INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

THE FACE ON THE MILK CARTON

CAROLINE B. COONEY

Before She Was Helen

ANOVEL

"An emotionally rich page-turner about the lives we want—and the lives we make."

—JEFF ABBOTT, New York Times bestselling author of Never Ask Me

READING GROUP GUIDE

- 1. Dom and Clemmie aren't the only two characters that live double lives. Discuss the duality of the other characters in the book. Do you think that everyone has hidden identities? Outline the different ways that people can lead "secret lives."
- Bentley's message to Boro on Instagram triggers the events of the book.
 What are your views on social media? Discuss the pros and the cons.
- 3. A lot of these characters are everyday but morally complex people. Did you find yourself sympathizing with any of them? What did you like about them?
- 4. How do you feel about Clemmie exploiting the death of a childhood friend? Is it justifiable?
- 5. How would you characterize the younger characters—like Harper and Bentley—in this book? Did you like them? How are they different from the older characters?
- 6. Johnny and Joyce both crave excitement in their quiet lives, which leads to some serious consequences. Have you ever felt this way? What did you do about it?
- 7. To protect her own secrets, Clemmie's main goal is to get Boro his money

- and help him escape—even though he's a violent drug-dealer. Do you think her motivation is selfish? How would you handle the situation?
- 8. If you discovered that someone close to you had a second identity, how would you react?
- 9. Carol-Lee was the only victim of Rudyard's who tried to report his crime, but her accusations were met with derision. Do you think she was right to speak up? Or do you agree with Barbara and Clemmie's strategy of running away from him?
- 10. When Clemmie is raped as a young woman, no one believes her, and when the accusations resurface in the present day, police officers don't take the matter seriously. How much do you think the ideas surrounding rape have changed?
- 11. How do you think the reunion between Clemmie and Billy goes? Do you think she should be entirely honest about her history? How do you think he would handle the information?
- 12. Clemmie seems to think that her age has protected her from any more suspicion. Do you agree? Will anyone discover her secret?

A Conversation with the Author

What inspired you to write Clemmie's story?

It all started with her name. Names fascinate me. I've written several books (the Face on the Milk Carton series, for example) where a girl is not living under the name of her birth. In Janie's case, it was because of a complex kidnapping. But what if you're an adult who makes a careful choice to live as a different person? Why would you do that? Why would you keep it up year after year? And how? Would you become a different person once you wore a different name?

Up until now you've written mainly in the young adult genre. Why did you decide to make the switch to adult fiction?

I loved YA. I used to do school visits. It's a great way to see America—through its libraries and middle schools. But then one day I realized I'd written over seventy-five YA novels. It seemed like enough! I decided to make the switch to adult novels, and because I read mysteries by the armload, I wanted to write a mystery.

You write a lot of mystery and suspense, but what are you reading these days?

I read history, but that's slow for me; it can take a month or even two, reading here and there. Mysteries and thrillers I read at a pretty good clip. I prefer paper, but I also read e-books. I buy new at bookstores, I buy used, I buy online, I go to two libraries—I am a book hound!

What pieces of your own life made it into the book?

I grew up in the 1950s. Those days seem as remote now as ancient Egypt or Greece. I wanted to include details that people younger than I have trouble believing. Clemmie's story is packed with those differences. And of course, a huge difference is how we react to children born out of wedlock. We don't use any of the old vocabulary. In those days, it was all about the sinful bad mother, and the father was hardly considered, unless they were forced to marry. As a young church organist, I did actually play the organ for a shotgun wedding, and I still remember both the pregnant bride and the skinny groom weeping as their grim parents escorted them to the altar.

The retirement community is a unique setting for such a dark plot—what made you want to use it as a backdrop for the narrative?

I moved from Connecticut, where many of my books are set, to South Carolina and a place called Sun City. I have had the most wonderful time here. But it's an unusual place, full of surprises, like the odd anonymity of nobody at all knowing a thing about your previous life. You can say everything or nothing. You can lead a life that is practically public property, what with your activities and neighbors and Facebook posts. But you can also lead a life invisible to everybody else, and I decided that Clemmie and her neighbors would do both of those things at the same time.

Did you do any research into real events that shaped the story?

Before She Was Helen is completely made up. I think the trick to writing fiction is to fall into your heroine's life so deeply that both you and the reader believe it must be true. You know it isn't true. But the reader feels you must have experienced all of this or you couldn't write about it. No. Only Clemmie went through what is described in these pages.