



**Love and Hot Chicken**  
**A Delicious Southern Novel**  
William Morrow

By Mary Liza Hartong  
ISBN: 9780063304796

**The debut of a dynamite new voice from the South, *Love and Hot Chicken* is a spicy and hilarious Tennessee story about family, friendship, fried chicken, and two girls in love.**

*The Chickie Shak is something of a historical landmark. Red clapboard walls, thriving wasp population, yard-toilets resplendent with sunflowers. My best friend Lee Ray and I used to come after our softball games and snag a picnic table while our mammas ordered the home team special. Truth is, most people around here order the same thing until the day somebody throws their ashes off a roller coaster at Dollywood. The line snakes around the building as far as you can see, the grimiest bunch of Jessies, Pearls, and Scooters you ever did behold, hobnobbing in the parking lot from noon until night.*

**Praise for *Love and Hot Chicken***

“This delightful novel is a gift that will open your heart and preach to your funny bone.”  
—**Jill Conner Browne**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Sweet Potato Queen’s Book of Love*

## Introduction

When PJ Spoon returns home for her beloved daddy's funeral, she doesn't expect to stick around. Why abandon her PhD program at Vanderbilt for the humble charms of her hometown, Pennywhistle, Tennessee? Mamma's broken heart, that's why. But truth be told, PJ's own heart ain't doing too good either. She impulsively takes a job as a fry cook at Pennywhistle's beloved Chickie Shak, where locals gather for Nashville-style hot chicken. It may not be glamorous, but it's something to do.

Fate shakes up PJ's life again when the town rallies around the terribly retro and terribly fun Hot Chicken Pageant. PJ finally notices her cute redheaded coworker Boof, a singer-songwriter with a talent as striking as her curly hair, and learns to fear her smack-talking manager, Linda.

As PJ and Boof fall for each other, Boof's search for her birth mother—a Pennywhistle native—catapults the budding couple into a mystery that might be better left unsolved. The Chickie Shak pageant takes off, spurring old rivalries and new friendships in this tale of unexpected connections and new beginnings.

## Questions for Discussion

1. As with many Southern novels, humor is a constant in *Love and Hot Chicken*. Which lines made you laugh? How does the humor contrast with the book's themes of loss and healing?
2. PJ thinks to herself: "At first, I thought grief was like sandpaper. That it would whittle me down to the tiniest person alive, toothpick size. I was wrong. Grief's an expander. It stretches you out bit by bit until you think the balloon will pop and then, handing you a plate of eggs, it stretches you again." How does PJ deal with her grief at the start of the novel? Where is she with it by the end?
3. Fried chicken, family, and communion are ever present in this novel. Is there a special food that unites your family or hometown? Is there a Chickie Shak-type gathering place where you live?
4. At the heart of *Love and Hot Chicken* is the romance between PJ and Boof. What do you think drew them to one another? How do they help each other find what they're seeking?
5. What does PJ mean at the end of the book when she reflects: "They say at some point your mamma sets you down and never does pick you up again, but I reckon the same thing could be said in reverse." How has her relationship with her mother evolved in the absence of her daddy?

6. Although he's died before the novel begins, PJ sees messages from her daddy all around her. Did you think he was lovingly haunting her, or was that a kind of wishful thinking on her part?
7. Dean Jackson describes the Hot Chicken Pageant as "a bizarre and delightful ritual. I'm fascinated with the whole thing." What did you think of it? What did taking part mean to each of the contestants we know: PJ, Boof, and Linda? Do you think it was a success?
8. Linda says of PJ and her best friend Lee Ray: "Y'all are pretty tied at the hip, aintcha?" What role does Lee Ray play in PJ's life? Where does their friendship stand at the end of the book?
9. Author Mary Liza Hartong has said she wanted to write a book about queer people and their lives where homophobia was *not* a central part of the plot. Why do you think she was so intentional about that? How does this book compare to other novels you've read with gay lead characters?
10. What do you think the future holds for the characters in this novel after you read the clippings in the Epilogue? What will happen to PJ, Boof, Linda, Mamma, and Lee Ray in the coming years?