

The Kindest Lie

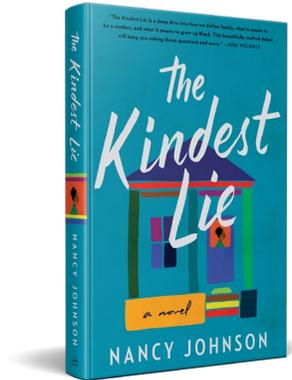
William Morrow

By Nancy Johnson

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Introduction

Named a Most Anticipated book by *O Magazine* * *GMA* * *Elle* * *Marie Claire* * *Good Housekeeping* * *NBC News* * *Shondaland* * *Chicago Tribune* * *Woman's Day* * *Refinery 29* * *Bustle* * *The Millions* * *New York Post* * *Parade* * *Hello! Magazine* * *PopSugar* * and more!



"The Kindest Lie is a deep dive into how we define family, what it means to be a mother, and what it means to grow up Black...beautifully crafted." —JODI PICOULT

"A fantastic story...well-written, timely, and oh-so-memorable."—*Good Morning America*

"*The Kindest Lie* is a layered, complex exploration of race and class." —*The Washington Post*

A promise could betray you.

It's 2008, and the inauguration of President Barack Obama ushers in a new kind of hope. In Chicago, Ruth Tuttle, an Ivy-League educated Black engineer, is married to a kind and successful man. He's eager to start a family, but Ruth is uncertain. She has never gotten over the baby she gave birth to—and was forced to leave behind—when she was a teenager. She had promised her family she'd never look back, but Ruth knows that to move forward, she must make peace with the past.

Returning home, Ruth discovers the Indiana factory town of her youth is plagued by unemployment, racism, and despair. As she begins digging into the past, she unexpectedly befriends Midnight, a young white boy who is also adrift and looking for connection. Just as Ruth is about to uncover a burning secret her family desperately wants to keep hidden, a traumatic incident strains the town's already searing racial tensions, sending Ruth and Midnight on a collision course that could upend both their lives.

Powerful and revealing, *The Kindest Lie* captures the heartbreaking divide between Black and white communities and offers both an unflinching view of motherhood in contemporary America and the never-ending quest to achieve the American Dream.

Questions for Discussion

1. The novel begins in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama. Why does Johnson choose to open the story at this pivotal moment in history and how does that set the tone for what unfolds in the book? How different would this story be if it began in the present day?
2. Ruth's long-held secret from her past sends her back to her impoverished hometown and threatens to upend the upscale life she's created with her husband Xavier. What does this reveal about being Black in America? What is the cost of that double-identity? Does one ultimately have to choose?
3. When Ruth encounters Black panhandlers in downtown Chicago, she refrains from giving them money; however, she donates to a white family she's never met that lost a child in a Ganton house fire. Later in the novel, she locks her car doors when she sees Black guys jostling in the street. Ultimately, she befriends Midnight, who is white. Does Ruth suffer from internal racial bias or selective classism?
4. Ruth wrestles with the moments after she gives birth when Mama leaves the bedroom with her baby, telling her not to think about her son and instead pursue her Ivy League education. Is Ruth to blame for walking away from her child? What was her responsibility, if any, to pursue the truth about her son's identity and whereabouts over the years? Did she have a choice or was she robbed of it?
5. The threat of police violence is a constant throughout the novel. How does that impact Black and white characters differently?
6. Butch is portrayed as a racist who makes hateful remarks and projects a bitter worldview. Despite this negativity, does he have any redeeming qualities? How does Midnight's attachment to his father inform his own understanding of race?
7. Midnight got his nickname from his Black and brown friends from school because he was a little white boy trying to 'act Black.' Is Midnight guilty of cultural appropriation? Do you think his behavior could be interpreted as offensive?
8. When the boys have the run-in with Dale at the convenience store, Corey and Midnight process that encounter very differently. How do their racial identities shape their reactions?
9. Mama reveals many explosive secrets throughout the novel. Are the choices she makes to protect Ruth and Eli understandable and forgivable?
10. The Kindest Lie examines the sacrifices and complexities of motherhood. What do Ruth, Mama, Lena, Verna, and Natasha reveal about what it means to be a mother in contemporary America?
11. Eli and Butch are both victims of the economic downturn. How does toxic masculinity infect Black and white men under this type of pressure?

12. Midnight is trapped in the web of poverty that Ruth managed to escape. Yet he's white and she believes he will always benefit from that privilege in spite of his unstable home life. Is that true? Will his whiteness supersede his economic disadvantage? Corey is raised in a middle class, two-parent household, but he's still Black. What will his future look like? How do these dynamics impact the trajectory of these characters' lives and how they view each other over the course of the novel?