

# BOOK CLUB KIT

"[A] triumph, a deeply affecting work of truth and reconciliation over what it means to live the American Dream." —LOS ANGELES TIMES

## The Kindest Lie

*a novel*

NANCY JOHNSON

"[A] BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED DEBUT." —JODI PICOULT

*Wm*

# Table of Contents

PAGE 3	MEET THE AUTHOR
PAGE 4	DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
PAGE 6	BEHIND THE BOOK
PAGE 8	Q&A





# Meet Nancy

A native of Chicago's South Side, Nancy Johnson worked for more than a decade as an Emmy-nominated, award-winning television journalist at CBS and ABC affiliates in markets nationwide. A graduate of Northwestern University and The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she lives in downtown Chicago and manages brand communications for a large nonprofit. *The Kindest Lie* is her first novel.





# Discussion Questions

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?





# Behind the Book

The first time I was called the n-word it happened early in my career as a television news reporter when a photojournalist colleague hurled the epithet in anger. The second time was when I had my first home built and someone spray-painted that ugly word on the drywall.

Just four years later, the election of Barack Obama was a balm soothing the wound, not just for me, but for all of us who'd experienced the legacy of almost 400 years of racial terror in America. Shortly before my father died of lung cancer, he cast the last vote of his life for Obama. My father survived the Great Depression, the Second World War, and Jim Crow; and then in his final days, he got to see a Black man like himself ascend to the highest office in the land.

In *The Kindest Lie*, I wrote about a nation drunk with hope as it broke a seemingly impenetrable barrier. Even as the financial markets crashed and factories shuttered and people lost their jobs, a sense of promise persisted. Yet in spite of the prospects the 2008 election presented, I watched the vitriol between Black and white America bubble up and boil over. There was nothing post-racial about it. So many people who were just trying to make it and fulfill their dreams had a scarcity mindset, an us versus them zero sum game.

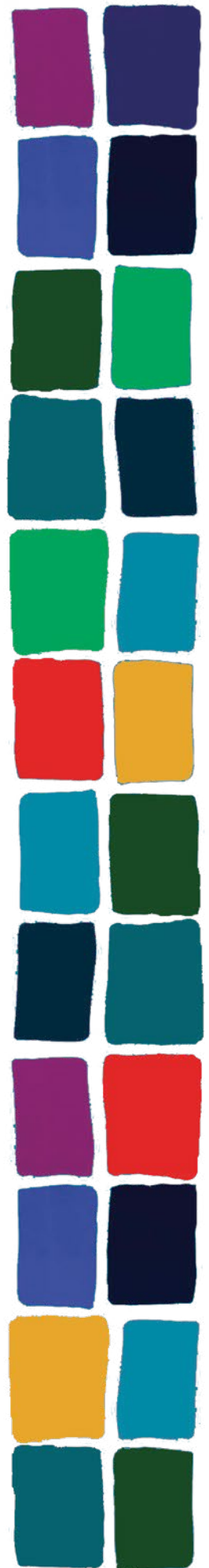
I centered the novel on Ruth Tuttle, a successful Black engineer on the come up in Chicago—a woman who's pulled back into the struggling community she managed to escape. Like me, she's a Black professional who often straddles worlds without finding firm footing in either. When she meets Midnight, a young white boy who is adrift and trying to find his way, she sees herself in him while recognizing the white privilege that often protects him. I created these two complicated characters to show the parallels of very different people both grasping for the American Dream. This story was born out of my own burning question: Could the universal need for love and family transcend the chasm of race and class in America?

When I created the Black characters in my novel, I knew some readers would come to the page with pre-conceived, faulty perceptions of who we are. The complexity of the characters in the Tuttle family show the range of our humanity and that they don't fit into a prescribed box. Mama is a ferociously protective grandmother who sacrifices and loves hard and sometimes lies to give her grandchildren the best shot at succeeding in this world. Yet we learn that at 78-years-old, she's a woman harboring trauma and unfulfilled dreams of her own. Eli, Ruth's brother—the character I most enjoyed crafting—is a

proud Black husband and father who's lost his job at the local auto plant. He's bitter and he's drinking too much, but even when his emotions are raw, he remains resilient, and we watch him protect those he loves over and over again.

The hopes and dreams of the white characters in *The Kindest Lie* are just as powerful and palpable as the Tuttle's. Midnight's desperate need to be loved twisted my heart in every scene I wrote. As a kid who was bullied for being too tall, too smart, and too nerdy, I've always connected with what it feels like to be on the outside of things. Those personal experiences of isolation and longing fueled the character of this young boy. Like Eli, Midnight's father Butch also lost his job at the plant. His behavior shows how economic anxiety can lead to toxic masculinity, regardless of racial background. There's no question that Butch is a hateful bigot, yet he is also capable of fierce love. As incongruous as it seems, both can be true at the same time.

I'm convinced that we're all reaching for our own version of the American Dream. The lies we tell, the secrets we keep, and the mistakes we make are all part of that journey. I don't have any easy solutions; however, I am convinced that children are watching us and repeating our mistakes. In *The Kindest Lie*, we see the disastrous fallout of what happens when racism goes unchecked and the children follow our lead. We need to have an honest dialogue. I hope that my novel can be a starting point for the conversation.





## Q&A WITH NANCY JOHNSON

**Q:** *The Kindest Lie* is a searing exploration of race, class, police brutality, the American Dream, and so much more. The novel might be set in the past, but these topics remain highly relevant to this day. How do you see *The Kindest Lie* fitting into the current cultural and political conversation?

**A:** Stories are timeless because universal truths are. The ways we hurt and hope transcend time and overlap generations. Anti-Black racism has a 400+ year history in America and its potency has never waned. In the book, what Ruth, Xavier and Corey feared in every encounter with white police officers became realized in 2020 in the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks.

I believe our nation is still just as bitterly divided and as roiling with racial strife as it was in November 2008 when my novel opens on the night America elects its first Black president. Back then, people were struggling to survive an economic downturn that left many jobless and financially strapped. Now, a global pandemic and the recession it spawned leave the most vulnerable in a precarious position more than a decade later. We face another monumental election this year that will test our nation again and reveal who we are and who we aspire to be.

**Q:** When Ruth, an Ivy-League educated Black engineer, meets Midnight, a young white boy adrift and armored with white privilege, they find themselves on a dangerous path that could upend both their lives. What commonalities do these two characters share? In what ways do they echo those of the Black and white communities in middle America? How do the challenges of their friendship reflect the deep divide between these two communities?

**A:** Both Ruth and Midnight grew up in working class neighborhoods in Ganton, Indiana. They're science geeks with big dreams. As a girl, she wanted to pursue an Ivy League education and become an engineer. Midnight dreams of becoming a microbiologist. Dreams can be elusive and easily slip away once they're in our grasp. That's why Mama told a series of lies and kept secrets to ensure Ruth's future would remain intact. Similarly, Midnight's father admonishes him to forget baseball and become a doctor so he can cure cancer someday. However, the most durable bond Ruth and Midnight share is their desperate need for love and family connection. Still, the world reminds them over and over that expectations and outcomes don't operate so equitably. Black and white America remain divided and it's that chasm that threatens the budding friendship between Ruth and Midnight.



**Q:** The novel focuses on Ruth then segues into Midnight's story with great skill and ease. What was it like to write from the perspective of a young white boy, and how did you find the balance to juggle these two narrative voices?

**A:** I'll let you in on a little secret. In an early iteration of this story, Midnight was a Black boy. However, when I decided to tackle the racial divide, I knew that Midnight needed to be white. I've never been white before but as a Black person in America who has had to navigate white spaces in school and on the job, I'm fairly fluent in whiteness. I relied on friends with sons and young boys themselves to fill me in on favorite video games and mischief. Where I really drew inspiration for Midnight's character though was my own experience as an outsider who was bullied as a kid. I understood his loneliness and longing for acceptance because I'd experienced that myself.

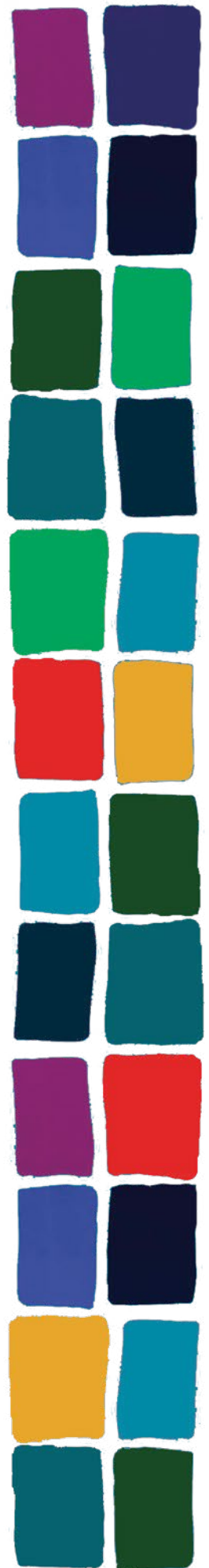
I was able to easily move in and out of both Ruth's and Midnight's perspectives because they're so different in terms of age, race, and gender. I had fun discovering the many parallels in their lives and watching their journeys intersect in the most explosive and emotionally charged ways.


**Q:** How did your background as a Black female professional, as well as your own coming-of-age experiences, influence the creation of Ruth's character?

**A:** I grew up in a solidly middle-class family where both of my parents were college graduates. That differs from Ruth, who came of age in a poor, working class family. Yet there are commonalities in that we both wear the mask of the Black professional and code switch as we navigate predominantly white spaces at work and then go home to our Black communities. There's a scene early in the novel where Ruth is in the workplace trying to maintain her professionalism while recognizing she's being marginalized. I've had that experience a few times in my career and those challenges helped me craft a believable scenario for Ruth. Also, I've had to be discerning with those from my own community, determining which Black colleagues are allies and which are detractors. Ruth finds solidarity with the Black office receptionist instead of her fellow scientist who shares her skin color but not her Black consciousness.

**Q:** *The Kindest Lie* opens at a place of hope with the rise of Barack Obama. Was it always important for you to start here, or did the novel have a different beginning?

**A:** It's often a challenge to know the right way to open a novel. I'd always been taught to begin at the moment when everything changes. In an early draft, I opened with Ruth giving birth at seventeen to her baby boy. But then I realized that the change moment was bigger than Ruth and her individual circumstance. Barack Obama's ascendance to the presidency birthed hope and promise in many across the nation, but especially Black people. Election night marked a celebration for those who lived to see it and in honor of those who had made it possible. Yet as powerful as that hope was, it had its limits in a country that had never healed its racial wounds. Starting with the celebration made the painful reality of what followed even more poignant.





**Q:** What inspired you to explore the sacrifices and expectations that are inevitably linked with motherhood? How do you expect readers will perceive your portrait of being a Black mother in contemporary America?

**A:** Society lauds motherhood as this calling that requires perfection and provides little room for deviation from accepted norms. We rarely see narratives about mothers who walk away from their children. Mothers who lie and break the law to protect those they love. Mothers who question their fitness to be mothers. I find those messy mothers to be the most interesting. I'm curious to know who they are, how they define themselves, and why they make the choices they do. In my novel, readers get to see a range of Black mothers in Ruth, Mama, and Verna. They love fiercely, sacrifice, and make mistakes. They're flawed and they're human. All of them are struggling to mother and protect Black children, trying to keep those children and their dreams alive.

**Q:** *The Kindest Lie* is your debut novel. How did you become a writer, and what was the first seed of inspiration for *The Kindest Lie*?

**A:** I can't remember a time when I wasn't writing. From penning school essays on how I spent my summer vacation to serving as managing editor of a city-wide youth newspaper in Chicago, writing occupied a central space in my life growing up. While I always loved books, I didn't settle on fiction writing until after my news career. I began to reflect then on my purpose and my passion. Writing is my gift and I knew I had to use it to tell untold stories and amplify the voices of Black people in America. The bitter divide between Black and white America in the 2008 presidential election saddened me because I couldn't understand how half of America saw things so differently than I did. That's something I wanted to explore, and it turned into *The Kindest Lie*. I believe fiction helps us transcend those barriers and have honest, difficult conversations. The world begins to make sense when we understand it through the lens of our characters.

**Q:** What was the most difficult section to write, and what section came to you most naturally? Likewise, who was the most difficult character to write, and who came to you most naturally?

**A:** Eli represents so many Black men in America who are proud and hard-working, trying to make it in a world that wasn't designed for their ascent. I connect with that truth in a fundamental way and that's why his story flowed effortlessly. It was a joy to write his character. One of the most difficult characters to craft was Mama. She's a feisty, strong-willed old woman, but I worried about drifting into caricature. Initially, I showed her anger and frustration with her granddaughter but revealed little motivation for those emotions. However, once I added layers to Mama's character—giving her a love interest and dreams of her own—she came alive on the page and I believe readers will understand, even if they don't agree, with the choices she makes.

I don't want to give away too much here in the way of spoilers, but I struggled with how to resolve things and bring closure to Ruth and Midnight's relationship. I'm not a "happily ever after" writer; I gravitate to endings that are emotionally satisfying and somewhat hopeful. Therefore, I wanted their closure to be complex and a bit ambiguous so that the reader could imagine what comes next for them.