



THE SPECTACULAR

A Novel

ZOE WHITTALL

BOOK CLUB KIT

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for picking up *The Spectacular*. I really hope you enjoy reading it.

I started writing this novel in 2009, shortly after returning from a trip to Turkey with my father where I met relatives from his side of the family for the first time. I learned some interesting family history from this experience and thought I could incorporate it into the story. Before she died, my Granny self-published a chapbook that detailed a childhood memory of escaping Smyrna in a rowboat. Originally I thought this was a memory from the Turkish war of 1922, but it was actually from the First World War when Turkey declared Britain its enemy, and my family who lived there were all British or French, part of the Levantine community who had immigrated there as far back as the 1700s. I also incorporated my grandfather's memory, recorded in a letter, of barely escaping in 1922—he remembers a Turkish soldier poking a bayonet under the rug where he was hiding in a church, and it didn't quite reach him and he remained undetected. But I struggled with writing a historical narrative and, after writing thirty pages or so, I put it aside and, while procrastinating, began to write *The Best Kind of People*.

For the following ten years, I spent nearly every day of my thirties contemplating whether or not I should have a baby. It was all-consuming, both emotionally and intellectually, and as a queer person there is just so much more planning that has to go into that choice, and I just never made it. I wanted a child very badly, but the circumstances of my life did not support it. My ex-girlfriend didn't want kids, my next partner already had them and didn't want more. I never felt like I could do it on my own. This preoccupation began to inspire the characters of Missy and Carola, and when I dove back into *The Spectacular* I shifted the focus onto a more contemporary narrative set in North America about reproductive choices and sexual autonomy. I began to look at the question of “should I or shouldn't I?” through the experiences of Missy, her mother Carola, and her grandmother Ruth, at various stages of their lives when they both wanted and didn't want to have children.

I hope you enjoy reading and discussing the book.

Best Wishes,
Zoe Whittall

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does the past influence the present in *The Spectacular*? How do the characters try to repress or escape the pain of their histories? What does the novel tell us about the relationship between past and present?
2. What is valuable—vital even—about women telling their own stories? How can girls and women be supported to determine their own narratives?
3. Of the three women, Missy, Carola, and Ruth, which character do you relate to the most? The least?
4. What beliefs are depicted in the book? How were they shaped for the characters? Do beliefs help or hinder the characters in their lives?
5. The theme of mothers and daughters is one that plays throughout the book. How would you describe Missy and Carola's relationship? Do you think it has progressed, regressed, or otherwise changed by the novel's conclusion? Why do you think Missy's views of motherhood changed?
6. Is mothering something that is taught or learned? What did the characters teach one another? Did Carola's beliefs about motherhood change by the end of the book? Was each character able to separate her sense of self from her identity as a mother (or not a mother)? Was each penalized for doing so—either by society or by one another?
7. Where in the book were characters keeping secrets? And what secrets held throughout the narrative? Why do you think people sometimes don't tell everything?
8. How does each of the characters distinguish love from sex? Do they believe in love? Do they feel they need it? Does this change over time? And where does non-romantic, familial love fit in? Do you think all the women's needs are fulfilled by the end of the book?
9. Sexuality and coming to terms with it is an important part of *The Spectacular*. How was sexuality used? Was it weaponized, ignored, repressed, exploited?
10. Did reading this book in any way challenge your view of the ways in which certain social and political issues have, in the past, been represented or painted over in mainstream literature and other art forms?
11. How did this book change you? Do you have a new perspective as a result of reading it? Did you learn something you didn't know before? Has your attitude or behavior changed?

TEQUILA SUNRISE RECIPE

INGREDIENTS:

- 1½ oz. tequila
- ¾ cup orange juice
- ¾ oz. grenadine syrup
- Orange slice, for garnish
- High-quality maraschino cherry, such as a Luxardo, for garnish

DIRECTIONS:

Into a highball glass filled with ice, pour the tequila and orange juice. Slowly add the grenadine into the glass over the back of a spoon or by drizzling it down the side of the glass, allowing it to settle at the bottom. Garnish with an orange slice and maraschino cherry.



Photo by Fernando Andrade on Unsplash

SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

To Bring You My Love

PJ HARVEY

Range Life

PAVEMENT

Three Days

JANE'S ADDICTION

Our House

CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG

Rockin' in the Free World

NEIL YOUNG

Fagetarian and Dyke

TEAM DRESCH

Gone for Good

THE SHINS

No Children

THE MOUNTAIN GOATS

Just One of the Guys

JENNY LEWIS

Treacherous

TAYLOR SWIFT

All of the Lights

KANYE WEST

Femme Bitch Top

TRIBE 8

Over (feat. 6LACK)

SYD, 6LACK

Racist, Sexist Boy

THE LINDA LINDAS

Be Afraid

JASON ISBELL AND THE 400 UNIT