

A woman in a dark dress is walking up a red staircase that leads into a dark, shadowy area. The scene is lit with a strong red glow, creating a mysterious and suspenseful atmosphere. The woman is seen from behind, walking away from the viewer.

"Everything you want in a book...and a chilling and surprising ending that stays with you long after the last page."

—**AIMEE MOLLOY**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Perfect Mother*

THE LAST FLIGHT

A NOVEL

JULIE CLARK

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What do Claire and Eva have in common? In what ways are they different?
2. How do you feel about Eva's decision to manipulate Claire?
3. Put yourself in Claire's shoes. How would it feel knowing that you've traded your life for someone else's? Would you feel guilty or fortunate? Why?
4. Describe the obstacles Claire faces once she escapes from Rory. Were there any difficulties that surprised you?
5. Compare Claire's relationships with other women in the book like Eva, Danielle, Petra, and Kelly. Are any of these women similar? In what way?

6. Discuss Eva's childhood. How does it affect how she behaves as an adult?
7. Identify some of the triggers Claire faces as a result of Rory's abuse. How do you think she can overcome them?
8. Claire makes the difficult decision to go public with her story, knowing full well that she may be met with criticism and disbelief. Why did she make this decision? Would you have handled the situation differently?
9. Liz is the only person Eva allows to get close to her. Describe their friendship. Why is it important to Eva? What does it mean to her?
10. Eva faces several huge difficulties in her life. Do you think her drug dealing is justified, given her circumstances?
11. Characterize Eva's relationship with Dex. Why does she feel betrayed when she learns the truth about him?
12. How did you feel after reading Eva's final chapter? Do you think there was anything different she could have done?
13. What do you think Claire will do next with her life? Will she be happy?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write *The Last Flight*?

I've been intrigued by the idea of whether someone could disappear from their life for a long time, and have often played out the various ways they could do it in my imagination. The things they'd need. How they'd get them. Where they might go, and what they'd do when they got there. What they'd have to be leaving behind. I knew early on that I wanted it to be a woman, and I wanted her to have an inner strength, even if her current situation didn't allow her to use it. What might be the tiny ways she'd fight back, fight for room for herself?

Which of the two women—Eva or Claire—did you enjoy writing more? Did you find either of them more challenging?

I love both of my characters for different reasons. I love how scrappy Claire is, how she can look at a situation and figure out how to make it work for her. And I love Eva because she's so flawed yet lovable. I enjoyed writing them both. I would say writing Claire was more challenging,

because I was pushing her forward in time, having her act and react to things she didn't know yet. Eva felt more natural to me, living in the past, filling in the blanks. With Claire, the tension had to be immediate, the pacing had to be tight. With Eva, I was allowed to sink more into emotion, to flesh out her backstory and how she ended up where she did.

We're in an era where women are finally starting to feel safe sharing their stories. How does this book relate to the #MeToo movement?

I wanted to acknowledge how hard it still is for women to come forward with their stories. Even in this era of #MeToo, the cost remains high both personally and professionally. Just because we have a name for it doesn't mean it's fixed.

Can you talk a little bit about the systemic forces of oppression that both Claire and Eva face? What made you choose to write about these topics?

As an educator, I feel like it's my obligation to shine a light on what still isn't working in our society. The way a woman's truth is sometimes held to a higher level of scrutiny than a man's. The benefit of the doubt that so often goes the other way. I've known people like Claire, and I've known people like Eva, for whom things don't always turn out okay. In the United States, we like to talk a lot about progress; however, change—not just for women but for all marginalized groups—is slow. Too slow.

What does your writing process look like?

I wake up early in the morning to write. During the workweek, I'm up at 3:45 and write until 6:00. Then I teach a full day of school and shuttle my kids here and there after school, making dinner, supervising homework. Early mornings—with a large pot of coffee—is my most productive writing time. My process is somewhat old school. I favor

drafting with paper and pen, especially if I'm having trouble. It slows my brain, it allows me to put down words that "don't count," and it allows me to get warmed up before committing words to my computer. I draft pretty fast—I think I had a first draft of *The Last Flight* done in about three or four months. Then I like to spend a year or more revising and rewriting.

As a genre, suspense is huge right now. How do you think this story sets itself apart from other books in the space?

I feel like this book has the commercial appeal of the suspense genre, with the emotion often found in upmarket women's fiction. But what really sets this book apart from the others on the shelves is the fact that I wanted both of my protagonists to be strong, savvy women. There's nothing crazy or unstable about Claire or Eva. It's important that the stories we tell reflect the strong women in the world today.

How did you map out all the twists and turns that happen throughout the story?

With lots and lots of note cards! It was really challenging to be writing a dual timeline and then weave it all together. It helped to have a clear vision for how the book would end, and I knew the ending pretty early on. From there, I mapped out Claire's and Eva's story arcs—what I wanted each of them to overcome, what I wanted each of them to learn.

What is the importance of female friendship in a narrative like this one? Have you found friendship with women to be just as important in your life as it is in Eva's and Claire's?

Female friendship is incredibly important in this story. We can all think about that one friend who showed up right when we needed her, giving us exactly what we needed to push us forward. I have been lucky enough to have some amazing female friendships. And as a single

mother, it's especially important to have those touchstones. My friends keep me sane. They make me laugh. They listen to what I'm struggling with and step in to help in innumerable ways. Humans are, by nature, social animals. And while I'm a dedicated introvert, I rely on my friends every day.

Why did you decide to set a thriller in Berkeley?

After college, I landed a job in the Cal Athletic Department. I worked in fundraising, so I spent a lot of time at Memorial Stadium, as well as Harmon Gym (which would later become Haas Pavilion). It was the best job for a just-graduated-from-college person who wasn't entirely sure she was ready to have a "real job" yet. I loved my years in Berkeley, made many great friends there, and often dream of moving back someday. I decided to set *The Last Flight* in Berkeley so I could revisit it in my imagination. Go Bears!

What are you hoping readers gain from *The Last Flight*?

I want readers to be inspired by the courage of both Claire and Eva, who did what felt impossible to each of them. No matter the circumstances, there's a way out. As Claire's mother put it: *If you pay attention, solutions always appear. But you have to be brave enough to see them.*