



Book Club Set #101

Her Secret Son

By Hannah Mary McKinnon

About the Author

I was born in Manchester, UK to British & Swiss parents. A year later they moved my older sister and me to Switzerland. Rather unsurprisingly I love mountains, chocolate and cheese...or mountains of chocolate and cheese, and my sister, of course.

After completing commercial studies in Geneva, I worked as a PA for DuPont. A year later I moved to Neuchâtel and became the Purchasing Manager for a high-tech company that made motors for industrial and space applications. While working, I returned to university, studying part-time for a Bachelor of Science. And then a friend of a friend introduced me to another friend who'd started up an IT recruitment business. I joined the company late 1995, and over the next fifteen years rose through the ranks to become CEO.

Things outside of work were hardly boring, either. A chance encounter back in the dark ages of the Internet in 1999 led me down the aisle with Rob, my Canadian rock, five months later. Actually it was exactly ten weeks after we met face-to-face at the Saint John airport in New Brunswick, Canada – and we're still married. True story. Our first son was born in 2003, followed by identical twin boys just sixteen months later, so I'm heavily outnumbered (and at 5 ft. 8 officially the shortest of the family).

My writing career began after we moved to Oakville in Ontario, Canada in 2010. Maybe it was the failed attempt at a start-up company, or an early mid-life crisis, but one morning I decided to follow my oldest passion, started writing, and never wanted to look back. My first book was a rom-com, but then I switching to the dark side of suspense (say it with me: muahahaha).

While I may never have enough time to get all of the ideas out of my head and on paper, I'll be darned if I won't have fun trying!

Retrieved from: <https://hannahmarymckinnon.com/bio/>

About the Book

How far would you go to protect the ones you love...when they may not be yours to protect?

When Josh's long-time partner, Grace, dies in a tragic accident, he is left with a mess of grief—and full custody of her seven-year-old son, Logan. While not his biological father, Josh has been a dad to Logan in every way that counts, and with Grace gone, Logan needs him more than ever.

Wanting to do right by Logan, Josh begins the process of becoming his legal guardian—something that seems suddenly urgent, though Grace always brushed it off as an unnecessary formality. But now, as Josh struggles to find the paperwork associated with Logan's birth, he begins to wonder whether there were more troubling reasons for Grace's reluctance to make their family official.

As he digs deeper into the past of the woman he loved, Josh soon finds that there are many dark secrets to uncover, and that the truth about where Logan came from is much more sinister than he could have imagined...

Tightly paced and brimming with tension, *Her Secret Son* is a heartbreakingly honest portrait of a family on the edge of disaster and a father desperate to hold on to the boy who changed his life.

Retrieved from: <https://hannahmarymckinnon.com/book-short-stories/the-neighbors-2/>

Discussion Questions

1. At what point in the story did you suspect Grace wasn't hiding the father's identity, but the mother's? What tipped you off, and how did you feel about that twist?
2. If you were Josh, what would you have immediately done when you realized Logan wasn't Grace's child? What would have pushed you to make that choice?
3. Josh blamed himself for his parents' and Grace's deaths. What kept him from spiraling downward after Grace died, and how hard do you think he had to fight to not spiral again? What might have happened if he did?
4. Josh intended to only give Logan up if his parents were good, decent people. What did you make of that decision? If Logan had been Charlie Abbott or Alex King, what should Josh have done, and why?
5. What scene was the most pivotal in the story for you? How would the novel have changed if it had been different, or hadn't taken place? What did you expect to happen?
6. Given Emily's circumstances—her family history, and what she thought she did to Alex—how did you feel about her giving Hunter/Logan up?
7. What might have happened if Grace refused to take Hunter/Logan from Emily? What would you have done if you'd been Grace on the bridge that day?
8. Emily's father and husband betrayed her in different but devastating ways. Did that betrayal justify her attacking Tyler, and why? What do you think ultimately made her take her own life?
9. How do you think Josh will cope with the lies in the long run? Will he ever be able to move past them, and if so, how? What about when he finds a new partner? Do you think he'll share the truth about Logan?
10. How do you feel about Josh not telling Logan about his true identity? Can a situation ever justify hiding someone's reality from them? What might happen if Logan found out five, ten, twenty years later?
11. If Grace hadn't died, do you think her relationship with Josh would have survived long-term? What do you think he'd have done if she'd confided in him about Logan?
12. If Josh hadn't found Alex's bones, but had discovered Logan was indeed Hunter, what do you think he'd have done? Could he and Emily have found happiness, why or why not, and if yes, how?

Retrieved from: <https://hannahmarymckinnon.com/book-club/#toggle-id-5>

Author Interview

Q. Congratulations, Hannah, on the release of your latest book Her Secret Son

A. Thank you very much! I'm excited (and nervous) to send Josh and Logan off into the world.

Q. It was a super fast read and an exciting one, particularly toward the end, which we will not talk about. The book had an interesting premise and Josh had some tough decisions to make. If you were in Josh's position in regards to your son, would you have done the same?

A. All things being equal, yes, I believe I would. As a mum of three boys, it wasn't hard to imagine my protective instincts kicking in, doing whatever I could to ensure Logan's safety and well-being. Mind you, that's easy to say when you're not in Josh's situation, and you know what happens in the end.

Q. How did you come up with the idea for this book?

A. At the gym! I usually listen to music or an audiobook when I work out, but in this instance the TV was on, and I caught the tail end of a news report. Difficult to tell you what it was about without giving away the story, but suffice it to say it caught my interest and got me wondering "what if...?" I let the idea noodle around my head for a while as it shaped itself into something I felt I could tell.

Q. It is interesting to read this type of story from an adopted father point of view. Why did you make your main character a man?

A. As a woman, writing an entire novel from a man's point of view was definitely a challenge, but one I welcomed. In my previous book, *The Neighbors*, one of the protagonists is a man, and I absolutely loved writing his side of the story. Once I'd come up with the premise of *Her Secret Son*, it became clear this was very much Josh's story. His partner dies, leaving behind not only her seven-year old son, but also deep, dark secrets Josh has to choose to ignore or unravel – there was something so compelling about that angle, I had to write it.

Q. Josh has a lot of things going on – past tragedies, addictions – why were those important parts of this story?

A. The audiobook's narrator, Alex Wyndham, described Josh as a "tortured soul" and I think that's absolutely spot on. Josh's past has very much shaped his present, and who he is, yet he's adamant it won't determine his future. Consequently he's been trying to make up for his mistakes for years. The theme running through the book is redemption, and Josh is a complex character who doesn't forgive himself easily, which is another big part of his character. I adored writing him.

Q. What types of research did you do for this book?

A. I had to look into autopsies, obtaining birth certificates, legal guardianship and adoption, to name a few, and there were geographical considerations, too, as the novel is based in upstate New York and Maine. I needed the help and knowledge from many specialists to guide me.

Some of my research never made it into the book, but enabled me to write with plausibility. The research part is always fun. People are so generous with their time and incredibly helpful with what can be very strange questions indeed.

Q. In your bio, you said you sometimes think you'll never get all the story ideas out of your head. Where do these ideas come from?

A. A multitude of places. Something I see on TV, hear on the radio or read. Sometimes it's a line of dialogue I overhear, or an image that pops into my head – my brain seems to constantly be looking for things to write about, and asking “what if...” questions.

Q. Have these ideas always been there or do they keep appearing?

A. Some old ideas hang around, and if they stick, they're usually the ones I should write about. However, new ideas do keep coming up, more so since I've written creatively. The more I write, the more ideas I seem to have – although many of them are discarded, and will never make it to the page.

Q. Where do you find these inspirations?

A. Specifically for my novels, the ideas came from four different places. My debut, *Time After Time*, was born out of frustration. I'd moved to Canada, the company I'd started up had failed, and I felt lost. I wondered how things might have turned out had I made different choices, then I thought about a character who got a glimpse of her alternate realities, and the story was born.

The Neighbors is about an ex-boyfriend moving in next door. They haven't seen each other for almost 20 years, and, in their wisdom, decide not to tell their respective partners they used to be together. The idea came to me when two houses on our court went up for sale at the same time. I wondered who might move in, thought how awkward it could be if it were an ex-boyfriend. That spawned characters with lots and lots of secrets, things they'd never want anyone to know.

Her Secret Son was generated by the news segment on TV and the genesis of my fourth book came from a comment I heard on the radio, and I built the story around it.

Q. You have written 12 short stories and three novels. Are they similar in style why or why not?

A. My short stories are quite varied with comedy, drama and more thriller-type reads. In contrast, my novels started with a rom-com, but I quickly moved to domestic suspense/drama. I prefer writing grittier, darker stories. There's something about them that gives me more to sink my teeth into.

Q. How is writing short stories different from novels? What do you like, dislike about each?

A. Short stories are fun because they're quick and, well, short. I don't plot them, but have an idea in mind and simply go with it and see where it takes me. There's something very liberating about that process.

Q. Is there a downside?

A. Not really, other than fewer people reading them.

Novels are a far greater investment in time and effort, but they let me create in-depth characters and storylines, which I love to do. However, before the novel really starts coming together, there's an awful lot more room and time for that pesky voice of self-doubt to creep in. I'm getting better at duct-taping its mouth shut.

Q. How long does it take you, on average, to write a book and short story?

A. I've written a short story in a day, or half a day, but that's only because they tend to be no longer than 2,500 words and I type really fast. I've been known to write flash-fiction stories in 30 minutes, but that's the exception, and only because the idea was crystal-clear from the moment my fingers touched the keyboard.

The first draft of a novel – my skeleton draft where I'm essentially telling myself the story – typically takes around two months. This isn't something I'd share with my editor. To get to that point takes another three months or so.

Q. What is your writing process?

A. Four books in and I'm definitely a plotter. I start with an idea, usually the beginning, and work out where I want the character(s) to be at the end of the story. From there I build stepping stones how to get them there. I interview my characters (sounds bizarre but it's incredibly helpful to flesh them out), and break the story up into around 30 manageable chapters with five to seven bullet points per chapter.

In the draft stage, each of those chapters has to reach a minimum of 2,000 words, meaning my skeleton draft will be around 60,000, or two thirds of my final word count.

At that point the heavy editing begins. I'll go over the manuscript five, six, seven times, layering, building and developing with each round.

Once done, I send it to my editor as a "first" draft, after which we go through another few rounds of edits – this time with her wonderful expertise and support.

Q. Do you write full time? If no, what else do you do? If yes, when did writing become full time and how did you decide you could do it full time?

A. My husband runs an electrical contracting company and I take care of all the finance, HR and admin for that, although writing is my main job. I've been a full-time author for a few years now, and am very fortunate that I'm able to do so.

I decided to dedicate my time to writing because I can't imagine doing anything else, and of course because I was lucky enough to get multiple book deals.

Q. I noticed on your website in addition to writing, you also do editing, helping other authors get to where you are. What do you like about editing? How has editing helped with your writing? Do you like the editing process for yourself? What advice would you give to new writers about the editing process?

A. The writing community is so supportive and encouraging, and offering editing services allows me to help others break into the market, too, which is a fabulous feeling. It's fun and incredibly satisfying to help someone shape their story, work out where to add character depth, improve pacing, or polish dialogue, and figure out blind spots. As for my own editing process, I love it! Writing the "skeleton draft" is by far the most tedious part, and why I write that draft as quickly as I can. It's far easier to edit a page with words than a blank one.

Having other people edit my work has been extremely helpful, career defining, actually. For *Time After Time* I hired a freelance editor, and it was an eye-opening experience. It changed the way I write forever because she was able to pinpoint exactly what wasn't working, and the mistakes I'd made. Multiple lessons learned, all of which culminated in my securing agent representation.

I've since worked with two editors at my publisher (HarperCollins) and they're phenomenal. Both Michelle and Emily bring so much insight to my work, have been able to get far more out of the manuscript than I'd ever imagined. They're both savvy and whip-smart. I've loved every minute of our collaboration.

In terms of advice for new writers I'd say this: when editing your own work, know that the first draft of anything you write will more than likely not be your best – that's what the editing stage is for, so keep layering. When working with a professional editor: listen, be open-minded, and try not to get defensive. They have your best interests at heart. But, ultimately, it's your work, and you have to trust your gut instincts, too. It's a fine balance.

Q. If you could offer one piece of advice to new writers in general, what would it be?

A. Can I make it three?

One; take some writing courses and find the courage to share your work. Two; if you're stuck on a chapter but know what comes after, skip ahead. I have no idea why I didn't think of that myself, but it was revelatory and liberating when I realized I didn't need anybody's permission to do so. Three; keep writing. The road to publication is littered with the corpses of fictional characters others gave up on. Don't let yours die, too.

Q. You mention you also dab in kid-lit. What kind of writing do you do for kids? Do you think you'll write for other audiences?

A. I have a middle-grade project I've been working on, and I'd love for it to be picked up, but its early days so we'll see. I might end up writing for other audiences. As my children grow, I do wonder if I'll ever attempt writing for young adults, but for now I'll stick to my domestic suspense stories.

Q. What are you working on now?

A. My fourth book, SISTER DEAR (working title) is getting close to the final editing stages with my editor. It's another domestic suspense/drama, this time about two half-sisters who don't know the other exists...until one of them finds out, and decides to infiltrate her sibling's life. Dark and twisty. I'm excited for this one, too, and it'll be out in 2020.

Q. Her Secret Son came out May 28. What are you most looking forward to about the book promotion journey?

A. Gosh, having a book published is both exciting and incredibly nerve-wracking. I'm looking forward to hearing what people make of the story, and hope people love Josh and Logan as much as I do.

Q. Is there anything you would like to say to your potential readers/existing ones?

A. Thank you for choosing to read my novels. It's a privilege I don't take lightly, and I hope you find it time well spent.

Retrieved from: <https://booktime584.wordpress.com/2019/06/09/hersecretson-2/>

Other Links and Resources

Author Video Interview:

<https://youtu.be/wzUkaGC1z6E?list=PLojXbcYQzMvv-T6cYjEYWH7FM08X3I3vL>

Author Scripter Interview:

<https://www.thebigthrill.org/2019/05/her-secret-son-by-hannah-mary-mckinnon/>

Grief and Bereavement Support:

<https://hospicesimcoe.ca/community-programs/grief-and-bereavement-support/>

<https://www.grievingchildren.com/>

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DATE: _____

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BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: