YOUR BOOK CLUB RESOURCE

READING GROUP GUIDE

When I chat with readers, one of the questions I'm most asked is: Where did the story come from? How did you make up the characters—are they based on people you know?

It's hard to explain. For me, at least, the story starts with a central idea, then it starts to develop around one or two characters, and finally, once I've "gotten to know" those central characters properly, it starts to develop into a plot—layer by layer—with secondary characters—husbands and parents and friends of the central characters—getting my attention last of all.

So what set me off on *Jessica's Promise*? Well, I think the very start came from an anecdote from a complete stranger a few years ago. My own children were still babies at the time and I was utterly sleep-deprived but also besotted by them. I was starting to look forward to going back to work (part-time, in my case) because I love my job but also worrying about leaving them. How could I be sure they'd be happy and safe without me?

Very unusually for me at that time, I went out one evening to meet some local women from our church—and ended up chatting to one about her childcare arrangements. She'd hired an older nanny, she said, a rather eccentric, motherly woman who was close to retirement age and had been a nanny all her life. To adults, this nanny could seem a bit awkward and formidable. I got the impression that the mother herself was a bit frightened of her, as if she might suddenly be told off—ordered to stop fidgeting or eat her greens.

But one day, she said, she'd come home from work unexpectedly in the middle of the afternoon to grab some papers—and when she opened the front door, she discovered Nanny singing lustily as she bounced down the stairs with an upturned colander on her head, one child riding on her back, arms waving, and the other lying helpless with laughter on the hall floor. In London, many nannies are twentysomethings who are having gap years doing childcare before they start their "real" career—and often seem glued to their mobile phones—so when I heard this story, I remember thinking: I LOVE this nanny! I want a nanny like THAT!

We did find a wonderful nanny—although she was a lot more conventional than the one in the story. But the vision of a rather odd, old-fashioned older nanny did stick. The more I thought about her, the more Angie started to appear.

Once I had a nanny, I also became fascinated by their profession and the role they play in our homes. In the past, here in the UK at least, only rich people had nannies. They conjure up an image of stiff uniforms and nurseries and of course Mary Poppins. But nowadays, with so many mothers working—and working long hours—and with the cost of day care centers so high here, lots of us "ordinary" families rely on childminders or nannies to keep us afloat.

But the relationship between nannies and the mothers who employ them is fascinating . . . emotional and very complicated. I've spent time getting to know other nannies on the days I'm at home with my own small children. We have joint playdates together and the nannies tip me off about good play centers and outings and fun activities.

I've been so grateful for their friendship—and I've learned so much from them. Again, it's a feature of modern city life, but I don't have sisters or parents or even childhood friends "just around the corner" to help out when one of my children falls ill or starts having tantrums or refuses to eat what I cook! My

nanny friends have been an incredible source of cheerful support and encouragement and advice.

So it seemed strange to me that there is, in general, such a disconnect between mothers and nannies. Generally, mothers meet up with other mothers. Nannies meet up with other nannies. When my lovely nanny friends introduce me to other nannies, in the park, for example, those nannies seem uncomfortable, suddenly on their guard instead of just relaxing and being themselves. Maybe it's partly a holdover from those olden days when there was such a class divide between mistress of the house and staff (I live in Britain, after all, where class is a "thing").

But I actually began to feel there's something much more complicated, and more interesting, going on. One local mother friend said, with disarming honesty: "It would make sense for us to have a nanny but I don't want to. I'm frightened the kids will love her more than me."

That's the heart of it. In creating Teresa, I wanted to write a mother who's frazzling herself into toast by trying to do it all and barely managing. She's also gone from lover to wife, from romance to drudgery.

In writing her, I thought of my mother and her friends, sitting around the kitchen table when I was a child, drinking tea and darkly discussing other people's affairs when they thought I wasn't listening. I didn't always understand but the messages I took from the chat were warnings: Once a man strays, they seemed to say, he can never be trusted; he's likely to do it again. If a woman breaks up someone else's marriage, no good will come of it. That's not always true, of course, but it's enough of a guilty worry to Teresa to make her paranoid about Craig—and wonder if the man who once cheated on his wife might now do the same thing to her.

And of course she feels undermined by guilt. What mother really thinks she's doing a brilliant job—when she's pulled in so many different directions? Most of us are constantly exhausted,

juggling the demands of running a home, feeding everyone, coping with laundry, working at least one "paid job," organizing presents for the children's friends' parties and costumes for plays and all the practical tasks that go into parenting—and then, oh yes, quality time…obviously, as every women's magazine and parenting book tells us (if we have time to read them) it is clear that calm, regular quality time with our children is essential. But when??

No wonder many of us feel inadequate. That nagging self-doubt creeps in: The nanny makes it look so effortless when we collect our children from her. What if they do like being with her more than they like being with their mother? It's an awful thought that could easily breed suspicion, even resentment toward the nanny...

After all, a nanny has access to your family, to your home, when you're not there. They take your place in every sense. They're supposed to. They see you in your underwear—both metaphorically and sometimes literally. Think of how many films and books tap into a mother's anxiety about that—stories about nannies who take over, who lure away husbands, who supplant the mothers utterly. What secrets might your nanny find if she went snooping around your drawers, rummaging in your dirty laundry—as Angie does?

All this helped me to imagine Teresa—anxious at work, stressed at home, and generally exhausted. Angie, the kindly nanny next door, appears such a godsend. Of course Teresa doesn't want to probe too deeply—the girls seem happy with her, she's affordable and right on her doorstep. Why spoil such a gift? And yet . . . the nagging voice won't go away. Do we, the reader, agree with Teresa? Can we trust Angie? Our doubts grow, too . . . And from the nanny's side of all this? I mentioned Angie's real-life inspiration, the stout matronly nanny in a stranger's story. In reality, many nannies I know have a difficult, precari- ous job. They may stay with a family for a few years—sometimes less—but they always know their days are numbered. They

know that as soon as the children become older, they'll be looking for a new family, a new job. I've seen wonderful nannies who clearly came to love the children they looked after and treated them as if they were their own—but once their contract ended, they were out of the family. That's really hard, especially if they haven't, for whatever reason, had children of their own.

And Angie's make-believe room? Well, it's an exaggeration of something I do with my own children. Partly in order to keep them safe when we walk to and from school, holding hands, I always tell them stories—making it up as we go along and ending with a hurried conclusion as we reach the gates. They're usually stories about a giant magic bear who takes them on amazing adventures. Into space. Up mountains. To visit dwarves and fairies or to meet their favorite storybook characters.

They still spend a lot of time doing pretend play. They're five now—a wonderful age. As Angie says, the magic hasn't died in them yet. It feels like our own secret world and I love the fact that, at their age, the boundary between real and imagined, what's rational and what's magical, is very fluid. We lose that, as adults. I wanted to show that with the scene at Angie's house when the police pull up the blinds and let the light in, ruining Angie's make-believe room and raising suspicions about her rules of play.

Of course, adults do pretend—but in the novel, their pretending is deception. I wanted to draw a contrast between Angie—whose make-believe with the children is benign—and the manipulative Helena, Teresa's backstabbing junior at work, who is also not what she seems—but in a more malevolent, ruthless way. And then there's Craig, Teresa's new partner—who is himself caught up in make-believe as he plays the fake part of a successful businessman. Perhaps the adult version of pretense is no less rare but a lot less innocent.

And what about the location? I live in suburban London. It's a community that's an eclectic mix. There are plenty of well-heeled

newcomers who work in central London, have money, and, like Teresa and Craig, love to buy up dilapidated family properties and modernize them. The road is usually full of construction vehicles.

But right next door to these new professionals, there are families who were born and brought up in their houses. They may rent or they may have inherited the property—but they can't afford to modernize. Two different worlds, two different properties, side by side. Just like Teresa and Angie.

And of course the houses become symbols, too. Angie's worn, drafty house, stuffed with her mother's tatty furniture—she is poor but also stuck in the past, surrounded by it and burdened by it. Teresa? She's building a new family home from scratch—with a modern family without a shared history and two children, half-sisters, from different mothers. And appearances really matter to her.

There were several tragic cases in the news while I was writing this novel—involving the deaths of small children in accidents. In both cases, the child had been left unattended "just for a minute" by a mother who sounded overwhelmed. At once, columnists and the community chorus that is social media were quick to turn on the mother and blame her—as Angie's community turned on her.

Of course we all have a duty to keep our children safe. But I couldn't help feeling wretched for the mother. Imagine the guilt and grief she'll bear for the rest of her life—as Angie has. In Angie's case, her grief is so terrible that she needed to extend her make-believe to pretending her daughter is still alive and well and thriving far away—in order to protect her sanity.

I worried that readers would blame her, too, but so far the responses have showed compassion to both women, despite their mistakes and faults. Most of us who are lucky enough to be mothers know it's the best job in the world—but also the toughest to get right.

Discussion Questions

1. Teresa clearly struggles to be a kind, patient mother at times. Is she a good mother? Is the way she interacts with Jessica troubling? What makes a good mother?
2. Craig works hard to earn money for the family but Teresa seems in charge of the home and childcare. Is that an accurate portrayal of most modern couples? How fair is that?
3. Craig is a shadowy figure for much of the novel—and at times he seems to be the villain of the piece. Once his real secrets are revealed, does he emerge ultimately as a villain or a hero?
4. Angie has a secret tragedy in her past. Given what she did, should she be allowed to look after other people's children?
5. What part do the locations play in the story—for example, the common; Angie's shabby, old-fashioned house; and Teresa and Craig's newly modernized one?
6. Fran resents Teresa for, as she sees it, breaking up her parents' marriage. How much right, if any, does she have to be angry about what's happened?
7. Teresa feels terrible guilt when Jessica goes missing. She is also haunted by the fact that she slapped her. How will Jessica's disappearance change their relationship in the future?
8. Angie is constantly cooking and offering home-cooked food to people. What does food mean for her?
9. One of the dominant themes in the book is pretense or make-believe. Who pretends to be something or someone they are not? Why?
10. How important is the need to make things up—to tell stories—to all of us, from childhood onward? What purpose does it serve?