had spent his professional life in the Foreign Service to walk me through all questions of protocol. He talked while I took notes for hours. My husband is an international human-rights lawyer and I worked for many years as a journalist. Also I've lived much abroad. All of this has also offered me some peripheral views onto the world of diplomacy. But mostly I read, read, read, and listened. Watched documentaries. Asked questions. For months upon months, I had the home page of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office website bookmarked on my computer.

Any advice for aspiring novelists?

If you recognize that writing a novel is hard work, and you are willing to put in that work, you are already well along the way. Try reading like a novelist too, and, always, listen. Never underestimate the importance of listening.

What's next?

More books, of course!

This interview with the author first appeared on the blog *paris (im)perfect*. Reprinted with permission by Sion Dayson.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who or what do you think the “unexpected guest” is? Might there be more than one?
2. Memory plays an important part in this novel. What weight does memory have in our lives? How might even bad memories be useful?
3. What are we entitled to shed from our pasts, and what do we have to bear?
4. Have you ever been in a comparable situation to that of Clare in her youth, or known someone who has? What changed for Clare that made the way she responded as a college student so disturbing to her as a full-fledged adult?
5. The book talks a lot about making choices. Who do you think bears responsibility for Clare’s youthful choice? Clare? Niall? Neither? What do you think of the choices Clare makes at the end of the book?
6. When Clare was growing up, many communities considered the IRA to be a terrorist group, while other communities considered IRA members to be freedom fighters and openly supported them. What effect might 9/11 have had on perceptions of terrorism? On support for groups considered by some to be terrorist?

7. What is the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist? What do you think of Niall? Are there instances when political action—even violent—outside of accepted norms is defensible?
8. In chapter 7, Clare reflects on the public’s opinion of diplomats. Has the importance or nature of international diplomacy changed in recent decades? If so, how and why?
9. Clare inhabits a beautiful apartment in Paris with full-time staff. But, in chapter 4, she reflects on the rarity of privacy, the “shortage of free will,” and the “constant menace of relocation.” In chapter 9, she points out, “The splendor belonged to the Crown; she and Edward were just staff (and she unpaid staff, at that).” How would you feel with Clare’s lifestyle?
10. What effect has 9/11 had on global and expatriate life?
11. Clare graduated from Harvard and speaks multiple languages, but she puts her career on a back burner for the sake of her husband’s. Why has she chosen to do this? Does it satisfy her? How are the compromises in their marriage particular to their situation as a Foreign Service family, and how might they be common to many marriages?
12. In the course of the novel, Clare proves to be the ultimate multitasking woman, handling a medley of personal, professional, and familial needs while preparing and hosting a formal dinner party. How would you have tackled her day? How do you balance your public and private lives?

13. Clare and Edward keep secrets from each other, and we learn that Edward has distinct views on the matter. In a marriage, is it necessary to know everything about your partner?
14. Jamie is very much his mother's son: fiercely private to the point where Clare knows confronting him is likely to silence him, but he's also innately passionate. How have his life experiences—being the child of a dual-national marriage, having lived in many places—influenced the way he acts?
15. What do you think of Clare's initial efforts to protect Jamie from his father and Edward from Jamie? What do you think of her eventual course of action? How would you have dealt with Jamie's situation?
16. In chapter 7, Clare says she sometimes felt she needed her children as much as they needed her, that her children were "anchors in the floating world." What does she mean by that?
17. In chapter 11, Clare tells the story of the Burghers of Calais and of the artist Rodin's decision to portray them as distinct from one another. One, Andrieu d'Andres, is depicted as particularly distressed by the act of self-sacrifice he is about to commit. Was this portrayal disrespectful? Realistic?

AUTHOR'S BOOKSHELF

Following are a selection of the books that took up residence on the bookshelf above my desk while I was working on *An Unexpected Guest*. Some were books I read cover to cover during my research. Some I found myself opening from time to time for inspiration or reference. Others were just totems of what I hold dear in literature. I didn't espouse the views found in all of the books on the shelf, or rely exclusively on information tendered by any single one of them.

Waiting by Ha Jin

Stories that talk about one thing in order to talk about something else have always fascinated me, both as a reader and a writer. This 1999 National Book Award–winning novel has huge things to say about both the Cultural Revolution in China and the human heart, through the deceptively simple story of a Chinese army doctor bound by arranged marriage to an old-fashioned country-woman but in love with a young urban nurse, with eighteen years to go before he can respectably gain a divorce.

The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro

When author George Hagen (*The Laments*) compared my writing to Kazuo Ishiguro's, in his blurb for *An Unexpected Guest*, I almost fell off my chair. I didn't reread *The Remains of the Day*—about an aging English butler who sets out to visit a former colleague while reflecting on both the nature of their restrained relationship and his years of unquestioning service, especially during the years leading up to WWII—as I worked on *An Unexpected Guest*, but

the 1989 Man Booker Prize–winning novel still kept an honored place on my office bookshelf.

***Rodin Museum Guide to the Garden* by Vincent Brocvielle**

Published by the Rodin Museum in Paris, this slim volume is packed with facts and stories about the artwork and flora in the museum's gardens, along with photos and drawings. I also taped a photo of *The Secret* by Rodin, two fine hands twisted into a cathedral peak together, on my office wall.

***Voices from the Grave* by Ed Moloney**

Although all the characters and details that appear in *An Unexpected Guest* are entirely fictional, the substance of the novel's action set in the past is based on historical record. For this, I studied ancient newspaper articles and government reports from both the United States and Northern Ireland, listened to tapes, and read reams of documentation. I also watched this documentary, companion to a book of the same name by controversial journalist Ed Moloney, containing old newsreel, local testimony, photos, and, above all, excerpts from hours of taped clandestine conversation with two leading paramilitary figures from either side of the Catholic-Protestant divide. It went straight onto my virtual bookshelf.

***Pay, Pack, and Follow: Memoirs* by Jane Ewart-Biggs**

Jane Ewart-Biggs was a British diplomat's wife in Paris back in the early 1970s. She went on to become a politician and peer in her own right after her husband was murdered by an IRA bomb twelve days into becoming British Ambassador to Ireland. This lively, self-effacing memoir offered an inside look into the lives of diplomatic spouses historically.

***Saturday* by Ian McEwan**

I read the novel *Saturday*, about one tumultuous Saturday in the life of a British neurosurgeon, shortly after finishing my first complete draft of *An Unexpected Guest* and thought, “Holy moly! One day, post-9/11 malaise, family relations. . . . This is a male homage to *Mrs. Dalloway*.” Maybe the masterful British author didn’t intend, even subconsciously, for this novel to be that. And the book came to me a little late in the game. Still, it immediately won a place upon my shelf.

***The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri**

Dante is one of those all-time literary rock stars usually known by a single name. The epigraph for *An Unexpected Guest* comes from the first canto of his *Inferno*, in which Dante descends into Hell to tour the sufferings of the eternally damned. The lines I used talk about the insatiability of violence. Violence breeds violence.

PLAYLIST FOR *AN UNEXPECTED GUEST*

From 1997 to 2007, I lived in the small city of Strasbourg in eastern France. In Strasbourg you can go for days without hearing English in the streets. English isn't even the most commonly spoken second language.

During those ten years, I did several noteworthy things: I, with my husband, brought two daughters through infancy; I began my debut novel, *An Unexpected Guest*; and I learned to listen to French pop music.

Yes. Driving, running, folding laundry, I found myself humming Raphael, Calogero, and Francis Cabrel.

When my older daughter and I sat down to create a playlist for my book-launch party, these songs began to spill out of me. I astonished myself, not only with how many French pop songs I knew but also by how fiercely, viscerally, they transported me back to the nascent days of *An Unexpected Guest*.

An Unexpected Guest tells of an American woman living in Paris in the mid-2000s. The songs for my playlist are not what my heroine, Clare Moorhouse, would have listened to. But they are what she would have heard. They are what I heard.

“Marie” by Johnny Hallyday

I can no longer hear the name “Marie” without breaking into the first lines—“*O Marie, si tu savais, tout le mal que l'on me fait.*” (“O Mary, if you knew all the evil that’s been done to me”)—of this monster hit about wartime loss of innocence. This may be because I heard the song played and played again. In France, Johnny is

legend. But the theme fits. The lasting effects of three separate violent conflicts are at the heart of *An Unexpected Guest*.

“Sous le vent” by Garou and Celine Dion

French-Canadians Garou and Celine Dion’s smash hit duet of 2002, in good Gallic fashion, embraces erratic behavior in love: “*Et si tu crois que c’est fini, jamais. C’est juste une pause, un répit après les dangers.*” (“And if you think it’s over—never. It’s just a break, a rest after the danger.”) I cannot explain how apt this song is for *An Unexpected Guest* without giving too much away. You just have to trust me on this one.

“Me gustas tu” by Manu Chao

French-born of Spanish parents, Manu Chao sings in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Gallic, Italian, English, and maybe a few other languages. What better musical choice for a book set within the Babelian world of the expat and diplomatic communities? “Me gustas tu” is another song about the vagaries of the human heart: “*Que voy a hacer, je ne sais plus. Que voy a hacer, je suis perdu. Que horas son, mi corazón.*” (“What am I going to do, I don’t know anymore. What am I going to do, I am lost. What times these are, my heart.”)

“Les tournesols” by Marc Lavoine

On a happier note, *An Unexpected Guest* is for me a book, ultimately, about hope. And that’s how I interpret this catchy summery pop ballad by Marc Lavoine: “*Mince la chance qui nous reste. Hein, hein, hum, hum, saisissons la quand même.*” (“Slender the chance we have left, but let’s grab it.”)

“Le vent nous portera” by Noir Désir

You don't need to understand the lyrics to get the sense of this bittersweet song, but here's the first stanza—*“Je n'ai pas peur de la route. Faudrait voir, faut qu'on y goute des méandres au creux des reins et tout ira bien la. Le vent nous portera.”* Translated: “I am not afraid of the journey. We have to see it. We have to taste it. Meandering deep inside, and all goes well. The wind will carry us.”

This playlist by the author first appeared on the blog *Largehearted Boy*. Reprinted with permission by David Gutowski.