



Elizabeth J. Church

All the Beautiful Girls

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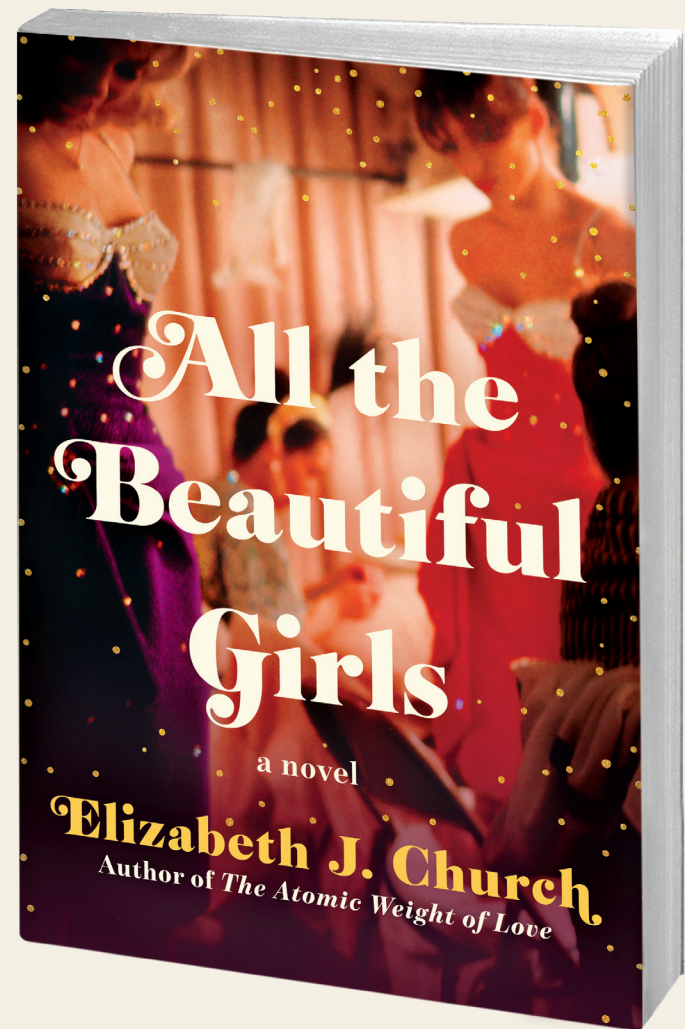
A NOTE FROM ELIZABETH J. CHURCH

THE SUMMER AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH, my brave, adventurous mother loaded her four children into our station wagon and drove us all from New Mexico to California. It was 1966, I was ten years old, and we stopped for the night in Las Vegas. I recall being far more enamored of the motel's cute kitchenette and our decadent TV dinners than I was of the towering neon displays we saw while exploring the Strip, our heads tilted up and up and up toward the grandeur of those immense billboards of light. Still, my little-girl's heart knew I was in the land of true glamour—of feather-clad dancers and crooning singers, of fast-paced comedy routines and sophisticated celebrities. Something about that oasis of money, of titillation and sin, of fame and heat, stayed with me—still remains with me.

When I set out to tell Lily and Ruby's story, I wanted to explore what are, for me, some of the more intriguing puzzles of life. Which childhood events alter the way we see the world? What is "family," and how do we navigate the limits of those into which we're born? How do we create the groups of people who support us through life? Finally—and by no means least of all—how does our culture see the lives and bodies of women? Have things changed for the better? Or at all?

That now-vanished, classic Vegas seemed such a fitting setting in which to pose these questions. After all, although arguably the culture of Las Vegas allowed for greater social freedom (it was, after all, Sin City), the Strip was essentially a movie set, all façade.

The more I worked on this novel, the more I became aware of the contrast between what happened in Vegas and what was happening



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in the rest of the country at the time—the Vietnam War, civil rights protests, the growing women’s movement. The city seemed a microcosm of an America so obviously in flux: the growing divide between the values of an outgoing generation and those of the up-and-coming youth. There was Sammy Davis Jr., dancing on the stage every night, but when he entered and exited the theater, he was forced to use the kitchen door. This was not the real world. It could not be the real world and still promise escape, both for its tourists and for its very own performers.

The most iconic Vegas performer, the showgirl, seemed to me the ideal figure to illuminate issues surrounding women’s bodies—how they’re simultaneously idolized and exploited, celebrated and taken for granted. Ruby also provided me with a way to write honestly about sexuality, that secret ignominy of a woman’s life. Her fears about the accuracy of her internal compass of love. Her fears about men, about how to know which ones can be trusted and which should be avoided. I let this smart, ambitious heroine grapple with the question my friends and I have long discussed: What leads us to the choices we make in love?

A great deal of research went into this novel. I read numerous books on the history of Las Vegas, as well as biographies of famous figures who passed through the town. I created a map of the Strip for myself because so many of the glorious casinos and hotels of yore were destroyed to make room for the new, and I wanted to be sure that Ruby traveled in the right direction when she went from one casino to another. The Internet also provided me with marvelous resources, including UNLV’s impressive digital collection of casino and showgirl

memorabilia, right down to menus with prices and original design drawings for showgirl costumes. I altered some things to suit my fictional purposes. For example, Sammy Davis’s trip to Vietnam took place several years later than is depicted in this novel. At times, I got lost in the research; it was a fascinating culture and time, and the variety and numbers of celebrities who passed through Vegas were astounding.

Several years ago, I returned to Las Vegas to attend a conference on special education law. It was no longer the place it had been when I was a child, and I felt a sense of disappointment—that I’d not been the right age to enjoy classic Vegas. I’ve remedied that disappointment by using my imagination to travel back in time. Now, I’ve walked with Tom Jones and Sammy Davis Jr., I’ve sat next to Sonny and Cher in an audience, and I’ve experienced what Ruby felt when she stepped onto a lavish stage set. I had a great time in the Vegas of my mind, plowing this landscape for all it offers—light and dark—to illuminate the life of Ruby, to find a terrain that suited the challenges of my indomitable heroine, and to confront what we believe about ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Although I no longer practice law, I still find the need to fight for a cause (or two, or three). In my fiction, my characters become my clients, and I am their advocate. After all, the issues that define the lives of Lily, Ruby, Vivid, Rose, Dee, Aunt Tate, the Aviator, and Jack—they endure, for all of us. And if I can hope to accomplish anything, it’s to create a more expansive sense of justice and to urge understanding.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ruby is resilient, a survivor. What aspects of her personality and life make her that, as opposed to a victim? Do you think some people choose—consciously or not—to become resilient, as opposed to victims?
2. Aunt Tate is a mixed bag—one moment she’s a strict, seemingly unfeeling disciplinarian, the next, she’s quietly leaving gifts for Ruby. Have you ever known someone like Aunt Tate? What makes Aunt Tate tick?
3. Ruby has no one she can trust enough to tell about Uncle Miles’s abuse. How have things changed for girls who suffer childhood abuse? How do things still need to change?
4. Why doesn’t Ruby hate the Aviator? Why does she seem to forgive the Aviator right from the start?
5. What roles do books play in Ruby’s life? How do books help her find her way and provide her with support? Is there a book that helped you cope with a difficult period in your own life?
6. Shame plays a large part in this novel: Ruby feels shame about her childhood and her choice of Javier; the Aviator feels shame about the car accident, and homosexual men of the time were taught to feel shame about their sexuality. How do the characters overcome or transform their shame? In what ways does shame determine each character’s course in life?
7. Why does Aunt Tate choose Uncle Miles over Ruby? Do you think if Ruby had revealed her abuse to Aunt Tate earlier, there would have been a different outcome?
8. Ruby’s dance recital piece is an effort to communicate her uncle’s abuse and her inability to escape. Ultimately, Ruby uses dance to free herself, to enjoy her body in a way that brings her joy, to give herself a voice, and to lend her a form of power—especially power over men. What other ways do you think dance proves vital to Ruby? What does dance do for, or give any of us?
9. Ruby is required to “mix” with men but finds it challenging. Why is it so hard for her? What do her relationships with the men who travel through the casinos teach her? What do those relationships tell her about herself?
10. Ruby accumulates wealth but remains unsatisfied. Why do you think this is so for her and for many others?
11. What role does Las Vegas play in the novel, in American culture in the sixties, and, most particularly, in Ruby’s growth as a young woman?



Photo Credit: <http://d.library.unlv.edu>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

12. Ruby's friendships with Vivid, Rose, and Dee sustain and challenge her. What is special about women's friendships, and about the ways in which women support one another?
13. Javier is abusive, but he does not go so far as to blacken Ruby's eyes or beat her senseless. Where is the line between abuse and poor treatment? How does a woman decide when to leave a relationship, and when to hang in there and keep trying?
14. Ruby has long been wanting to join in the protests or otherwise engage with the changes the youth culture is endeavoring to make. Why then does she fare so poorly when she meets with the UNLV protest group? What sets her apart?
15. After she returns from Vietnam, why doesn't Ruby report Javier to the police and have him charged with theft?
16. Ruby struggles with what she feels is her flawed compass when it comes to determining whom she can trust and finding love. What has led to this state of uncertainty for her? Do you feel you have an accurate fix on trust, or on finding the right partner? What helps us to learn how better to make these important choices?
17. Would you want to travel back in time to classic Las Vegas? Why or why not?
18. Would you want to be a showgirl? Why or why not?
19. Do you think that Ruby will ever be able to find and sustain a healthy, loving relationship with a man? Why or why not?
20. How does Sloane's existence change Ruby's perception of herself? How do the experiences of Ruby's childhood affect how Ruby is and will be as a parent?
21. What actors would you cast if there were a film version of *All the Beautiful Girls*?
22. ***Contains Spoilers*** The Aviator and Jack must keep their love for each other a closely guarded secret. How has society changed since the sixties? How might things be regressing, and why? What societal fears limit the expression of love to male-female relationships?



Photo Credit: <http://d.library.unlv.edu>

VEGAS FUN FACTS

- At the Tropicana, dinner could be had for as little as \$6.00 in 1969. At the Aladdin, happy hour cocktails were \$0.59, breakfast was \$0.69, a lunch buffet was \$1.69, and a dinner buffet was \$1.99.
- On July 16, 1969, two underground nuclear tests triggered at the Nevada Test Site created such a large tremor that the top of the Sahara swayed.
- B.B. King performed his first Vegas show in 1969 at Caesars Palace.
- Evel Knievel crashed on December 31, 1967, when he tried to jump over the fountains at Caesars Palace.
- Showgirls were often former ballerinas, musicians, and singers, and their costumes could weigh up to seventy pounds (in heels!). Blue or green eyes were preferred.
- Howard Hughes arrived in November of 1966, and took the top two floors of the Desert Inn. In March of 1967, he bought the hotel. He paid \$6.25 million in cash and assumed another \$7.0 million in liabilities.
- In July of 1967, Hughes bought the Sands for \$14.6 million. In 1970, he tried to buy the Dunes but the negotiations fell through.
- Don Arden's "Lido de Paris" showgirls performed at the Stardust, and in 1969, over 9 million people saw the Lido production.
- The International Hotel opened in 1969, and Elvis performed there exclusively until his death. His opening show on July 26, 1969, included in the audience: Sammy Davis Jr., Tom Jones, and Fats Domino. The dinner show cost \$17.50 per person. Elvis had 800 consecutive sold-out shows and sold \$43.7 million in tickets.
- Circus-Circus opened in 1968, and the casino could be entered by sliding down a pole. The casino featured a bar built into a merry-go-round, jugglers, acrobats, clowns, fortune tellers, and a "freak show." There were no rooms in the facility until 1972, and in 1969 the "Nudes of the Night" production signed 25-year-old Babette Bardot, who performed a strip tease at the end of her 45-minute act. Her chest measurement: 44 inches.
- The Moulin Rouge Hotel, an off-Strip property, opened in 1955, and was reportedly the country's first interracial hotel. It closed just six months after opening. For the short time it was open, Moulin Rouge featured African-American showgirls.



Photo Credit: <http://d.library.unlv.edu>

MUSIC PLAYLIST INSPIRED BY THE NOVEL

- “You Were Only Fooling,” Kay Starr
- “She’s Leaving Home,” The Beatles
- “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” The Beatles
- “Wishin’ And Hopin’,” Nancy Sinatra
- “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” Marvin Gaye
- “I Heard It Through The Grapevine,” Marvin Gaye
- “Sympathy For The Devil,” The Rolling Stones
- “She’s A Rainbow,” The Rolling Stones
- “Time Is On My Side,” The Rolling Stones
- “All Along The Watchtower,” Jimi Hendrix
- “Purple Haze,” Jimi Hendrix
- “Cracklin’ Rosie,” Neil Diamond
- “Spill The Wine,” Eric Burdon & War
- “It’s Not Unusual,” Tom Jones
- “She’s A Lady,” Tom Jones
- “Feeling Good,” Sammy Davis Jr.
- “Something’s Gotta Give,” Sammy Davis Jr.
- “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” Sammy Davis Jr.
- “You Are My Lucky Star,” Sammy Davis Jr.
- “Aquarius,” The 5th Dimension
- “Let The Sun Shine In,” The 5th Dimension
- “Positively 4th Street,” Bob Dylan
- “I’d Rather Go Blind,” Etta James
- “Watching All The Girls Go By,” Dean Martin
- “Ain’t That A Kick in the Head,” Dean Martin
- “Maybe,” Janis Joplin



Sammy
Davis Jr.



Photo Credit: <http://dl.library.unlv.edu>

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DRINK IDEAS FOR YOUR EVENT



The Classic Daiquiri

Serves: 1

Ingredients:

- 1½ ounces light rum
- ¾-ounce fresh lime juice
- ¼-ounce simple syrup

Directions:

- Pour the light rum, lime juice and simple syrup into a cocktail shaker with ice cubes.
- Shake well.
- Strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Credit: TheSpruce.com



The Old Fashioned

Serves: 1

Ingredients:

- 1 sugar cube (or 1 bar spoon simple syrup)
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- 2 ounces rye or bourbon
- Orange twist

Directions:

- Muddle the sugar cube and bitters with one bar spoon of water at the bottom of a chilled rocks glass. (If using simple syrup, combine bitters and one bar spoon of syrup.)
- Add rye or bourbon.
- Stir.
- Add one large ice cube, or three or four smaller cubes.
- Stir until chilled and properly diluted, about 30 seconds.
- Slip orange twist on the side of the cube.

Credit: NYTimes.com

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DRINK IDEAS FOR YOUR EVENT



Sparkling Cider

Serves: 4-5

Ingredients:

- 2 cups apple cider
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 cup club soda
- Fresh whole cranberries (optional)

Directions

- Mix together the apple juice and sugar and pour into two glasses.
- Add ½ cup club soda to each.
- Be sure that glasses can hold 1½ cups of liquid, adjust as needed.
- You want two parts apple cider to one part club soda.
- Optional: garnish with fresh cranberries.

Credit: FamilyRecipes.com



Iced Tea

Serves: 16

Ingredients:

- 4 green tea bags
- 4 orange pekoe tea bags
- 6 cups boiling water
- 1 cup white sugar
- 1 (12 ounce) can frozen lemonade concentrate
- ½ lemon, juiced
- Cold water, or as needed

Directions:

- Place green tea bags and black tea bags in a 1-gallon glass jar. Pour boiling water over tea bags; steep for 30 minutes.
- Remove tea bags; stir in sugar and lemonade concentrate until dissolved. Fill jar to the top with cold water; stir in lemon juice. Chill in the refrigerator until cold. Serve over ice.

Credit: AllRecipes.com

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FOOD IDEAS FOR YOUR EVENT



Cranberry Jell-O Layered Cake

Serves: 12

Credit: TasteofHome.com

Ingredients:

- 2 packages (3 ounces each) cranberry gelatin
- 1½ cups boiling water
- 1 can (16 ounces) whole-berry cranberry sauce
- 1½ cups cold water
- 1½ cups graham cracker crumbs
- ½ cup sugar, divided
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened
- 1 carton (16 ounces) frozen whipped topping, thawed, divided
- 1 can (15 ounces) mandarin oranges, drained

Directions:

- In a large bowl, dissolve gelatin in boiling water.
- Stir in cranberry sauce and cold water until blended.
- Refrigerate for 45 minutes or until partially set.
- Meanwhile, in a bowl, combine the cracker crumbs, ¼ cup sugar and butter.
- Press into an ungreased 13-in. x 9-in. dish. Refrigerate until set.
- In a small mixing bowl, beat cream cheese and remaining sugar until smooth.
- Fold in half of the whipped topping.
- Spread over crust.
- Fold oranges into gelatin mixture; spoon over cream cheese layer.
- Refrigerate for 4 hours or until firm.
- Cut into squares; dollop with remaining whipped topping.

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FOOD IDEAS FOR YOUR EVENT



Cocktail Meatballs

Serves: 10

Ingredients:

- 1lb lean ground beef
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons water
- ½ cup bread crumbs
- 3 tablespoons minced onion
- 1 (8 ounce) can jellied cranberry sauce
- ½ cup chili sauce
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 1 ½ teaspoon lemon juice

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350°F (175°C).
- In a large bowl, mix together the ground beef, egg, water, bread crumbs, and minced onion. Roll into small meatballs.
- Bake in preheated oven for 20 to 25 minutes, turning once.
- In a slow cooker or large saucepan over low heat, blend the cranberry sauce, chili sauce, brown sugar, and lemon juice. Add meatballs, and simmer for 1 hour before serving.

Credit: AllRecipes.com



Pigs in a Blanket

Serves: 6

Ingredients:

- 8 Frankfurters
- 8 Slices American Cheese
- 1 (10 ounce) package refrigerated biscuit dough

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C).
- Wrap cheese around each frankfurter then the biscuit around that. Put on cookie sheet with the overlap of biscuit faced down, so you don't have to use tooth picks.
- Bake in preheated oven until biscuits are brown, about 10 to 15 minutes.

Credit: AllRecipes.com

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FOOD IDEAS FOR YOUR EVENT



Deviled Eggs

Serves: 4

Ingredients:

- 6 eggs
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Smoked Spanish paprika, for garnish

Directions:

- Place eggs in a single layer in a saucepan and cover with enough water that there's 1½ inches of water above the eggs.
- Heat on high until water begins to boil, then cover, turn the heat to low, and cook for 1 minute.
- Remove from heat and leave covered for 14 minutes, then rinse under cold water continuously for 1 minute.
- Crack egg shells and carefully peel under cool running water.
- Gently dry with paper towels.
- Slice the eggs in half lengthwise, removing yolks to a medium bowl, and placing the whites on a serving platter.
- Mash the yolks into a fine crumble using a fork.
- Add mayonnaise, vinegar, mustard, salt, and pepper, and mix well.
- Evenly disperse heaping teaspoons of the yolk mixture into the egg whites.
- Sprinkle with paprika and serve.

Credit: FoodNetwork.com

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