

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

LEAVE



THE

GIRLS

BEHIND

JACQUELINE
BUBLITZ

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

JACQUELINE BUBLITZ

Where did the idea for *Leave the Girls Behind* originate?



The idea for *Leave the Girls Behind* came from a single line near the end of *Before You Knew My Name*: 'It's never just one life these men destroy.' It felt like a jumping off point for examining a different kind of victim. A widening of the lens to show just how many people's lives are impacted when a gendered crime occurs.

As I continued to think about that lens, I began to explore just how complicated our relationships with the wives and partners of serial killers can be. People tend to view them with a mix of sympathy, or scorn – or suspicion. 'How could she not have known?' is such a layered question.

Embracing my new career as a crime writer (a deliberate as opposed to 'accidental' one!) I then began to ask an even more loaded question – 'What if she DID know?'

The story is set a year after Alice Lee's murder, and the characters in both novels move in the same spaces, both in terms of the Upper West Side of New York, and that threshold where our ghosts wait for us. I knew I wanted to continue to explore that shifting line between the living and the dead, and this felt like the perfect companion piece that could also stand on its own.

Did you have to undertake any research when writing this novel?

To start, I interviewed a series of experts in the fields I was exploring, including a Police Chief in the US. But a lot of my hands-on research came from watching endless true crime documentaries, with a focus on stories that included proven or suspected female accomplices. I also did a bit of my own online 'sleuthing', including mapping how difficult it might be to track down the family members of notorious killers. Everything Ruthie did, from downloading yearbooks to tracking down people who had gone underground, was something I needed to be certain an

amateur detective could do, if she had the time and dedication to her task. So, basically, I had to be able to do it myself.

On the more scholarly front, I spent a lot of time researching how children process traumatic events, and how dissociative behaviours and identity disorders manifest in the adults they become.

And on a lighter note, I became well-acquainted with the ancient goddess, Hecate, who became the patron saint of my girls. A mantle she shares with Stephen Sondheim, whose song about creative obsessions, 'Finishing the Hat', became Ruthie's theme song. And mine too, if I'm honest.

After undertaking that research what's your view on whether killers are born or made?

I really enjoyed examining that question in the book, but I'm not sure I'd put money on the theory my characters eventually settle on! My understanding is that there's no single serial killer gene, but there are certainly genetic markers around impulse controls and aggression. And when a person who is already predisposed to violence experiences abuse as a child, that combination can have lethal consequences.

A hugely frustrating part of my research into notorious serial killers of the 70s and 80s is that there was so often a point where they might have been stopped, had their predatory behaviour been taken more seriously by authorities. Someone like John Wayne Gacy was investigated and let go multiple times throughout his life, for example. I became quite obsessed with all the turning points for these men. Moments they came so close to being caught, and how slipping back under the radar must have emboldened them to keep escalating their terrible behaviour.

Much like *Before You Knew My Name*, this novel is more concerned with those the killer left behind rather than the killer himself. Why is that?

For a start, I think perpetrators get more than enough attention already. Books, movies, podcasts, TV – I consume it all too, so it's not so much a judgement as a desire to tell a different part of the story. Essentially, I'm less interested in the mechanics of a crime, and more focused on how that crime impacts people, both directly and at the societal level. The ripple effect of one person's

behaviour on so many other lives – that’s always fascinated me. I also think this is the more fertile ground for a writer. As I like to say, my characters are about so much more than the worst thing that’s happened to them, and I want to keep exploring that. I’ll (mostly) leave dissecting the villains to other writers, who do it so well.

Did you have a favourite character from this novel – one that was particularly enjoyable to write?

It was always fun to set Juno loose in a scene. Another obsession of mine is the mercurial nature of teenagers, and the way they can swing wildly between being a child and a burgeoning adult. Writing dialogue for Juno was especially rewarding. All that thinly disguised vulnerability, and her sharp tongue, which I found very amusing. I also have a fondness for Amity, the wannabe influencer, who felt very contemporary to me.

But I can’t say too much about *any* of my characters, because they’re all full of surprises ...

What do you hope readers will take away from *Leave the Girls Behind*?

I definitely set out to evoke that feeling of getting caught up in a true crime case that hasn’t yet been solved. The way we experience all the twists and turns, and somehow become personally invested, despite having no guarantee we’re actually going to find out what happened.

I want readers to care about Ruthie, too. She might be an unreliable narrator, but she’s very aware of this, and she’s a determined, brave protagonist who puts it all on the line for the people she loves. Someone recently called her a ‘haphazard heroine’, and I love that. It will make me very happy if she resonates with readers, especially when it comes to the questions that she’s asking about what makes a ‘good’ victim – or how we define victimhood at all.

And I hope readers continue to think about Ruthie and her girls *after* they close the book. I wouldn’t mind if there’s a little haunting going on!

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. How have the actions of Ethan Oswald impacted Ruth's life – and the other living women?
2. Do you think Ruth could really see dead girls or are they a side effect of past trauma?
3. To what extent are some of the women complicit in Ethan's crimes? Or are they complicit at all? Does the fact that they were victims absolve them of their own crimes?
4. Did you see any of the twists coming? Which revelation shocked you the most?
5. What do you think was the significance of the song choice from *Carousel*, 'What's the Use of Wond'rin'?
6. Did you sympathise with any of the women Ruth tracked down?
7. Do you think killers are born or are they made? Were any of the characters in the story evil or were they a victim themselves?
8. The novel doesn't explore the killer's side of the story. Do you agree with the author in her reason to exclude his viewpoint from the novel?
9. The ghost girls stopped appearing to Ruth as frequently as they did at the start. Why do you think that was? Do you think Ruth is going to be able to ever leave the girls behind?
10. Who was your favourite character in *Leave the Girls Behind* and why?

JUST FOR FUN

- Who would you cast in a screen adaptation of *Leave the Girls Behind*?
- If you could have a chat with any character from the novel, who would it be and why? What would you like to ask them?