

The background of the cover is a watercolor illustration of a snowy landscape. In the upper half, there are dark evergreen trees reflected in a body of water, with a snowy bank in between. The lower half shows a snowy field with several evergreen trees in the distance. The overall color palette is dominated by whites, blues, and greens.

THE RUNAWAYS

Sonya Terjanian

"The novel, written in lively, vivid prose and very hard to put down, is by turns charming and disturbing."

—**ANDREW SOLOMON**, National Book Award–winning
author of *The Noontide Demon*

A NOVEL

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Why does Ivy think she has a black heart? Do you agree?
2. Mary Ellen feels excluded from her family's life. Do you think this is an inevitable consequence of her choice to have a career, or has she brought it upon herself in other ways?
3. Why do you think Justine goes out of her way to help Mary Ellen?
4. How does Mary Ellen's product, Numbitol, reflect her life choices?
5. How does Mary Ellen respond to the art when she first visits the Institute of Contemporary Art with Matt?
6. Why do you think Mary Ellen has trouble taking pictures in the beginning of her stay at Justine's house?
7. Why do you think Mary Ellen loves the "accidental pictures" so much?

8. Why does Ivy have so little empathy for Mary Ellen's midlife crisis?
9. Does Mary Ellen's privilege make her unsympathetic? Why or why not?
10. What does Ivy learn about herself when she helps Mary Ellen after her accident?
11. What are some similarities between a teenager coming of age and an older person having a midlife crisis?
12. Do you think creating or experiencing art can help navigate life's difficult passages? Have you ever had this experience?
13. Have you ever pretended to be someone you're not?
14. Have you ever run away—from home, from your feelings, or from something else?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did you get the idea for this book?

My friends have a beautiful vacation home in the woods of northeastern Pennsylvania, and sometimes they let me go there to write. While I was there one winter, working on my first novel, *The Objects of Her Affection*, it occurred to me that the house would be a great setting for a story. I loved the contrast between the modern, glassy house and the rough, blighted forest... I was also inspired by the ice formations on a nearby creek. Whenever I had writer's block, I would walk to the creek and take photographs of the ice, and as I became absorbed in the pure, physical beauty of it, I found myself becoming more open to ideas and emotions. That experience became the core of this story.

Have you ever gone through a midlife crisis?

I don't know if I would call it a crisis, but in recent years, I've definitely been thinking a lot about how to lead a more authentic life. I've decided to prioritize artistic pursuits—a choice I realize is only available to people of privilege. I've been reflecting a lot about that privilege, feeling simultaneously grateful and guilty—something that

probably comes through in the way I've written about Mary Ellen and Ivy.

Was it difficult to write from the point of view of a teenager?

It was so much fun! I spent some time reading my diaries from high school, which was cringe-y but also really helpful. I was struck by how actively engaged I was in forging my identity and how obsessively I tried to view the results through the eyes of other people. I really felt like I was in control of my own actualization—a feeling that quickly disappeared after college, but which returned, in a milder way, later in life. Inhabiting Ivy's character was a fun way to revisit that time of intense self-invention.

Mary Ellen becomes obsessed with art theory and something called "criticality." Do you feel that these pursuits are a waste of time or even a destructive influence?

For the most part, I think the academic study of art theory is a worthy and important discipline. For someone like Mary Ellen, however, it can be tempting to use theory as a barrier to a more intimate and visceral experience of art. Being too caught up in theory can also make it difficult to create art, because it can get in the way of raw, honest emotion. In Mary Ellen's case, it has a paralyzing and distancing effect, which is only exacerbated by her tendency to run away from her feelings.

Have you gone through a struggle similar to Mary Ellen's in your writing?

Absolutely. The most difficult part of being a writer (or

any artist) is learning to access uncomfortable emotions and channel them into your work. Like Mary Ellen—like anyone, really—I'd rather avoid those feelings than dig around in them. I've also had my share of writer's block, which can come from insecurity, and second-guessing myself, and trying to be someone I'm not. Overcoming all of that stuff is hard work, but in the end, it hasn't just made me a better writer—I think it's made me a more honest, self-aware, and empathetic person.