

You can't undo the past.
But can you live as if it never happened?

THE ONES

WE

A NOVEL

KEEP

"Elegantly written."

—JAMIE HARRISON, award-winning author
of *The Widow Nash* and *The Center of Everything*

BOBBIE JEAN HUFF

reading group guide

1. How would you have reacted to Eleanor's gift of a famous, expensive painting? Would you be offended by the gesture or appreciate your mother's willingness to offer you a "ticket out"?
2. Olivia was on a solo hike, enjoying a rare moment of alone time, when her son drowned. If you were in her shoes, would you feel guilty or responsible for what happened to your child?
3. How would you react to the news of your child's death if you were in Olivia's situation? Would you be tempted to run from the truth and never turn back?
4. Do you sympathize with Olivia's choice to run, or do you condemn her for leaving?
5. Do you think that if Olivia's grief eventually led her to return home, she would be welcomed by her family?

6. Harry never seemed to be angry at Olivia for leaving. Instead, he quietly mourned her absence. How do you think you would feel in his situation?
7. Why couldn't Toni's maternal presence fill the void left in Brian's life? What does the concept of "abandoned child syndrome" look like in both Brian and Rory?
8. Why do you think Olivia chose to live so close to the resort where her son drowned? What was the significance of her proximity to the lake?
9. The Ward family held special significance for Olivia. After living near their graves for so long, she reflected that "Mary's children are more real to Olivia than her own three. It seems that proximity is everything." What do you think she meant by this?
10. What motivated Brian to find his mother? What do you think the turning point was?
11. What was the significance of Debussy's *Children's Corner*, and what meaning did it hold for Olivia, Brian, and Chloe?
12. What do you think the future holds for Olivia's relationship with Brian and Rory? Do you think they will grow together as a happy family, or are the wounds too deep to heal?

a conversation with the author

What inspired you to write *The Ones We Keep*?

The starting point for *The Ones We Keep* was a solo walk that I took at a resort. I was staying there with my husband and (then young) four sons, and on the way back from the walk, I thought: What if someone told me that one of my sons had died but not which one? I decided that I would be tempted to run. If I didn't know which child had died, it would have been my way of keeping all of them alive.

Many years later, I turned the idea—the walk, the death, and Olivia's flight—into a short story. I had by then published other stories, but this one stalled and had no takers, in part because it was already too long. The story ended up in a drawer. Looking at it again many years later, I realized that the more interesting aspect of the story was the unknown life that followed Olivia's flight. So, what began as an unpublished short story grew into a novel.

Olivia makes an impossible decision when faced with the death of her child. How do you hope readers will react to her choice?

Some readers challenged me in earlier drafts by suggesting that no mother would abandon her surviving children in the way that Olivia did. So I kept re-drawing Olivia's character to try to make her actions at least understandable in the context of who she is and who she becomes after the tragedy.

I think a novel has to challenge readers to understand characters who may be, in some sense, odd. I wanted readers to understand this woman, whose whole life is essentially a tragedy.

The characters in your book go through some truly emotional and sometimes traumatic situations. Did you find these scenes difficult to write?

Not at all. I found them fun to write! I was just super glad that what was happening to them wasn't happening to me.

Music plays an important role in this story. Are you a musician?

All the pieces of music Brian and Olivia and Chloe play in the novel are pieces I've played and loved. I started the piano at the age of five. Until I was fourteen, my dream was to become a concert pianist, but then I had an accident that severed a tendon in my left hand. The surgeon wasn't able to connect it back to the tip of my forefinger, which I was never again able to curve. I was devastated. I mean, for starters, forget all of Bach.

But I still played. Later in life, I learned the organ. I remember vividly the day when some part of my brain opened for the

first time, allowing me to play that third, extra line of notes with my feet that the piano lacks. I played professionally in churches, in funeral homes, and for weddings. I don't play piano or organ often these days, although I still feel there's music in my future. I keep the pieces I'd like to learn stacked up on my piano. However, these days, writing tempts me more than music. It seems I am only able to practice one art form at a time.

What's the most important thing you hope readers take away from your book?

That my first novel was published when I was 76!

What does your writing process look like?

My process has evolved over time. I have another novel ready to go, and the way I wrote it differed from my approach to *The Ones We Keep*. In my current writing, I, of course, have a basic plot, but I now plan out each chapter as a series of scenes. I sit in my armchair with my notebook, asking myself what I want to accomplish in each scene. I then make notes (for example, my character thinks her mother doesn't love her anymore, and she decides to run away from home). When I rough out the scene's mini plot points, I take the notebook to my laptop and start. After I've finished each scene, I edit. I'm painstaking: I examine every word—is it the right one? Does the scene flow? Does it get me where I want to go? Sometimes in bed at night, I'll re-read what I've written that day on my phone, and because there are so few words on the screen, I feel I'm better able to spot when a

paragraph or word is not quite right and should be replaced with something better—or expunged.

When you aren't writing, how do you like to spend your time?

I read, of course, and I listen to or watch far too much news. I volunteered as a patient advocate when I lived in Canada, and I'm still fascinated with the field of medicine and spend quite a lot of time reading about new medicines, studies, clinical trials, etc.

I have four sons and four wonderful daughters-in-law and numerous grandchildren (also wonderful, btw) who live nearby, and I spend quite a lot of time with them, especially on weekends.