



Book Gang Podcast Transcript:

Christina Baker Kline (00:01)

Hi, my name is Christina Baker Klein and I'm here with my new novel, [The Foursome](#)

Amy's Warm Intro:

Today on Book Gang, I'm thrilled to welcome Christina Baker Kline, whose latest novel, *The Foursome*, captivated me so thoroughly that I devoured it in a single day—and have thought about it every day since. Inspired by astonishing real-life events and Kline's own family connection to the Bunker legacy, *The Foursome* invites us into the tangled, claustrophobic world of Chang and Eng Bunker, the legendary conjoined twins, and the two sisters who become entwined with them in nineteenth-century North Carolina. Kline's storytelling is immersive and fearless as she lightly traces the twins' astonishing journey from being sold by their mother at age eight to touring internationally as an oddity to ultimately settling in North Carolina in hopes of finding wives and growing a family, where the true love story for us begins.

We witness, through Sarah's singular perspective, how forbidden love, societal constraints, and the daily realities of an unprecedented marriage unfold with both

intimacy and discomfort. Adelaide and Chang's immediate chemistry is shadowed by the era's prejudices—their marriage would cross racial boundaries, and Addie would risk accusations of bigamy if Eng didn't marry as well. Pressure mounts on Sarah, already carrying the weight of scandal from an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, to marry Eng, intertwining all four lives in ways that are both deeply personal and historically charged.

Kline masterfully explores the emotional entanglements, moral quandaries, and relentless hope that define these characters. She doesn't shy away from the challenging choreography of daily life, in their everyday rhythms, and into larger-scale conflicts as the sisters grapple with differing beliefs about religion, slavery, and war. The two families grow apart yet remain inextricably linked, raising 21 children between them, while dozens of slaves toil on their land, even as the twins' own early lives were marked by exploitation.

The novel's structure—told in a linear timeline through Sarah's eyes—keeps the sprawling cast and tumultuous events grounded and cohesive, avoiding the pitfalls of multiple timelines or viewpoints. Through Kline's meticulous research and empathetic storytelling, readers are gifted not just transported into a historical novel—they are dare given an intimate portrait of resilience, risk, and the longing for belonging in a society quick to judge what it can't understand.

The Foursome is a phenomenal, larger-than-life story, inspired by the curious question from Kline's own family history: Why would two conventional young women in rural North Carolina choose to marry conjoined brothers? The result is a page-turner that lingers in your mind, perfect for book clubs eager for rich discussion about love, courage, and the choices that shape generations.

If you're new here, hi! I'm Amy Allen Clark, the voice behind the Book Gang podcast, and I'm so happy to have you. This show celebrates debuts, backlist favorites, and under-the-radar book gems, and we are officially kicking off our Summer Author Series after launching the 2026 Summer Reading Guide out into the world. First, I just want to say thank you for the incredible enthusiasm for this guide this year. I was unsure whether this was turning into a vanity project, and as welcome when we live in a world filled with book content and often feel overwhelmed by it all. It means so much that you would entrust me with your reading lives in any way, whether that is listening here or using the guide. I will be selling it all summer long, so it is never too late to grab it. This year's guide is the biggest I've done, with 70 handpicked titles—featuring upcoming releases, fresh new reads, and beloved backlist gems. You can flip through 57 pages packed with bookish inspiration to create your ultimate summer reading stack.

Your generosity fuels the countless hours, research, and love poured into every episode and this special resource. Thank you for helping us continue this community-driven work! Every dollar makes a difference—your support helps keep the Book Gang podcast

thriving and allows us to keep delivering thoughtful book recommendations and in-depth author interviews.

For our May book club pick, we'll be exploring Janelle Brown's gripping literary thriller, *What Kind of Paradise*. Mark your calendar for our Zoom discussion on May 28th at 8 PM ET. I've linked to Janelle's podcast where she joined Book Gang to share insights into her writing process and the inspiration behind this novel—be sure to listen for a deeper look.

In *What Kind of Paradise*, Jane has grown up off the grid, her world bounded by her father's strict routines, a woodstove for warmth, and a steady diet of nineteenth-century philosophy in place of formal schooling. Her father's stories about their past are sparse—her mother died in a car accident, he says, and that loss sent them into the wild for a simpler life.

But as Jane approaches adulthood, questions—and rebellion—begin to burn. When a shocking discovery upends everything she thought she knew about her father and herself, Jane flees Montana for the only place that might hold answers. Here, Jane's quest to unravel her mother's fate and her own identity forces her to confront the collision of nature and technology, innocence and experience, and the secrets that shape us. It's a perfect pick for fans of literary suspense and evocative family dramas and I'm so excited we have so many new friends who joined this month and can't wait for you to experience your first meeting with us in our warm, multigenerational club. It is \$5 to join, or you can prepay for a year and save 10%.

I'm so delighted to share Christina Baker Kline's writing journey for today's special feature. This will be on my best books of the year list, and for those of you who want to experience it with one of your favorite audiobook narrators, Marin Ireland lends her voice to this special project, so I have no doubt that it is a spectacular way to indulge! This week, to celebrate this special story, I've updated one of our most popular book lists: *The Best Books About Twins for Double the Drama* with XX new titles. Patrons will have a printable checklist and a spoiler chat with Christina to open today.

Now let's meet this week's guest: Christina Baker Kline is a #1 New York Times bestselling author of ten novels, including *Orphan Train*, *The Exiles*, *Please Don't Lie* (co-authored with Anne Burt), and *The Foursome*. Christina Baker Kline has been published in more than 40 countries. Her novels have received the New England Prize for Fiction, the Maine Literary Award, and a Barnes & Noble Discover Award, among other prizes, and have been chosen by hundreds of communities, universities, and schools as "One Book, One Read" selections. Her essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times* and *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The San Francisco Chronicle*. *The Foursome* hits store shelves on May 12th and is available for pre-order everywhere.

One last thing—if you love this show, leaving a review on iTunes is a quick, free way to support my work. And to our patrons who keep the lights on at Book Gang: **You are the beating heart behind every good story we share here.** Thank you for supporting human creators in a world turned upside down by AI. Now, let's get chatting!

(transition music)

Amy Clark (00:07)

Christina, I'm so happy to have you here. I have already set our readers up for how special this book is. It is one of my favorite books that I've read this year. I'm really excited to dig into it. And I actually have a pretty fun icebreaker, hopefully. I'm curious if you have ever attended the Chang and Eng Bunker Family Reunion, because I saw that on the news.

Christina Baker Kline (00:10)

I know. It's actually amazing. So I have never attended, partly because they take place in July and that's just a really busy month for me. I have a house in Maine and my husband's on the board of the library there and we just have a lot of stuff going on. But my cousin who got me into this whole thing, who is a genealogist, goes every year. And my son Eli went with her two years ago and just had a total blast and was sending pictures the whole time.

And I am really in touch with a lot of those descendants. Some have been so helpful to me doing research and pointing me in the right direction and even showing me all around the property. So if your readers already know what the book is about, it takes place in North Carolina, Northwestern North Carolina, and mostly in a town called Mount Airy. And Mount Airy has a Chang and Eng Museum, which is run by one of the descendants named Tanya. She's amazing. And there are other descendants who live nearby as well. So I've been really lucky to have tapped into this resource for research. It's been great.

Amy Clark (01:39)

Well, I love that. You know, I have been reading you for years and years and a lot of our listeners are new to historical fiction. So I understand your robust backlist catalog. And obviously one of the most familiar titles I think for a lot of readers would be Orphan Train. And I also know that you have been writing since the 90s. And so this book became a breakout hit a little bit later in your career. I just wanted to hear a little bit about what it's like with that overnight success quote unquote with all of this and how you navigated expectations after having such a big blockbuster hit.

Christina Baker Kline (02:18)

That's such a good question. You know, I, people often say, you know, you suddenly feel that you had made it or whatever? But what's so funny when I think back on my career is that I always thought I had made it and I was actually kind of content with my place in the world as a writer. I was so thrilled that I got published at all. I had an editor I loved. was at a publishing house that was really kind to me. And I just thought I would always be what they call a mid-list writer, someone who teaches. And I had a robust editing career. taught on college campuses for many years, and I still love to teach and do workshops and things like that.

So I had crafted a life that was centered around writing and obviously I have three children so centered around my whole life but enabled me to write and I just thought it would always be like that I would get nice advances, but you know, it takes a while to write a book. So you have to supplement with other things.

And I think that's an important thing that I tell my students and my children actually also, which is your avocation may not be your vocation and that's okay. It's okay to have something you love to do that might not be the thing that earns you a living because people are creative in all kinds of ways. All children are born creative. Every child writes stories and sings and, you know, plays make believe. So I just, I hate the idea that making it is only based on sales. Instead, I like to think that a creative life is worth living at every level, every price point.

But yes, this did happen to me. It was unexpected. My novel Orphan Train, which was my fifth novel and my like ninth book, I've got a bunch of nonfiction books as well, took off in a way that nobody anticipated. It was on the *New York Times* list for two years, two months, two years, and it did change my life profoundly. I had a much larger readership all of a sudden. But it wouldn't have mattered if it hadn't changed my life. I mean, it's nice that I'm better known than I was, but it also, you know, the next novel that I wrote, which is called Piece of the World, and it's about Andrew Wyeth and his muse, the woman who was at the center of his most famous painting, *Christina's World*, was a very quiet book. I was lucky that my publisher was fine with my going back to a quiet literary less kind of big picture story. I kind of wrote that book, I think, as a reaction against feeling like I might need or be expected to produce another blockbuster.

I like writing. I love writing. And whether they are books that hit the *Times* list or not is kind of less important to me than the act of finding a story I love. And so that's kind of been my guiding principle. Sorry, that was a very long answer to it.

Amy Clark (05:43)

I'm here for all the answers. I love it. I love hearing this. Obviously for me, your quiet novel is my favorite of your books and it struck such a chord with me. I love that painting. I loved learning that backstory and you know, Orphan Train is the commercial success. It's wonderful, but it's always nice when storytellers get to tell the things that they're most passionate about and that their team will be on board as you explore different things. I'm wondering as you've navigated all these decades of being in the publishing industry, are you seeing things shifting with historical fiction or with what is expected, especially with our readers now who are maybe more TikTok consumers or moving really fast with social media.

Christina Baker Kline (06:34)

That's, I love that question because yes, I mean, one of the most fascinating things about being, and you and I could probably have a whole separate conversation about this. I'm really interested in book trends and in what's going on, even if it's not, if it doesn't really serve me, meaning I don't write romantasy for example, which is huge right now, and I don't write fantasy. I have a whole theory about that, which is that because my kids are exactly the age of Harry Potter,

Amy Clark (06:52)

Yeah.

Christina Baker Kline (07:04)

In fact, my oldest kid, child, Hayden, was the ages of Harry Potter in every book, all the way up through the books as they were being written. And we were those families who stood in the bookstore at midnight and, you know, waited for the new release. And then Christopher Paolini. There were all these super strong fantasy books and authors that my kids in their late 20s and now early 30s even grew up with. And I think that it created an appetite for those books for adults.

And so what we're seeing is that a lot of adults are reading books that have an element of fantasy in them one way or another, either romance or something else, darker subjects, darker subject matter, I guess, that emerged out of that passion that they developed as children. I love seeing that, actually. I think it's very fun and exciting. People always say historical fiction is on the way out. They always say that. It's happened since I wrote and in fact, Orphan Train, which was called historical fiction, I never thought of as that. I kind of backed my way into it because two thirds of that book is set in the present day. Only a hundred pages, which are told as essentially a story by one of the central characters is, you know, she's telling the story of her childhood. So I was sort of surprised when that book was called historical fiction. Now, of course, I understand it makes sense.

And my more recent books are set wholly in the past, although one that I'm percolating will have a big present day component. With that said, I've also written two thrillers now that I had a blast doing. I have a co-author, my dear, dear friend, Anne Burt. We wrote one called Please Don't Lie. And we have another one we've just finished that's coming out next year called Watch Her Lie. So I'm kind of interested in exploring different genres.

But what I would say about trends with historical fiction is that people say that readers aren't, that it's not a hot genre at the moment. But I'm discovering with this book that there's a lot of interest. And I think it's just about telling a good story and finding something. For me, one of my sort of touchstones is a quote from Hilary Mantel who wrote Wolf Hall and all these wonderful books that were set far in the past. And she said that she wrote, she said, "I like to think that I write contemporary novels set in the past." And that was a freeing line for me. I think about it a lot because I too like to write books that have some bearing on the present moment. And I think The Foursome is absolutely that.

I tried to write a novel that starts in the 1840s, but that feels contemporary in some ways. It really is wrestling with aspects of our culture that we are grappling with today, number one. And number two, I wanted my characters to feel fully alive and I wanted readers to put themselves in the place of, for example, my narrator, Sarah, Sally, her nickname is Sally, and really think about what it would feel like to be her in that moment. So yes, it's set in the 1840s, but I want readers to think, how would I react in this moment? so in some ways, so I avoided dialect for one thing.

The language is kind of a blend. I tried not to use anachronistic dialogue exactly. And I tried to be careful about how I was presenting the world because it was a different world. But I also wanted readers to really feel it as a modern reader. And so the language, I think, is a blend of the way people would have spoken then and how people speak today.

Amy Clark (11:18)

Yeah, you know, I'm wondering, do you think you could have wrote The Foursome years ago or do you think it's coming to you right at the right time? Why?

Christina Baker Kline (11:23)

No. I know I couldn't have. First of all, it was such a leap to write this book. It was so terrifying for a lot of reasons. It grapples with slavery, with slave holders, plantation life, race. My character is a white woman who married an Asian man who's conjoined, which means disabled, essentially too. So there were a lot of aspects of this book that were sort of hot subjects and hard to address.

It took me six years to write this book, and I even put it aside for two years during that period because at one point I really thought it was just too hard to write, to pull off, that it would, I had seen, you know, our culture's been through a lot over the past six years, and there were books that were canceled, and that were, if not canceled, then criticized for being insensitive. Number one, I wanted to write a book freely and with courage and with conviction about what I was doing and not pussyfoot around. But I also didn't want to be insensitive. It was a real question about how to pull that off.

And finally, two things gave me courage to write the book. One, as I mentioned, Leslie Luper, as I told you, goes to the reunions and who first in the early 90s, first kind of unearthed our connection to this family connection to the story. She came back from the reunion and she said, if you don't, this is our story. This is the story of our distant relatives. If you don't tell it, who's going to do it?

And then number two, I had just finished The Exiles and I started getting letters from writers saying, you did this in The Exiles, you told a story that was hard to tell about an aboriginal girl. It's a true story that is part of my narrative. And I actually did that fearlessly without even thinking twice about it. I knew I wanted to tell that story. I knew it. I had to tell the story of what happened to the Aboriginal people in Australia during that time period that I wrote about when the convict women were brought over, the British women. And I started getting letters from people saying, you gave me courage to write about cultures that are not my own. And it made me realize that I needed to just stop worrying about it and start and do it and that I could do it. So I did. I hope you think I pulled it off.

Amy Clark (14:10)

I mean I'm really honestly frankly astounded. First of all I want to say speaking to the structure of the book, I don't know what I expected when I went into the story. I certainly thought there would be a lot of alternating perspectives. thought there's only way to tell this story is to tell from four viewpoints, but you actually chose one sister to tell the story from. And it was such a smart decision because I think I would have been so overwhelmed any other way. And we're getting this very specific viewpoint with the character. I mean, did you always know you wanted to tell it from that sister's point of view or did you play around with viewpoints before that?

Christina Baker Kline (14:53)

I did play around with viewpoints. And it was only when I came back to the book after putting it aside for two years and working on another book that I found a way in. And the way I found a way in was like everything cracked open. I had done a ton of research, read a lot of books, but I kept coming across a small detail. Well, first of all, stepping back, The

Foursome as you know, is about Chang and Eng Bunker and their marriages to my distant cousins. Sarah and Adelaide Yates in the mid 19th century in the South. And they had 21 children and they lived on adjoining hillsides.

That story is just unbelievable on its face. Even just the description of it is crazy, I think. And everybody's question is how in the world did that work in all kinds of ways, right? But the brothers went back and forth every three days. And when one was in the other's house, they practiced what they called alternate mastery, which meant one brother was in charge of the household and the other was essentially silent for three days. And they pulled this off for their whole lives. They did it until they died. This was the schedule they kept.

But what I discovered, and so just the piece I wanted to mention is that I've read everything that's ever been written about these people, I think. And what was amazing about their stories to me is that very little was told about the wives. And in fact, in the biographies, and there are some absolutely stunningly beautiful biographies, great biographies, I had to piece together the women's lives because a lot of them were out of order, a lot of the stories about the brothers, or they would be sort of themed, like the war, or their being on the road, or whatever. And so would, reading between the lines, I discovered in several different sources that one of the sisters chose to be buried in an unmarked grave on her own property, separate from her husband, his brother, and her sister, with whom she obviously had a lifelong relationship. And I thought that was so strange. She was buried with formerly enslaved people and with the four daughters who died before her, her four daughters. And that was just such an odd detail.

And then one of the descendants sent me a picture of her grave, which they're now restoring, of before they did eventually give her a gravestone, but it was in complete disrepair neglected, abandoned in this like graveyard that was not even marked. It had small stones. And then the brothers and Adelaide have this incredibly large, they have their own graveyard with all the other children and with like this monument to them. So what an odd detail. And I started sort of thinking, what would it mean? Why would one of them do this? And that is the person that I decided to focus on because there were other details about her that were fascinating. For example, Adelaide, her sister, was by all accounts beautiful, charismatic, fun-loving, at least in her early years. And she fell in love with the handsome, charming brother. And the two shy siblings, who were sort of awkward and quieter, had to be coerced into marriage, essentially, because it would have been bigamy if one sister had married and the other didn't.

I thought, what would it be like to be that woman who it really wasn't quite her choice and she was coerced into marriage and she had to make a life? And then what happened

that would have somehow estranged her from the others? And so that was the key to me unlocking the story.

Amy Clark (19:03)

I loved that you did this. It also gave us almost like a reprieve when the husbands were going elsewhere, like when they were off the property, we get that very unique perspective of what it was like to be raising all these children alone, you know, because they were basically single moms for half that time in order to make all of these things work. You know, that, that in itself gave us a little bit of a break from what felt like at times like a claustrophobic feeling around these people are just really honestly on top of each other in rooms in places yeah it's so intimate you know and to give us that breath to allow them to be on the other sisters property and then to actually witness what was that like for someone you know to be away from their spouse maybe it was nice you know in some aspects just have a little break right

Christina Baker Kline (19:38)

Yeah, think was really actually sometimes, because you weren't just with your spouse, you were never. I mean, one of the things I loved grappling with, I mean, in a way, it wasn't even until I started writing that I even understood all the implications and complications, just the idea that maybe even if you wanted to have a private conversation, there was always someone else there. You couldn't ever have a moment of privacy.

And for the first number of years, like four or five years, four years, I think, they lived together on the same property. Sarah was living in the same household with her sister when they were having children and increasing the household size. And then eventually one ended up with 11 children, one ended up with 10 children. And they then had, of course, the two brothers and the sister. I mean, it was so many people. The brothers were determined to have lots of children because, and by the way, it was really helpful to me to watch. There was a BBC documentary. There's this wonderful BBC documentary about a Mormon sect where the husband has multiple wives and they live kind of out in the middle of nowhere. They're all on top of each other. have all these children.

And he said something that Chang and Eng also said, which was that he wanted to create a community of people, that is by having children, that would not think that their way of life was strange, that would come into it, born into it, feel that it was normal. And that's why there's a line I have that Sally says at the beginning of the book, which is, even the most extraordinary life feels ordinary when you're living it. And that's the sense that I wanted to convey, which is, how does this feel if it's your ordinary life?

The other thing to remember is that the two sisters were very young, 19 and 20. I think they were 20 and 21 when they got married, but they didn't know any other way of marriage. They had never been with anyone else really. And so it was, even though it's so hard to fathom, it was the only life they knew. So strange. So when, eventually when the sisters had separate homes,, yes, it would be a relief to be without everyone there. And also to kind of raise children. Sally and Addie, Adelaide, had very different ideas about raising children. And this is documented. Sally was much looser. Adelaide had all these rules. And so I tried to convey that in the book as well to show what it felt like to be in that moment, in that situation.

Amy Clark (22:40)

Yeah. I was thinking when you're referring to just like that these are like it's ordinary life. This was their ordinary. Obviously there is I think as a reader a kind of a sense of dread for the wedding night or when we think about what these conjoined twins dealt with in their earlier years where they were reduced to being a spectacle for people to see them and then later in life when they had to embrace that again to pay for debts and things like that. I think it would be easy perhaps to really fixate on just like what is this it almost feels you know like we're getting to access that and you do this in such a beautiful way but you don't shy away from those moments right you do put us in the minds of especially this one sister where we're able to experience that with her. Can you talk to me a little bit about, you know, how you wanted to approach these scenes with such restraint, but also gives the reader an opportunity to experience those experiences with the sisters.

Christina Baker Kline (23:49)

Yeah, mean, obviously writing about intimacy in this book was super hard. I mean, I'm a little squeamish to begin with, I don't, I, yeah, so it was hard. It was harder than usual. What I did for myself as a writer is that I eased into it with my character, meaning she herself was so apprehensive. I mean, we know that she had 11 children, she had, it happened. But in my novel, I just tried to imagine what it would feel like to sort of enter that arrangement. And she was, she's sort of a stand-in for the reader because she herself was really freaked out by it. And it took a while to figure out how to do what she needed to do as a wife in that situation. Her sister was much more comfortable with moving ahead.

But so that was the way that as a writer, I myself eased into it too, is that I gave her some breathing room and let it happen gradually. And it was also a way to create intimacy with this stranger, essentially, this man who in that situation she had to be, they had to be fully honest and sensitive with each other about what was going on. And so I was able to kind of let their emotional relationship grow before she had to have a physical relationship. And that made it much easier.

So I had two editors on this book, and my first editor, who was my longtime editor, was amazing. In the middle of writing the book, actually I'd already written a draft and then she became a huge, she got a huge job and left for one of the other big publishers and couldn't take her writers with her. but I was so lucky to get this brilliant editor. Caroline Zankan is my editor now. So Kate Nenzel was my first editor and she's incredible. And then I got Caroline. So I had two different approaches to looking at the book. Caroline edited the second draft, I would say. I mean, this is like draft 10 and 11, I would say, because I never turn in a book until I feel like it's really ready. And even so, with Kate, I mean, I added a hundred pages with Caroline because I just needed to fill in. But Kate was sort of of the opinion that maybe I should fade to black more than I was inclined to. In the first draft, it didn't have, it was more kind of hinted at than explained. But Caroline kind of helped me get to a different level with the second one that I turned in. First of all, I expanded the whole Civil War section hugely.

That, I was so intimidated by writing about the Civil War because people who care about that time period know everything about it and I was desperately afraid of getting things wrong. even in my final, and I gave this book to 13 readers in the end, historians, sensitivity readers, all kinds of people. And even in the final, HarperCollins, I think, hired a fact checker who found one, you know, detail wrong about one of the skirmishes that even my historians had missed. So it's a, it's very vetted. I hope I didn't get anything wrong at this point, although I'm sure I did.

With Caroline, I expanded the emotional story a bit and the physical story and also the, you know, what really happened to the family during the Civil War and how they were personally affected by it. So there was a lot of expansion that happened. I tend to write short anyway. I like to start, a lot of people write like a thousand pages and pare back. I don't write that way. I tend to write my way to the end and then fill out sections. So that was a lot of what my revising was with this book.

Amy Clark (28:20)

Yeah, I thought it was so well done. It's one of those things that I feel like it would be inescapable to have not shown even those scenes to understand. also that these two marriages start from such different places, right? Some people fall immediately in love head over heels. mean, this is hitting some romance trope beats here. Some people are instant love. And then we also have people who grow to love each other. And that's true even now.

Christina Baker Kline (28:40)

That's right.

Amy Clark (28:50)

Sometimes when we get married we don't know how we're going to evolve or who we're going to evolve into and I think it's neat to have two relationships that you can witness how these two sisters, one more reluctant the other more embracing what's going to transpire. You know obviously this isn't the only characters, we have all of these children and for whatever reason I was getting like Little Women feelings in these scenes where the kids are all piling on and there's like a lot of activity going on in one scene. A lot of this I think could from a writer perspective but also from a reader perspective could feel overwhelming but I think it heightens the tension in every scene because you know there just is so much going on. There's like making the food for all of these children, there's the gardening, the laundry, all of these little aspects to their day that we get to witness but also the people who have to make all of that work for them and that is a huge component in this story. Can you talk to me about how you approach those scenes. I mean, how are you tracking all these children? Did you have it mapped out? Like, what did that look like for you as a writer? Yeah.

Christina Baker Kline (29:56)

Well, it was super hard because you have 21 children that you have to keep track of. I mean, in my first draft, that was one of the things that Caroline and I really worked on. And the second draft was my creating scenes that gave you intimate moments with different children. So it didn't just feel like a mass or that I was ignoring them altogether. But obviously I couldn't, the book would be a thousand pages if I had really gone into all of those children. So I sort of put a light on a story and then pull back. I adhered as much as I could to the historical record, but there are a few things that I had to change. For example, as we know, children died in those days. were, childhood who had mortality rates were high. Not all of those 21 children lived. And two of Sally's children died very tragically, very young. Caroline, I remember saying after she read the second death, which was awful, she just said, my gosh, I think what if we just combine these two children into one and tell one story of one death because it's so sad otherwise. So I did do that, I kind of alighted to two of the children. So that was hard.

I, when you mentioned Little Women, I was laughing about this with a friend the other day who also writes fiction set in the past about how influenced I was by Little Women, by all the Little House books, Caddie Woodlawn. There are all these sort of pioneering adventure stories of girls that I grew up reading. And when I started writing fiction set in a time before electricity and all of that, I realized that I was tapping into my love for all of these details of how in the world do you raise children and have a household with no modern conveniences whatsoever? How do you do laundry? How do you cook? What role does sewing play, for example? All these domestic arts that were absolutely skills that you

had to know back in the day that now people can get away without really knowing were fascinating to focus on, explore, and a large part of women's lives back in the day was figuring out how to keep these households going any modern help. And it was just super time consuming too.

But with that said, I also really needed to grapple with the fact that these women lived on a plantation and that they had enslaved people who were there to serve them. And I had to figure out how to grapple with that and be sensitive to it, but also to convey their own complicity in the system and not to sort of superimpose on them a modern sensibility. So what I was trying to show in the book is that Sally had had an experience when she was in her teens with this renegade, this woman who didn't believe in the system that she lived in.

And it sort of planted a seed for her that eventually took root or blossomed or whatever the metaphor might be. She had a different experience that changed something inside her, even though that awakening was slow. Caroline, my editor, actually had me do a scene that I did not want to do. And I think it's pivotal in the book. And I'd love your opinion on it.

During the Civil War, both Sarah and Adelaide had sons who went to fight and were on the Confederate side. They were Southern men and they fought for the Confederates. And Caroline said, really think you have to have a scene where Sarah and Adelaide get into an argument about their I was afraid that it would be too obvious that Adelaide was the bad guy and Sally was the white knight or whatever. But what I discovered writing the scene is that if I could make Adelaide's arguments equally weighty or at least compelling for her.

So for example, she was able to say, you're a total hypocrite to her sister. Look at you pretending to be so high and mighty when in fact you benefit from the very system that you're criticizing and lots of other things too. So it was a great scene for me to write because it made me articulate all the ways in which Sally was complicit and she couldn't be this pure character at all. She wasn't at all. But it was so painful too.

Amy Clark (35:16)

Ugh, you know, I think the reason why this book is so perfect for book clubs is because you are talking about, you know, we are still grappling with a lot of the past and what we are reckoning with right now. You know, all of these things overlap with each other. And one of the things that not only that that scene with the argument, right, that someone is benefiting still off of something that they're pretending to be against, which they feel that way, but are your actions matching that, but also the contemplation on faith and where do I identify with church values as well, which I think was so beautifully done because the

Quaker faith is something that comes into play that she wants to come back to the Quaker faith because the church is aligning themselves with things that they don't agree with.

And I feel like so many of those echoes are being felt right now in the modern timeline where, you know, what are we being complacent about what are we okay with what did we you know maybe vote for what what where do we stand in churches how are we representing the people that we claim to care about right we say that we love people but are we actually doing the work or just sitting in pews. I think it was such a great thing and I'm curious what you maybe would love to see book clubs talking about you know whether it's this modern timeline or you know what you have created in this world for us to see

Christina Baker Kline (36:48)

There are so many parallels with the world today in this book. And I think book clubs will discover when they read it and start talking about it that, you know, there are a lot of complicated gray areas. I mean, one of the things that I had to come to terms with writing the book is that human nature hasn't changed. The laws have changed, meaning...

There are still, there are people today who would live within that system if it weren't against the law, which is crazy to think about. We like to think about it as some dark moment in our past that could not be repeated. It couldn't happen again. But the fact is it could, it could happen. Not exactly that way, but it is fascinating to think about human nature in general. Now the religion piece was such a gift to me that the sisters father was Quaker.

He was a Quaker and he was a slaveholder, which is absolutely against the tenets of the faith. And so wrestling with that and thinking about it, and in fact, this aunt, Aunt Joan in the book, who comes back a few times, who's the one who influenced Sally fairly early on, says your father is leading, the life he leads is not at all the faith he professes to have. And so I was thinking so much about all of that. My family is Southern. Obviously, I'm related to these people. My father's from Georgia, and my mother's from North Carolina. And my father actually grew up in a fundamentalist Southern Baptist family. Not quite snake handlers, but actually very, very conservative and very I mean, I remember attending church services when I was young where people were being saved and were writhing on the floor and having these experiences of that were sort of unimaginable to me. My parents were professors and I was raised mostly in England and Maine and we went to an Episcopalian church that was very different. Yes, both my parents were originally Southern Baptist so I had a lot to draw on in terms of the Baptist church that I described in the book. But also, I know some people who are Quakers, and I did a deep dive into

what that means exactly. And so it was really interesting to me to have Sally sort choose that faith for herself that was separate from her sister and the brothers. And there's some evidence that that may have been true or was true.

Amy Clark (39:50)

Wow. I loved this book. Is there anything I didn't ask you, Christina, that you've been dying to talk about?

Christina Baker Kline (39:59)

That's such a great question. I think you've been an amazing interviewer. I'm sort of at a loss to even think about what we haven't discussed. Really, we've hit the main points. What I would say to you, I guess, is that if you have read my, what I would say to your audience is if you've read my books, I think this one marries some of the stuff I got right in Orphan Train and some of the stuff I got right in A Piece of the World in that it really is a granular look at one life, which is what I was doing in A Piece of the World in a rural setting. And language was really important to me in this book. I was trying at every turn to strip out sentiment, to be as spare as I could, but also to convey the enormity of this experience. But it has some of the epic reach of Orphan Train in that it takes place over a number of years. It is about a pivotal moment in our nation's history. It's about a little-told story that is actually part of the historical record and that I wanted people to know. So hopefully it kind of does both of those things.

Amy Clark (41:25)

It does. Well, before we close out, just want to mention that Christina is going to stick around for one of our spoiler chats, which is always so fun. So we'll get to talk about the last half of the book. But as we close out this section, Christina, we always end this spot here by just asking writers what they're feeling proud of, whether it's with this project or with life in general. And it gives me a chance to say, this is such an honor. I've been a big admirer of your books for many many years. You are one of the main reasons why I even got hooked on historical fiction even though you didn't know you were writing it in the beginning. I'm so glad to finally connect with you but especially over this project because I think this book is so important. It is so special and I don't know a single book club who could not have an incredible book chat because of the work that you did. So thank you for doing something big and brave but I would love to hear what you're feeling proud of right now.

Christina Baker Kline (42:26)

Thank you, Amy. What I'm feeling proud of is finishing this book. And what I would say, I always say this to my students, but my biggest piece of advice is finish. So many of us get to a moment in our books. I mean, I get to this with every book around page 120, I think,

what am I doing? don't even, what is the story? It's not good enough. not, you know, it doesn't have enough. I'm never gonna be able to finish it or whatever, but that I forge ahead. But with this book, it really was the one book I've ever written that I was going to not finish, that I was going to put aside permanently. And screwing up my courage and going back to it, I would say to writers out there who have a manuscript that feels that way to you, really think about going back and digging back in. It took me months to stop hating it. I went back to it and I thought, I just don't even know. I don't even know what this is or if I can pull this off.

So, yeah, the feeling of accomplishment when I finally managed to turn in the last draft was huge. And also because I'm proud of myself for grappling with these terrifying things. The stuff we fear is the stuff that matters the most, I would say, in our work and in our perhaps deep in our psyches. You know, by taking... You could write a safe book. I was writing a book that was going to be fairly safe. And by taking a leap, I think, we move ourselves forward and we grow. And that's what I'm proud of, is that I took the opportunity to actually grow at this late stage. You know, I'm glad that I did. I'm really glad that I did because also it led to the book I'm working on now, which is another great leap and another, it just taught me that I can grow more every time.

Amy Clark (44:33)

Well, your risks paid off. I'm so glad that I got to read the story. Listeners, if you want to follow me on the other side of the paywall, we will have that fun spoiler chat. Thank you, Christina.

Christina Baker Kline (44:45)

Thank you so much, Amy.

This transcript is provided for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, errors and omissions may occur. The content of this transcript may not be comprehensive and should not be relied upon as a substitute for professional advice or judgment. The views and opinions expressed by individuals in this transcript are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the transcriber or any associated entities. Furthermore, this transcript may be subject to copyright protection. Any

reproduction, distribution, or other use of this transcript without the express permission of the copyright owner is strictly prohibited.