

"Compulsively readable...an expertly  
layered story of family secrets."

—KELLY SIMMONS, author of  
*One More Day* and *Where She Went*

~~A~~FTER

Perfect

Life

A Novel

Rebecca Taylor



# Reading Group Guide



1. Is there a character in *Her Perfect Life* that resonates strongly with you? Which one, and why?
2. Considering what we learn about Clare, do you feel sad, triumphant, or something else altogether at her fate?
3. Have you ever wondered what life was really like for someone you admired? Discuss who this would be and if your assumptions were challenged from exploring the struggles behind Clare's outward success.
4. If you were in Clare's shoes and given the chance to reach success (but risk a close friendship), would you do so? How would you have handled the fallout with Donna Mehan?

5. Why do you think Simon stays with Clare throughout a marriage that is so obviously breaking down, and how did you feel knowing he blamed himself?
6. If you could sit down with one of your idols and ask them questions that they had to honestly answer, who would you choose and what questions would you ask?
7. Did the twist of the book surprise you, or had you guessed what was going to happen? If you had other theories, what were they?
8. Jump forward in time. Where do you see the main players, such as Eileen or Simon, a few months, a year, a decade after the events in *Her Perfect Life*?
9. Suppose Eileen hadn't ended up inheriting her sister's fortune; do you think she would have made a different choice about her marriage without the freedom this money now provides for her and her family?
10. And speaking of money, how did you feel about Eileen choosing to give Eric so much? Why do you think she did it? What would you have done, and do you think your feelings about infidelity in a relationship have changed over the course of your life?



# A Conversation with the Author



## **What inspired you to write *Her Perfect Life*?**

I think the initial spark of an idea came to me during the 2012 Summer Olympic games. Like the rest of the world, I was getting ready to watch another of Michael Phelps's awe-inspiring performances in the pool, when the camera panned to his family cheering him on in the crowd of spectators. The announcer named the family members, and it was the first time I took note that Michael Phelps had two sisters, Hilary and Whitney.

At that time in my life, my own two children were nine and almost eight. Like many siblings, especially those as close in age as mine, the rivalry and bickering were often off the charts. Watching those two adult women cheering for their extremely talented and famous younger brother made me wonder—what was it like for them to be the siblings of The Star?

Of course *Her Perfect Life* has nothing at all to do with swimming or the Olympics, but that wonder about Hilary and Whitney Phelps was the seed that grew into the Eileen and Clare sibling dynamic. To

have all those shared childhood experiences, to grow up together, to love someone that much, and then watch them go on to become a person that excels far beyond everyone else in their field. To witness them become not just great but a living legend in the minds of the rest of the world—what impact would that maybe have on a person's thinking about their own dreams, talents, and accomplishments?

Eileen is my character who wrestles with these thoughts and emotions.

**Did you have to do any research to bring Clare and her “perfect” world to life?**

Yes and no. On the one hand, being a writer writing about a writer was as simple as combing through my own headspace and emotions. The angst, the desire, the struggle to believe in yourself while still creating and getting your work out there—those inner aspects of Clare and her career were easy to find. More research was required with regards to her settings, homes, and the types of expensive things she would surround herself with. Although it was the best sort of research because it's like shopping for real estate, furniture, cars, and wine that are WAY outside my budget. It was fun to live vicariously through her success. As far as locations, I have traveled to Casper, Manhattan, and San Francisco but never lived in those places. So I relied heavily on internet maps, travel guides, photos, and my own imagination when creating her world in these places. My parents have lived in Wyoming for over twenty-five years—so that was very helpful when developing Clare and Eileen's birthplace.

For the parts of the book that are the “behind the curtain” world of publishing—I once was fortunate enough to work for a successful literary agent in the Denver area. Working as her assistant and helping with aspects related to foreign rights, I got a very clear and interesting vantage point of the publishing business. What I learned while working there has been instrumental to me in many ways. One, it made me realize that if I wanted to continue working in publishing, I definitely wanted to do it as a writer. Two, it made it very clear to me just how hard I was going to have to work to make a career as a writer happen. And three, it gave me the insider knowledge I would need to make Clare and Simon’s fictional lives rich and authentic.

**Which character did you connect with the most? Which was the most difficult for you to write?**

Honestly, I really do love every one of my characters, and in case you’re curious, there are elements of myself in each of them. And while Clare and I share a profession, it’s actually Eileen’s character that I most closely identify with.

The most difficult character for me to write was Adam because he needed to be one thing to Clare and another to my adult readers. He’s the love of Clare’s life, a teenage boy, and a legend in her mind. He was this, but also for my readers he was flawed, a person who made unkind choices and was also all too human. Adam’s character required me to live fully in Clare’s mind, a woman still mourning the greatest loss of her life, recreating different realities for that loss through her fiction, while either ignoring, denying, or completely having no memory of the very real aspects of Adam’s behavior that

provide the evidence to contradict Clare's extremely romanticized vision of Adam—of course, until she finally tells herself the truth in her last and final book.

Adam was a juggling act because we have to rely on Clare, a somewhat unreliable narrator when it comes to her memories and the fictions she's been telling herself for years.

**Eileen is an incredibly fascinating and layered character, but any one of us could step into her shoes. What qualities did you bring to her to make her accessible, relatable, and sympathetic?**

It's her life as a mother, her struggles with her marriage, her questions about her own choices, good and bad, that make her completely real to me. Eileen could be me. She could be my best friend. She could be any number of the women in my book club or living on my block. I love that she is a flawed person—but this doesn't make her a bad person, only human. My hope is that having an Eileen character gives women space to consider aspects of their own lives that are not so perfect and, if they didn't already know it, the knowledge that they are not the only ones.

**Your story pulls the reader from the rocky shores of California to the small towns of America and even visits the busy streets of New York. Do you have strong connections to these places, and did you mean for them to play such important roles in the book?**

I seem to always be drawn to writing stories that cover a lot of physical territory. I think this may stem from growing up in a military family and moving as much as I did as a child. Because of this,

I don't have a strong sense of "home" the way many people do and I feel connections to many places I've lived and/or visited over the years. I have loved many small towns and big cities in America and all over the world. Not unlike people, they have their own beauty, strengths, and drawbacks as well. For me, places have personalities all their own, and because of that, I feel they can't help but become one of the characters in a story.

But no, I didn't intend them to be important. I think it's more just the way I view places and settings in general—so it ends up coming across in the story.

### **On to questions about writing! Are you an outliner or a "pantser"?**

I am both. I like to have a map, which is my general outline of the major destinations I want to hit on my way through the book. And I have to know about how long I'm going to take to get there, word-count-wise. But for the most part, when I sit down to work on a scene, I let it go where it wants as it comes to me. Some scenes I know I'll write ahead of time, some scenes I know I NEED to include, and others pop up based on events that transpired along the way, but I always know how it's going to end before starting. It might change slightly, or even completely, but I like to know where I'm going before I take off.

### **What does your writing space look like?**

I'm very fortunate to have a designated office space in my house. It has glass French doors that open up off our main entrance, dark hardwood floors, a cream deep shag rug, a purple buttoned settee, a

down-filled denim club chair, a small coffee table, and a glass desk with a white leather office chair. There are several ash-colored bookshelves filled with books, candles, lanterns, and various bric-a-brac. I recently purchased a four-by-six-foot bulletin board that I DIY'd by covering it with upholstery fabric, three-by-five note cards filled with plot points, character sketches, and scene ideas for my current book-in-progress are pinned to this.

Most days, my pug, Bella, and my Mal-Shi, Billy, are sleeping either on the chair or on the rug beneath my feet.

### **When you're not writing, what are you up to?**

Well, the largest chunk of my nonwriting time is spent working at my job. It's not a sexy answer, but it is the truth. Outside of that, I'm also a mother, so I grocery shop all the time, pick up other people's socks, load and unload the dishwasher twelve times a day, and end up washing everyone's clothes, even though I swore many times I wasn't going to do that anymore. Maybe you can understand why I identify with Eileen so much??

But what I really love to do is read great books (of course), hang out with my kids (when they're not asking me to wash their clothes, bring them food, or drive them somewhere), watch movies, binge amazing shows, browse bookstores, sit in coffee shops, travel as much as I can, watch people in airports (it's the BEST place for people-watching), hang out with great girlfriends, and browse realtor.com for homes in coastal cities and contemplate moves I might make once my high school teens graduate.

**What are some of your favorite authors and books?**

Easy: *The Thirteenth Tale* by Diane Setterfield, *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, *Circe* by Madeline Miller, *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer, *The Map of Time* by Félix J. Palma, *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman, *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, the entire Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, *The Storyteller* by Jodi Picoult, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah, *The Eyes of the Dragon* by Stephen King, *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, *What Alice Forgot* by Liane Moriarty...so, so many more. And, gosh, should I also hit on all the great books from my childhood? Because I could seriously do this all day.

**If there's one thing you'd like readers to take away from *Her Perfect Life*, what would it be?**

The same thing I always wish for myself as a reader: an engaging and enjoyable experience that keeps us up, turning pages, long past our bedtime.