

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. The author has chosen a quote from Alice Munro as the book's epigraph: "None of that. Not allowed. Be good." Why do you think she chose to use this quote?
2. The narrative focuses primarily on the Slate family: Michael, Mia, and Finn. Do you agree with the decisions they make over the course of the book? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the role that Frankie's character plays in the book.
4. There are a number of plot twists in the novel. Which one was the most surprising to you, and why?
5. In the wake of Finn's loss, Mia puts a sock around her hand and attempts to brush her teeth and button up a shirt, to experience what her son will feel when he comes home from the hospital. She breaks down when she realizes that she cannot help him in this difficult time. Discuss a few examples of moments where characters try—successfully or not—to put themselves in each other's shoes. Does it change them?
6. What did you make of Mia taking Michael's baseball bat over to Eli's? Did her violence surprise you? Why, in the end, did she set the bat down?
7. Sex is a powerful tool in this book. Compare and contrast three situations in which sex translates to power in the novel. Do different characters wield this power differently? Why or why not?
8. How did you feel about Mia and Michael's views on their sexual relationship? Do you agree with the choices Mia made?
9. Why do you think Michael sought out Dirk's company? What do you think they each found in the relationship that kept them coming back?
10. At one point, Finn considers that maybe he is "a better person now...less afraid," suggesting that after his accident he understands real love. Do you agree with him? Was it worth it?
11. The epilogue opens with a quote by Anaïs Nin: "Where the myth fails, human love begins." Do you think this is an apt quote for the book?

Q & A with Joanne Proulx

Can you say more about what inspired you to write this novel? Was there a particular scene that it all grew from, or a particular character?

A story about a Russian boy who'd lost his hands to frostbite after stowing away in the wheel well of a Moscow-bound plane in an attempt to escape the poverty of his village; a story of a boy in my hometown who passed out drunk in a snowbank and lost all his fingers; a radio interview with a father who forced his son's amputated arm into a dish-filled sink—a scene that appears in the novel—in an effort to get the boy to come to terms with his altered physicality: this is where the novel began. I was interested in exploring privilege as it relates to loss and whether violence ever has a place in recovery—to test the premise that “Sometimes softness works, sometimes you need a shakeup,” as Michael says in the book.

This is your second novel, after the award-winning *Anthem of a Reluctant Prophet*. The two books are quite different in tone and structure. Was your writing process different for each of them? What drew you to such a different story?

My writing process, my five days a week plus Sunday morning schedule, didn't really change. And in both novels I wrote to try to make sense of the world. Just after starting *Anthem of a Reluctant Prophet*, my sister was given six months to live—this as the US was preparing to invade Iraq. I kept thinking about the thousands of families who, like my family, were about to be devastated by the loss of a loved one and the ultimate madness of war. Writing *We All Love the Beautiful Girls*, I was troubled by the seeming rise in violence against women as *Fifty Shades of Grey* climbed the bestseller charts. So while the two novels are very different in tone and structure, they both explore what connects and what divides us, the role of violence on a personal and global level, and acts of love as salvation—if that doesn't sound too flowerchildish. That said, *Anthem* is all seventeen-year-old self-deprecating smartass Luke Hunter; he makes me laugh. *Beautiful Girls* is a more serious novel, told in one teen and two adult voices; imagining Mia's, Michael's, and Finn's takes on the same event reinforced how difficult it is to ever truly know another person, even those closest to us.

What was the most surprising thing for you in the writing of the novel? Did any of the characters turn out differently than you'd expected?

I am not a big plotter. My stories unfold as I write. About a year into the novel, when I realized what was going to happen, I was devastated, unable to continue until I imagined the scene where Finn comes and comforts Frankie after the assault.

As well, I was surprised by how much empathy I had for Dirk—the chapter where Michael finds him in the shed near the end of book was hard to write. Like Don, he is such a lonely character, unable to connect in a meaningful way with others, “an outsider even among outsiders,” the ultimate tragic figure.

Have there been any authors who have influenced your work, in this novel or in *Anthem*?

I love Don DeLillo's sentences. I love Alice Munro's quiet brilliance. I love Miriam Toews' comedic touch when dealing in tragedy. I love Margaret Atwood's prescient storytelling. I love Raymond Carver's big, minimalist heart. I love Ali Smith's mind. I love Leila Slimani's *The Perfect Nanny*. But while writing *Beautiful Girls*, I felt most influenced by Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, a gorgeously crafted book that takes a hard look at suburban life in 1950s America, something I tried to do in *Beautiful Girls* in a present-day setting.

What are you working on next?

I'm researching my next novel, *Invincible Summer*, a dystopian-utopian tale of female strength and friendship in a hostile future.