



Book Club Set

Looking For Jane

By Heather Marshall

About the Author



Heather Marshall was born and raised in Canada, where she lives with her family and their giant golden retriever.

After completing two Master's degrees, Heather worked for several years in politics and communications before finally turning her attention to her true passion: storytelling.

Her debut novel ***Looking for Jane*** was an instant #1 bestseller and dominated the *Toronto Star* and *Globe and Mail* bestseller charts for 27 total weeks over the course of 2022-2023, including 5 consecutive weeks at #1.

Selected as one of Indigo's Top 10 Best Books of 2022, the *Globe and Mail's* Top 100 Books of 2022, and CBC's Best Canadian Fiction of 2022, ***Looking for Jane*** was also chosen as STYLE Canada's Book of the Month, CityLine's Book Club pick, and was an Indie Next pick for February, 2023. It has been published in 14 languages in 19 territories around the world, and was recently optioned for development into a television series by BentFrame Film & TV and Cineflix Studios. Stay tuned for Heather's next novel, which will hit shelves in 2024.

Retrieved from: <https://heathermarshallauthor.com/>

About the Book

This “powerful debut” (*Hello! Canada*) for fans of Kristin Hannah and Jennifer Chiaverini about three women whose lives are bound together by a long-lost letter, a mother’s love, and a secret network of women fighting for the right to choose—inspired by true stories.

Tell them you’re looking for Jane.

2017

When Angela Creighton discovers a mysterious letter containing a life-shattering confession in a stack of forgotten mail, she is determined to find the intended recipient. Her search takes her back to the 1970s when a group of daring women operated an illegal underground abortion network in Toronto known only by its whispered code name: Jane . . .

1971

As a teenager, Dr. Evelyn Taylor was sent to a home for “fallen” women where she was forced to give up her baby for adoption—a trauma she has never recovered from. Despite harrowing police raids and the constant threat of arrest, she joins the Jane Network as an abortion provider, determined to give other women the choice she never had.

1980

After discovering a shocking secret about her family history, twenty-year-old Nancy Mitchell begins to question everything she has ever known. When she unexpectedly becomes pregnant, she feels like she has no one to turn to for help. Grappling with her decision, she locates “Jane” and finds a place of her own alongside Dr. Taylor within the network’s ranks, but she can never escape the lies that haunt her.

Weaving together the lives of three women, *Looking for Jane* is an unforgettable debut about the devastating consequences that come from a lack of choice—and the enduring power of a mother’s love.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you know about the postwar maternity homes and the underground networks offering illegal abortions before reading this book? How do these chapters of history inform your understanding of women's rights in Canada?
2. Due to an unfortunate mistake, the letter addressed to Nancy didn't arrive to her in 2010. What do you think might have happened if she had received it then?
3. St. Agnes's Home for Unwed Mothers is not a welcoming place for the women who are sent there. How are the girls made to feel small or powerless? Where and how do they find joy, despite their situation?
4. The power of a mother's love is a central theme throughout the novel. How do the women in the novel express their love for their children, either adopted or biological, or during pregnancy? When does that love help heal relationships? When does it cause unintentional harm?
5. The novel also explores the mother-daughter relationship, particularly through Nancy, but also Angela. How are these women shaped by their mothers' decisions, and how do those choices affect their own attitudes toward pregnancy and motherhood?
6. Similarly, why is it so important to Angela to reunite Nancy with her biological mother?
7. What are the social expectations of women during the 1960s and onward, and how do the women in the novel fulfill or circumvent these expectations? For example, what barriers does Evelyn overcome while pursuing medical school or working as a doctor? What pressures might Frances also experience?
8. Dr. Morgentaler warns Evelyn that the costs of illegally providing abortion are high. What risks do Evelyn—and others fighting for women's rights—face? Why are the risks worth it?
9. Describe the impact that witnessing Clara's illegal abortion has on Nancy. How does it change their relationship as cousins? How does it help set Nancy on the path to Jane?

10. Contrast the experience Nancy has at Clara's abortion against her own. What do their stories highlight about freedom of choice and the importance of accessibility?
11. How does Angela's storyline illustrate the evolution of women's rights? In what ways do they still need to advance?
12. Consider the ways friendship and family are portrayed in the novel. What brings people together? What do these examples say about our need for human connection?
13. Discuss the role of secrets through the characters of Frances, Sister Agatha, Nancy, and Evelyn. What is accomplished when they share their stories or secrets with one another? What happens when they don't?
14. The novel underscores that time as a force can drive the characters' decisions and regrets. How does the passage of time influence Evelyn, Nancy, and Frances as their lives unfold?
15. Were you surprised by the revelation about Evelyn and Maggie's final days at St. Agnes's?
16. In the author's note, she says that more than 300,000 mothers in Canada are estimated to have been forced into the postwar-era maternity home system. What do you make of the government's lack of apology or interest in reparation to the survivors of these homes?
17. What is the significance of the title Looking for Jane?

Author Interview



When we read this debut novel, we were riveted by the heartbreaking depictions of young Canadian women who were placed in postwar homes for unwed mothers and compelled to give up their babies for adoption, or opted instead for backstreet abortions. To learn more about this period in our history, we spoke with the book's author, Heather Marshall, whose sensitive fictional take on these real-life events illuminates the power of women, and of motherhood.

Canadian Living (CL): Looking for Jane links two parts of our history—the real-life underground networks organizing safe abortions before they were legal, and the maternity homes set up after the Second World War, where unwed mothers were placed to wait out their pregnancies and then give up their babies for adoption. The novel is told through three main characters: Evelyn, who, in 1961, stays in one of the homes and subsequently becomes one of the doctors working with the abortion collective (the Jane network); Nancy, who becomes pregnant as a teenager in 1981 and decides to seek an abortion, then later works with Evelyn in the Jane network; and Angela, who finds a misdirected letter in 2017 and sets into motion a chain of events that changes all the women's lives. Heather, these are some big topics to tackle in any novel, let alone a debut, no?

Heather Marshall (HM): They are. When I started thinking about this book, I thought it was about abortion, and then while I was writing I considered it more and I thought, "No, this is about motherhood." The book covers pretty expansive territory, and abortion is definitely one facet of the story and propels the plot in a big way, but ultimately *Looking for Jane* is about motherhood and choices—wanting to be a mother and not wanting to be a mother and all kinds of grey areas in between. That was what I wanted to explore. Choices around motherhood are not black and white; it's a massive decision one way or the other, whether you choose to have children or not, whether you want to have them and can't, or don't want to have them and end up pregnant. *Looking for Jane* is about a lot of huge questions in women's lives.

CL: How did the book come about, and why do you think this story is important to tell?

HM: For a while it was two stories I'd been working on in my head—one on the Canadian maternity homes and the other about the legalization of abortion—and then I realized that they were actually two sides of the same coin, which is the ongoing fight for women to have agency over their own bodies. The story dropped into my head

almost fully formed, and I wrote it, well, because I believe it needed to be written. I hope this novel can help to shine a bit of light into the dark space surrounding the history of reproductive rights in Canada and, in doing so, start some conversations.

CL: What does the title mean?

HM: *Looking for Jane* refers to a composite of underground abortion networks that worked to give women a safe option before abortion was legal. In my research, I found a reference to an organization with the unofficial nickname Jane that operated in Chicago, and the idea grew from there. In the novel, Nancy is told that if she ever needs a safe abortion, she should call around to doctors' offices and ask for Jane. Eventually she'll find someone who works with the network.

CL: The women's experiences at the maternity homes are harrowing, from being cut off from their families to giving birth in basically a hospital closest to having to return to the home to work as cleaners and then being told to forget the whole thing ever happened! There was such shame and abuse.

HM: Exactly. Many of the homes were run by religious organizations and sort of subsidized by the government, and those conditions were pretty standard as far as I found. I gave my characters a reasonably sympathetic nurse in the book, but I read horrible accounts of nurses being despicably mean to these girls. It's just horrendous, frankly. I scaled back some of the awful things I read about, but the firsthand accounts contain terrible stories about the treatment of these young women. Even after giving birth, they were expected to work as, essentially, cleaners and cooks to 'pay off their stay' for a subsequent three months. Statistics Canada notes that between 1945 and 1971, almost 600,000 babies were born to unmarried mothers, their births recorded as 'illegitimate.' One researcher estimated that more than 300,000 mothers in Canada were forced or coerced into surrendering their babies for adoption within this system.

CL: So was it the federal or provincial government that was responsible for these homes?

HM: The program fell under social programming, and generally social programs are administered by provinces but with federal funding in the form of transfer payments. It was around the 1960s that the federal government started to commit funds to establish some-thing called the Canada Assistance Plan, and that was to help provincial social assistance programs that included these maternity homes. So the federal government paid the provinces, who then sort of outsourced the program to (mostly) churches to administer.

CL: You've said that you never learned about Canada's maternity home system in school, and I'm sure many people will say the same. Is there a lot of information out there about these homes?

HM: I think even in the past couple of years there's more than there was when I started writing *Looking for Jane*. It was all so secretive for so many years, with so much stigma attached. I stumbled across a newspaper article that exposed this issue and noted that some of the women who were affected by the adoptions from homes for unwed mothers were starting to assemble through an organization called Origins Canada. They were pushing the government to review the system, and that led me down a rabbit hole to other news articles. When I started doing more academic research, I found firsthand accounts of women who stayed in those homes. Those accounts inspired my characters. The federal government undertook a study of the postwar maternity home system and the women's claims of trauma when they were approached by Origins Canada, and in 2018 the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology put forth a recommendation to the Government of Canada that it should publicly acknowledge that the program took place, and issue a formal apology within one year to the women and children who were traumatized by the system and the forced adoption mandate. We're four years out from that now and it's long overdue. Once I started *Looking for Jane* I felt an incredible responsibility to tell these women's stories as accurately as I could, and I made a very deliberate decision not to exaggerate or minimize the trauma that they endured. I would really like to see these women get their formal apology, and feel quite motivated to help. I hope this book will give that cause some attention.

CL: You wrote some evocative scenes about the fight for women's rights in the '70s and '80s, including a description of the 1970 Abortion Caravan in Ottawa and a fictional meeting between Dr. Henry Morgentaler and Evelyn. They had such realistic flavour.

HM: Yes! I was able to connect with Judy Rebick, an amazing activist and author, and she filled me in on a lot of the colour and the behind-the-scenes happenings that I wasn't getting from the reading I was doing.

I highly recommend her book, *Ten Thousand Roses*, which is sort of a compilation of firsthand accounts of women who participated in the women's liberation movement—it's really inspiring.

CL: You were pregnant while working on *Looking for Jane*, and your son is just turning one. When you started writing, which character did you most identify with, and now that you're a mom has that perspective changed?

HM: There's a part of me that really loves Paula, who's a ferocious activist in the book—I can relate to her very intense feelings about reproductive choice and access. I

definitely wrote some of myself into her character. Also, the scene with Angela and Tina in the bathroom when they see the positive pregnancy test, that came from my experience of ‘Oh my gosh, we’ve been waiting for this,’ so in that respect I identify closely with Angela. She’s also the character that feels very emotionally compelled to get to the bottom of this mystery with the letter and sort of stick her nose in—I can see myself doing that! I think if I found a letter like the one in the book I would do everything I could to try to find the intended recipient.

The toughest scene for me was the one in which Evelyn says goodbye to her baby. We were editing that one when my son was about three weeks old, so I was on this hormonal trip in the postpartum phase and I was sitting in front of my desk holding him and just sobbing. I’d hoped I nailed it when I wrote it but I wasn’t pregnant then, and after giving birth that scene just hit very, very differently.

CL: I love that *Looking for Jane* concerns all these complicated life circumstances for each character, but there’s no hint of judgment about any of the women’s choices.

HM: Through writing *Looking for Jane* and my own experience, I’m aware now more than ever why the issue of abortion is so deeply emotional and how it causes such profound, passionate feelings on both sides. But I’m still so grateful that I live in a country where it’s my legal right to make the choice to remain pregnant—or not—because our courts have determined that my body, and everything that’s happening inside it, belongs only to me.

CL: So given all that, what do you think is a key conversation a mother should have with her kids?

HM: There are so many ‘direct parenting’ conversations about being good people and being true to themselves, and making sure they know that I’m a safe harbour at all times. But in terms of life advice, I think, you know, you’re never sure when you’re going to run out of time with your parents, so I like the idea of telling my child that if there’s anything they ever want to know about me and my past, they can ask.

Retrieved from: <https://www.canadianliving.com/life-and-relationships/canadian-living-books/article/interview-with-heather-marshall-looking-for-jane-s-author>

Other Links and Resources



Interview - Heather Marshall on the true events that inspired her debut novel 'Looking For Jane': <https://globalnews.ca/video/8739498/heather-marshall-on-the-true-events-that-inspired-her-debut-novel-looking-for-jane>

Historical Fiction chats: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg_IcVXkjec

Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

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: