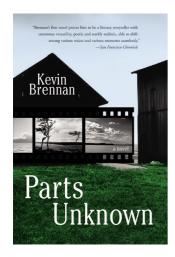# Parts Unknown

By Kevin Brennan
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Introduction

A masterfully rendered debut novel of a man's decision to leave the life intended for him behind, and the turbulent emotions unleashed in his family when attempts to make amends, Kevin Brennan's riveting debut novel *Parts Unknown* surrounds the families of photographer Bill Argus and his wife, Nora.

Many years before the present action, Bill had abandoned his first wife and their child and now, at the age of sixty-three, wishes to return to his hometown of Pianto, California, for a shot at redemption. Through Nora's eyes, his dubious homecoming is reported, along with Nora's own troubled family history and long-time estrangement from her mother. Her father, much like Bill, had left the family when Nora was a child, and he hasn't been heard from since. Bill's reception by his brother, Cameron, his Aunt Carmen, and his ex-wife Annie spark in Nora a revisiting of her speckled past, with the themes of guilt, regret, and forgiveness on her mind as she witnesses Bill's clumsy reappearance in Pianto.

Through other, third-person points of view, the novel brings the past into focus, studying the prism of family relationships behind the latter day action. Moments of epiphany for Bill's mother and father, Annie, Annie's parents, Cameron, and Bill's son, Hayes == all in various time frames == reveal to the reader the elaborate personal rivalries and choked emotions that impede reconciliation. Set in the California desert and Sonoma County, this striking meditation on the elusive nature of redemption lovingly maps the diverse terrain of the human heart as it probes the intricate bonds of family and the complex nature of forgiveness and love.

Questions for Discussion

1. Kevin Brennan had the character of Bill Argus in mind for over thirty years == dating back to time he spent in a Blythe, California hospital == before Argus appeared as a character in this novel. Brennan's family had been in a car accident and was laid up in a desert town for a few days, during which time an older gentleman who happened to be a photographer was being treated for appendicitis. Brennan engaged his fellow patient in conversation and learned that this man lived alone in the desert and occupied himself taking pictures. As Brennan left Blythe and the hospital behind, the memory of the photographer stayed with him, and he began to wonder how a man might have slouched his way into such a lifestyle. *Parts Unknown* was his answer. Can you think of an individual who briefly flitted through your own life == someone whose lifestyle was either contradictory to your own, or who simply intrigued you? If you were to write a book about this individual what do you think you would learn about yourself?

2. The character of Bill Argus is revealed in the third person, where almost all of the other characters in the novel narrate part of the story. Discuss how each voice unveils a new perspective on the story. Which narrator did you trust the most? Whose voice did you feel the most drawn to? Whose voice did you trust the least? Do you wish Bill Argus had narrated a passage in the first person? Discuss how you feel this would have changed the novel.

3. How did the knowledge that Nora had engaged in prostitution influence your opinion of her? Do you feel that her choice was a result of her abusive childhood? Or do you think it was simply a pragmatic decision that insured her economic survival?

4. Does Bill recognize his pathological and cruel treatment of Cam as a direct result of abuse from his father? Do you think that he realized that he could not control his impulses as an adolescent because of his own mistreatment by Bad Ray? Discuss his peyote and Wild Turkey influenced confrontation with Bad Ray long after his father's death (page 165). What does Bill learn?

5. If you were a resident of Pianto, do you feel that you would have been able to keep the secret of Hayes' paternity? Discuss the concept of an open secret. How would/does it feel be someone who keeps up an illusion at the request of others? How would you cope if you were to find out your reality had been manufactured? How do you think Hayes would react if he were to learn the truth?

6. How does Nora's relationship with Bill's family change over the course of the novel? How does she come to feel about her husband's brother and the family she has married into? How does she repay their hospitality and help to broker the peace between the family members? How does Nora help Bill with his homecoming? What does she offer to him in terms of strength, and comfort and compassion? Discuss what you think Nora and Bill speak of under the covers each night in his brother's house. Do you think that Bill would have returned to Pianto if Nora had not been at his side?

7. Nora feels such an intimate connection to a photo taken by Bill Argus that she goes on a desperate search for the man who took the picture == thinking that he might have answers for her. Is there a work of art, a piece of music, a film, or a book that has ever driven you to try to connect with the artist? What questions did/would you have for them? What would you want them to offer to you?

8. The fictional town of Pianto is said to mean "we wept" in Italian. Why do you think Kevin Brennan deliberately chose this translation? What resonance does it add to the story?

9. Compare and contrast Annie and Cary Lee. How did each cope with abandonment by their husbands and the knowledge that had been left to raise their child on their own? Discuss Cam as a father figure as contrasted to the father's of Nora, Bill and Annie. Who was most emotionally equipped to shelter and raise a child? How did the experience of each major character as a child impact their emotional development?

10. *The Denver Post* wrote that "[*Parts Unknown*] roasts the old chestnut that male writers cannot convincingly tell stories from

female perspectives. Brennan does it with grace, wit and beauty." How did you feel about Brennan's ability to write from the female perspective? Did you feel that the transitions between male and female perspectives were seamless, or did you think he had more success in one gender over the other?

11. Bill's mother had to live a life in Pianto pretending not to be the grandmother of her only grandchild due to Bill's desertion of Annie. Discuss the emotional impact of maintaining the lie. How was Miranda's dream for her life changed by Bill's desertion? How was Annie's mother changed by her husband's banishment of Annie from their family?

12. Discuss why you thought it was significant to the author to use part titles for each section of the story. What did you think of Brennan's choices for the part titles? How did it influence your understanding of each section? Also discuss the meaning of the novel's title *Parts Unknown* as it relates to the narration of the novel == each chapter almost its own short story, telling a fragment of the larger tale from a different character's perspective, with many parts unknown to the other characters of the story that are only shared with the reader. Discuss other reasons Brennan titled his novel *Parts Unknown*.

About the Author

Kevin Brennan was born and raised in St. Louis. After stops in Virginia, London, San Diego, and San Francisco, he has settled in Northern California with his wife and surrogate children, Ned (a dog) and Nip (a cat). Now forty-six, he has rung in the New Year in Red Square, performed as a busker in the London Underground, wandered the California desert, and auditioned unsuccessfully for a reality television series. He and his wife were married in Arezzo, Italy, having navigated a tortuous Italian bureaucracy as well as the Autostrada in a rented Fiat Tipo. Driving in Rome nearly killed him.