But Half the Plot

People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.
—JAMES BALDWIN, *Stranger in the Village*

We think back through our mothers, if we are women.
—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

Surely it was time someone invented a new plot.
—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *Between the Acts*

I HAVE SAT BENEATH these words of Baldwin and Woolf my whole writing life. Tacked above my head on three scraps of paper and carefully moved from desk to desk to desk, they hang up there beside a black-and-white photo of strangers on a beach, poems by W. B. Yeats and Elizabeth Bishop, a cover of a magazine I loved from 1983, notes on a conversation overheard on the street outside, newspaper articles. It is a jumble of influences, the wallpaper of my mind. As a writer of historical fiction, long ago I took the Woolf and the Baldwin as beacons, drawn to the image of our histories living and speaking through us, relishing that kind of necessary ventriloquism to imagine my way into the past. But it was only as the idea began to percolate for *The Guest Book,* in tandem with what felt like a shift in the larger cultural moment, that I found myself looking up

at these sentences and finally seeing the clear challenge they throw down to each of us to reckon with our individual relation to the collective past.

I began this book knowing only that I wanted to write a multigenerational novel whose plot *thought backward* through three generations of a family to explore the way in which the past lives inside the present; how we echo our parents' and our grandparents' voices without knowing whose they are, and repeat gestures without knowing what we do. I was especially interested in the way generations continue blindly forward by remembering in fragments. And I wanted to show how we remember, and most of all, how we forget, by choosing what we don't tell. I wanted to set it all in one place, in the same old house on an island, but move back and forth through time so the ghosts of past and present and future were always in the rooms, sitting in the same chairs and clearing the same plates.

This was 2010, and the public conversation about race in this country appeared to be shifting, first with the candidacy and then presidency of Barack Obama. His speech invoking Faulkner's often-quoted lines "The past is never dead. It's not even past" was an inspiration and a dare to all of us to fully imagine what it meant for an African-American man to be president. And because of that, it seemed to me, for the first time in my life, white people and black people in the same rooms were talking explicitly about race, were talking openly about the country's racial past and how it cued the present. I wanted to enter the conversation, to use the writing of the novel about a white family to understand that past. If history is memory carried in our bodies, I wanted to explore the half-truths of familial memory. And I wanted to think of it in light of this country's memory and how that lives inside each of us. What might it really mean to have history trapped in us? Or us trapped in it? Whose history? What does the trap look like? And given American history and racial memory, was it even possible to invent a new plot?

I wanted, in other words, to come to understand the implications of the words on the wall above my head, to understand what Baldwin meant by history's trap, and to imagine—and so to interrogate—my own place in that trap. And that place was white, Northeastern, and moneyed. Old moneyed.

Those were the big ideas, the given terrain I meant to explore. And like explorers, writers often bushwhack forward with a direction but no clear map. The novel is the map you write to discover where you are, to see whether what you've imagined even exists. But ideas are not a story, and all I had besides the ideas was the image of two sisters in a big house with a secret—a secret that had been buried in one generation and that would explode in another, a secret never told but nonetheless passed down.

And what *was* that secret?

I didn't know, but I knew instinctively where to start.

Eighty years ago, in the middle of the Depression, my grandparents were sailing off the coast of Maine when they spotted a FOR SALE sign on the dock of one of the islands in Penobscot Bay. After tacking in, they tied up at the empty float, walked through the shingled boathouse out onto the rocky lawn, took one look up the hill to the hundred-year-old apple trees, the white farmhouse and sloped barn flanked by the empty flagpole—and bought it.

As I grew up, I could drop that story like a calling card and watch it take hold in people's imaginations. An island. The place, and the story of the place, created a mythos around our family. So I understood early in childhood the power of a place to bind and define. I hadn't worked for it, I hadn't imagined it into being, I only stepped into it; it was simply the place I inherited. But it grounded my own place in the world. Far more than a summer house, the island became the marker for my family, holding us, reminding us who we were, year after year, generation after generation, and all without a word.

For when one has money, I was raised to understand, one never speaks of it. Class is the money that doesn't say its name. And class's cousin, privilege, it is useful to remember, comes from the Latin *privus lex:* private law. Rules not spoken but understood. The mark of these cousins is the quiet that surrounds them. It was bad manners to speak of what one had. It was rude to acknowledge a difference. Keeping quiet was a virtue, which allowed it all to continue privately, without questioning that order or where it came from—the way things were was simply a given. And

nowhere was this sleight of hand more present than on the island where that quiet was equally matched by the sheer beauty of the place—the light and the water, the games, and the joy of a family around its table, the tribe.

But it was also the kind of quiet that bred fiction. For though this quiet and place are my inheritance, the Miltons of Crockett's Island are utterly imagined, born out of the silence I grew up in. A silence I wanted to understand, and fill. So I kept writing.

By this point, I had been writing the book for two years, building the fictional world of the Miltons in search of the story. I had New York and Crockett's Island, and many characters. I had a love affair, a tragedy, and an old photograph. I had three timelines humming along but still no tissue that connected them, no plot.

And what was the secret?

Late in the summer of 2012, my husband and I and our two sons moved to Berlin for a sabbatical year. I spent much of the first couple of weeks wandering the city, and as I didn't speak German, I was external to the place in a way I'd never been before when I had lived in other cities abroad. Without understanding the language, there was no chance of being caught by the words overheard around me. As a writer, I am an inveterate eavesdropper, remaining on subways long past my stop to hear the end of a conversation carried on across the car. In the beginning of my time in Berlin, then, language was simply sound and cadence, without meaning. This meant I was particularly open to the physical expression of the place itself. Like Rome, the layers of Berlin's history are right there on the surface for all to see; with bullet holes left purposefully unfilled, and extensive plaques on otherwise innocuous buildings, the city walls testify to the horror and sorrow of the past as well as to the hope of a future—the cranes perched atop massive building sites rise above the rooftops of Berlin, just as the playgrounds of the present rose upon the cratered bomb sites of the past.

The walls of Berlin speak, but so, I came to see, do the streets. Set into the sidewalks as part of the project begun by the artist Gunter Demnig in 1996 are the brass paving stones, *die Stolpersteine,* or stumbling stones,

embedded outside the last place a Jewish person lived or worked before they were deported. The words on each stone are simple: *Here lived,* and then the name, the date of their birth, the date they were taken from that spot; and then the date and the place of their death—one didn't need to know German to understand the German word *ermordet,* murdered. *Ermordet Auschwitz. Ermordet Sachsenhausen*. Or sometimes *Flucht in den tod,* literally "flight into death," meaning killed trying to escape, or by suicide. The stumble stones literally interrupt the surface of the present. They make the past physical, concrete, impossible to ignore. All over the city, the stones attest: *Something happened, and it happened here. On this spot*.

You have to stop.

And I did, as over and over, all over the city, without pattern or design the stones appeared. Sometimes singly, often in pairs or in a cluster of four or five—a family, often more than one—the stones pepper the sidewalks throughout old East and old West Berlin, memorials that tell the story of a particular person in a particular place. Stones that called me to think back through the present spot to the place in the past, asking: Who would you have been in the moment the stone holds? The man fixing the railing outside the house when the boy was taken? The woman walking her dog? Would you have looked away? Would you have stepped forward? What would you have done? Who, the stones asked me, would you have been?

Begging the question, who are you now?

And there in Berlin, looking down at my feet, I thought of home.

What if our country had put down stumble stones? What if we had marked every spot where a slave was sold, or resold? What if we had stones that said, *Here, this happened here*? What if the ground beneath us spoke, held the memory of what happened?

It would start to tell the story, but it would be but half the plot. Here, a black person was sold, yes, but here too, in this same spot, a white person watched, adjusting what he or she saw in front of them, a black human being, to *not human,* to goods, and went on with what they were doing.

What if a stone had been put down for that moment in the market, or the street, or the field? The moment marking the matrix, the racial structure we live inside. A stone for the one who looked away from the human trade, the sale. Or now, in the present, from the unarmed men shot to death. What if we had a marker for those moments? Those people? How would our conversation about the past and the present be different? How would it shift the ground beneath our feet?

And I began to understand what Baldwin meant by a trap.

Marked, the spots of history demand a reckoning—the place speaks back to what we carry. Unmarked, those moments remain inside us, carried down through us in the guarded quiet of this country's memory. As long as they are unmarked, those moments in the past live, walk, breathe, and are carried *in us*. That is the trap. There is no place else for them to go except inside, and so passed on, passed down, carried forward. Unsaid and so repeated, the same silent story told again and again.

There is the secret, the American secret, hiding in plain sight—and it is trapped in us until we tell it: Who were you in the marketplace? And who are you now?

And there was my story. That was the map.

What if I could show how one moment, one single moment, a moment that was walked over and around—unknown to everyone but the person at the moment's center—lay buried like an unexploded bomb, silent across time and generations?

I am not talking here about pyrotechnics, nor atrocities, just the simple "everyday wickedness," as the critic A. O. Scott has called it, of looking away, creating a "lethal innocence." Or—as in the case of the Milton family—of saying no instead of yes. What would the memory of a single pivotal *no* look like passed down through generations? A refusal witnessed by none but the place where it was uttered, a living memorial, but unread, unreadable, except to the person who said no. What if that place were on the island—the place that held the Miltons both to their myth and to the tarnish on their shine? What would explode the secret into the open—what would get the place talking? How would they come to see what

they had "forgotten"? And when they finally do come to see, what do they do?

Who are you? Professor Evie Milton challenges her university students in *The Guest Book* at the beginning of each semester. "Who are each one of you? *That* is history," she tells them. Evie asks the question I came to understand in the writing of this book. In the absence of stumble stones, of externalized memory, we can "forget." If history is in us, then seeing ourselves fully—who we might have been in the past, and who we might still be—is the way to spring free of its trap, to tell the secret. Thinking back, then, is an *act* of remembering, and remembering forward, an *act* of imagination: confrontations, therefore, not just reflections.

There have been many calls for white authors to put whiteness and its privilege under scrutiny, and from within, not placing the burden of the conversation and the labor of representation in the hands always and only of authors of color. Like history, old narratives will speak through us, until we reckon with what we keep passing along, until we look down at the ground at our feet and see where we stand—and then say what we see.

So, now what? Do we look? Or look away?

Other quotes that hung above my desk as I wrote *The Guest Book*:

> We owe respect to the living; to the dead only truth.
>
> —VOLTAIRE

> Young Germans are not responsible for what happened over forty years ago. But they are responsible for the historical consequences.
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> —RICHARD VON WEIZSÄCKER, president of West Germany and then of United Germany, 1984–1994, on the fortieth anniversary of World War II's end

"The difficulty is, you see," he said, "that our imaginations cannot count. When I say five million died—the figure is blank. Five million deaths does not equal one death. Five thousand dead in a concentration camp—there is that same difficulty. The figure is blank. But if I say five died, then perhaps. And if I say one died, a man I have made you know and understand, he lived so, this is what he thought, this is what he hoped, this was his faith, these were his difficulties, these his triumphs and then he—in this manner, on this day, at an hour when it rained and the room was stuffy—was killed, after torture, then perhaps I have told you something that you should know about the Nazis."

—ERICH MARIA REMARQUE,
1946 *New York Times* interview with Van Gelder

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; *ten thousand recollections* [emphasis mine] by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained…will divide us into parties and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, *Notes on the State of Virginia,* 1782

Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life possibilities.

—JILL STAUFFER, *Ethical Loneliness*

Further Reading

Below are a few of the books and essays that informed the writing of *The Guest Book,* or—as in the case of the Solnit book and the Stevenson memorial—appeared after *The Guest Book* was finished but are deeply engaged with the same questions.

Nelson Aldrich, *Old Money*

James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction*, in particular:

- "A Stranger in the Village"
- "The Fire Next Time"
- "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel"

James Baldwin and **Margaret Mead**, *A Rap on Race*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law*

Bryan Stevenson, Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, which created the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama, opened 2018; *Just Mercy*

Rebecca Solnit, *Call Them by Their True Names,* in particular:

- "The Monument Wars"
- "Breaking the Story"

Discussion Questions

Welcome to the reading group guide for *The Guest Book*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *The Guest Book*, you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Discuss the significance of the title. What does the Miltons' guest book represent in this novel? Are Len and Reg guests? Is there any significance to the fact that Reg never signs the book?

2. Between Kitty, Joan, and Evie, which character resonated most with you? Why? Discuss the similarities and differences between these three Miltons.

3. What role does anti-Semitism play within the novel? Do you think Joan ultimately rejects Len because he is Jewish? Do you think Kitty and Evelyn would have objected to Len if he hadn't been Jewish but solely from a lower class? What do you make of what Len's son, Charlie, tells Evie: That was the night "a Jew died too"?

4. Evie teaches her students, "Below the pattern, the great sweeping pages, the wars drummed out and fought, are the questions: What if? What happened? *How?* Beware the vast magisterial history unrolling a carpet across Time: this followed by this, leading inevitably to that. Nothing is inevitable; everything is tangential, particular—*human*." What does she mean? How do the characters in this novel understand history?

5. Min tells Evie, "Jung believed the Hero was not the young man setting forth with his sword to conquer parts unknown. . . . The true Hero is the man in middle age, who traveled backwards in order to be able to return." What is the significance of setting Evie's story line during middle age, the stage of life her best friend refers to as "the In Betweens"?

6. In the rowboat on the island, Reg says he wants to be "alongside," and Moss says, "You are." What does that midnight conversation reveal? Discuss Moss's friendship with Reg and the limits they face in understanding each other's experiences.

7. Reg tells Moss, "You can't slip your history, man. That's what I'm telling you. That's the story I keep getting, again and again. Those people . . . your parents—whatever they did, whatever they didn't do in their lives—that's what's in you. No matter what you say, or do." Do you think he's right? Are the sins of the father, or in Moss's case, the sins of the mother, inherited by the children? How much agency do the different characters have, and how much are their fates shaped by their last name or identity?

8. In the middle of the novel, Kitty is uneasy about what she calls Moss's "overabundance of conscience," and thinks: "Responsibility was not an absolute. We were kind, we were generous, but we did not owe more than we could give." Do you agree? Does Kitty's ul-

timate decision to include Reg in her will make up for how she treated him on the island? Why or why not?

9. Joan tells Evie, "You can't revise what's happened. Nor should you. A life can change in a single moment and from there you simply move forward." Evie asks, "But can't you re-do, Mum? . . . Can't there be many moments? Can't a life turn and re-turn and turn again?" We see that Hazel wants to revise Evie's thesis on the Anchoress. Discuss the different ways in which the women of this novel view history, and the possibility of revising a life.

10. What do you think about Joan's wish to have her ashes buried, nameless, under a stone that says *Here*? What is she marking? What is the power of that word? How does it resonate with the relation between memory and place that the novel suggests? What is the significance of Crockett's Island to each generation of Miltons?

11. In *A Room of One's Own,* Virginia Woolf wrote, "We think back through our mothers, if we are women." Using this quotation as context, discuss Evie's relationship with Joan and how the mother-daughter bond informed Evie's life.

12. When Anne realizes that Joan never told Evie about Len, she decides not to say anything because Joan's story "wasn't hers to tell." Reg originally intends not to disclose this to Evie but ultimately changes his mind. Who do you think did the right thing? Is it important that Evie know who her biological father was? Why? And is it important who tells her the story?

13. "We vanish," Evie whispers in the novel's final line. What is the effect of those words on you? What is their significance and how do they echo across the entire novel that came before?