This Shining Life

HARRIET KLINE

BOOK CLUB KIT
QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel opens with Rich in his element—at a party, surrounded by family. How did this introduction shape your first impression of him as a character, especially in light of the next time we see him, receiving his diagnosis?

2. What do you think of Harriet Kline’s choice to structure Part 1 as alternating between the adults undergoing Rich’s diagnosis and last weeks, and Ollie’s narrative after his father’s death? How did it inform your reading experience?

3. Ollie’s chapters give us the first glimpse into life after Rich dies. What do you think the refrain that opens each of his chapters—“My dad died”—says about the way he is processing his grief? How does his fixation on solving the puzzle fit into this?

4. How do Ruth and Nessa differ in the ways they see the world? How does this inform the way each of them grieves? Were there similarities in their personal journeys, despite how different they seem as people?

5. Compare Angran to Marjorie and Gerald. How do think Ruth and Rich were each shaped by their parents? How do you think this has informed the way they parent Ollie?

6. How has Ruth’s relationship with Angran informed who she is as a person, especially in terms of her mental health? How is her depression portrayed in the novel, compared with Angran’s own experiences when Ruth and Nessa were growing up?

7. How do you feel about the final scenes of the novel, especially seeing all of these characters together under one roof? What do you think lies ahead for Ollie and his family?

8. What was the most significant change you saw in each character by the end of the novel?

9. Even though Rich didn’t really intend for there to be a puzzle, Ollie’s quest to try to solve it was transformative for him, and for his family. What did he, and the other characters, learn from this undertaking?

10. What does the phrase “golden thinking” mean to you? If you had to pick a color for your thinking, what would it be?
Can you explain the title?

When the character of Rich first came to me, I pictured him in a garden at dawn, with the sky pale and peachy behind him. He was always associated in my mind with that color, a shade so soft that it’s almost indistinguishable from white. I wasn’t sure why at first. I thought there might be a notion of impermanence—something in the way this color fades as the sun rises, just as Rich’s life force would fade from the world. It wasn’t until I actually wrote him into the garden, listening to the birdsong and admiring the dawn that I began to understand. “There was gold somewhere he thought, and he was standing in the glow of it.” This was the line that made sense of it to me. He’s the character who most often treasures the fact of being alive and for him, life itself shines golden; when we see the beautiful color of the sky, we glimpse this too. I thought of many titles for this book, but I knew that shining had to be in there somewhere. It is a sad book, but there is joy in it too, just as love and grief are inextricably entwined.

What inspired you to write this shining life?

About two years before I started writing This Shining Life I was present at the death of a dear friend. It was one of the saddest moments of my life but also the moment when I felt most authentic. I was completely connected to my feelings and to the reality of each moment as it unfolded. As tragic as it was, there was a sense, as it happened, that I was completely alive. I’ve never really felt like that since and I found myself wondering why we are so often disconnected from events around us, and what it is that stops us from being truly alive. I was thinking about bereavement too, and noticing how we bring our own emotional history to the experience of grief. It was these two themes that I wanted to explore by showing a number of journeys through love and loss.

What did your writing process look like?

The writing process was a mess! I wrote scenes as they came to me, out of chronological order, sorting them into a story as I went. Ollie always arrived with the line “My dad died.” Try as I might, I just couldn’t unhook this phrase from his voice. This meant that all his scenes had to be written from a viewpoint after Rich’s death. But I didn’t want to start the book there. I wanted to lead up to it so we could get to know Rich and the way the family operated around him. There was nothing for it, but a dual time line! Large rolls of wallpaper were required. I had to write one list of the events as they unfolded for Ollie, and another, beside it, of the events as they occurred for everyone else. I drew arrows between these lists at the points where they converged. Every time I edited a scene in one list, I had to change it in the other. Sometimes arrows were scribbled out, sometimes new ones were drawn. Sometimes I sat with my head in my hands and despaired!

What do you hope readers take away from the book?

I hope that readers will finish the book feeling some love for the characters despite their flaws. I wanted to suggest that people who are difficult or weak or annoying are all striving, like anyone else, to find their way through. Most of all though, I’d love readers to finish with a sense of how lucky we are to be alive.
RECIPE

THAT PICNIC-TO-GO PLATE
FROM THAT CHEESE PLATE WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE
BY MARISSA MULLEN

KEY: THE PLATE:
RECTANGULAR GLASS
BAKING DISH,
5 × 8 INCHES

1: CHEESE
Comté

2: MEAT
Genoa salami, sliced

3: PRODUCE
Strawberries
Dried apricots
Castelvetrano olives

4: CRUNCH
Marcona almonds
Seeded crackers
Walnuts

5: DIP
Blueberry jam

6: GARNISH
Fresh thyme
Carnations