

"Kept me turning pages long into the night!"

—SUSAN CRAWFORD, author of *The Pocket Wife* and *The Other Widow*

SECRETS of SOUTHERN GIRLS

A NOVEL

HALEY HARRIGAN

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. How does Reba's diary serve as a narrative device within the story?
2. What do you think is Julie's central motivation for agreeing to return to Lawrence Mill?
3. Who, if anyone, do you think is responsible for Reba's death?
4. How is the relationship between Julie and Evan similar to the relationship between Reba and August? How are the two relationships different?
5. Why do you think Nell never told anyone (not even Toby) about Reba's diary?
6. How do you think Toby will react to Reba's diary once he reads it? Will it change anything for him?
7. Racism is an ugly stain on the town of Lawrence Mill. How would things have been different if Reba's parents—and the town—had been more accepting of an interracial couple?

8. Do you think Reba and Toby really loved each other, or was their relationship purely physical?
9. Why is Reba's innocence so important to Julie? Do you think people hold their friends to higher standards than the ones they set for themselves?
10. In what ways is the decaying old mill a metaphor for the relationships in Julie's life?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Where did you get the idea for *Secrets of Southern Girls*?

I've always been interested in how a person's past shapes and informs who they become in the present. I'm also fascinated by identity and self-awareness—how we see ourselves versus how other people see us. I knew I wanted to take those big concepts, add two teenage friends, and drop it all into a small town and see what happened. Things took off from there.

Of all the relationships in the book, which one do you think is the most important?

The friendship between Julie and Reba, definitely. Despite the romantic involvements, it's the friendship between these two girls that really drives the story forward: what they each want out of their friendship, what they expect from each other, the secrets that drive them apart. Julie puts no store in romantic entanglements (until Evan, at least), but she carries the weight of this broken friendship with her for a decade.

Why did you choose to make Reba and Julie's friendship so pivotal to this story?

I had a very clear picture in my mind of these two friends: one of

them a free spirit who was quite intellectually and emotionally mature for her age and yet very innocent at the same time, and the other who had a certain level of sexual maturity but lacked that emotional knowledge. I was enamored by their friendship, and I wondered what kinds of trouble they'd get themselves into, both together and on their own.

What was your inspiration for the town of Lawrence Mill?

I grew up in a small town in the south, which gave me some logistical inspiration (mainly, the mill itself). But I wanted to create a town where not everything is friendly and charming and happy. I wanted to create a town that had some ugly to it, that had a dark side. The racism in Lawrence Mill isn't exactly a secret. I think that, unfortunately, that's not too far removed from reality for some small towns in the south, even today. It's something that I was afraid to write about, and that's how I knew it was something I *needed* to write about.

Which character from *Secrets of Southern Girls* was your favorite to write?

Believe it or not, Toby was my favorite. He's a complete mess, but I was so invested in his journey. Throughout the writing process, his voice was the one that came to me the clearest.

There's music in the background in many of the pivotal moments in *Secrets of Southern Girls*. Why did you choose to make music so prominent?

A few reasons. One is that I love nineties alternative music, and I was excited for a chance to make it part of this story. The other is that

I think there is a special relationship we have with music when we're growing up, where a song can have a powerful, lasting effect. I don't think we are quite as susceptible to that power as adults. It made sense to me that in those very intense moments between Reba and Toby, not only would there be music playing, but they would *notice* it.

How long have you been writing?

For as long as I can remember. My grandpa had this shiny electric typewriter when I was a kid, and I remember the first time he let me use it. I fell in love. I would sit there for as long as he'd let me, typing story after story. Luckily, the stories have evolved (somewhat) since then.

Where do you find inspiration for your writing?

Everywhere. Mostly, by trying to pay attention to everyday life. I find that the ideas I take the farthest are based on one very mundane kernel of truth, turned around and around until something that began as commonplace ends up as something else, something twisted and complicated.