

## The Divines

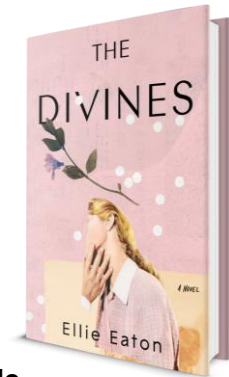
William Morrow

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### Introduction

**With the emotional power of *Normal People* and the reflective haze of *The Girls*, a compulsively readable debut set in a secluded boarding school, exploring the thorny side of memory and the struggle to reconcile our teenage selves with who we become as adults.**



**“*The Divines* is a cool, chilling and elegant novel.”**

**—Sarah Perry, internationally bestselling author of *The Essex Serpent***

**“A scintillating coming-of-age story about the brutal bonds of female boarding school friendships, class prejudices, and the ways in which false memories can take the place of truth.”**

**—Susie Yang, *New York Times* bestselling author of *White Ivy***

*Can we ever really escape our past?*

The girls of St John the Divine, an elite English boarding school, were notorious for flipping their hair, harassing teachers, chasing boys, and chain-smoking cigarettes. They were fiercely loyal, sharp-tongued, and cuttingly humorous in the way that only teenage girls can be. For Josephine, now in her thirties, the years at St John were a lifetime ago. She hasn't spoken to another Divine in fifteen years, not since the day the school shuttered its doors in disgrace.

Yet now Josephine inexplicably finds herself returning to her old stomping grounds. The visit provokes blurry recollections of those doomed final weeks that rocked the community. Ruminating on the past, Josephine becomes obsessed with her teenage identity and the forgotten girls of her one-time orbit. With each memory that resurfaces, she circles closer to the violent secret at the heart of the school's scandal. But the more Josephine recalls, the further her life unravels, derailing not just her marriage and career, but her entire sense of self.

Moving between present-day Los Angeles and 1990s Britain, *The Divines* is a scorching examination of the power of adolescent sexuality, female identity, and the destructive class divide. Exposing the tension between the lives we lead as adults and the experiences that form us, Eaton probes us to consider how our memories as adults compel us to reexamine our pasts.

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## Questions for Discussion

1. "Myth has two main functions. The first is to answer the sort of awkward questions that children ask, such as: 'Who made the world? How will it end? Who was the first man? Where do souls go after death?'. . . The second function of myth is to justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs." –Robert Graves, Introduction to the *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*

The epigraph to *The Divines* is the Ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself" (γνῶθι σεαυτόν). How does this maxim play out in the central narrative of the novel? What other parallels can be drawn between *The Divines* and Greek mythology?

2. "There were no mobile phones at all, though we briefly carried black pagers which we clipped to our tweed skirts like emergency room physicians, until Fat Fran realized what they were and put a stop to it. We had no access to chatrooms. Facebook didn't exist, no likes or dislikes, no Google, Wiki, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat or Gmail. Total radio silence."

Much of *The Divines* is set in the 1990s before cell phones and social media had really taken off. How does this lack of modern technology affect the relationships between the girls? How do you think the events of the novel might change if *The Divines* was set in the present day? Do you think Gerry would have been more or less ostracized?

3. "I was a teenager, self-obsessed, too caught up in my own narrative to care about anyone but myself."

How much do you think adult Josephine differs from her teenage self? What about the other girls? Which of Skipper's updates at the end surprised you most? Is it possible for anyone to truly change?

4. "Who were we if not our mothers' daughters?"

What role does motherhood play in the actions of the narrator? How does Sephine's parenting of her daughter compare to her own upbringing?

5. "Our habit of using boy's names was one of the peculiarities of the Divine that was to be heavily reported in the press later that summer. The tabloids in particular dedicated an entire page to the subject of our nicknames, lingering on the fact that in the three years Gerry spent at our school she never received nor gave herself an alternative moniker, pointing, or so they said, to social ostracism."

The life of the Divines is shaped by ritual and pageantry. What purpose do these types of traditions serve in elitist institutions like St John's? Does the boarding school experience impact the importance of the traditions?

6. Josephine is at once drawn to girls like Skipper and also repulsed by them. Throughout the novel, she makes decisions which either reinforce or dismantle her standing with the Divines. How does the social hierarchy of the world of *The Divines* play into the narrator's sense of self as a teen and as an adult?
7. To what extent can we trust Sephine's view of her school days? How reliable are any of us as narrators of our own stories?
8. How does the revelation that Gerry's coach is the man behind the Polaroid photos change our perception of Gerry and what she's endured? Do you think the girls would have reacted differently to the photos if the book was set in the present day?
9. How does class play a role in the relations between Lauren and Josephine? How are their families distinctly different? How do Divines' interactions with the town reinforce or negate class stereotypes? Discuss the author's use of dialogue to denote different social classes. How does the way a character speaks define them in the story?
10. "Divines could be cruel, conceited, arcane, but we were faithful to the end. We sobbed and hugged one another. *Forever*, we promised, *always*. Nothing could break us apart, proving in the end how much we underestimated Gerry. We swore on our lives. We crossed our hearts."

What does it ultimately mean to be Divine? Why does the narrator wrestle with this characterization?