

The Possibility of You
By Pamela Redmond
Book Club Guide

I had book clubs in mind when I wrote The Possibility of You. Exploring timeless issues that affect women – women of my generation, of my daughter’s generation, and of my mother’s and grandmother’s generations too – as well as the way things have changed over the decades made conversations and debates come alive in my head. I longed to hear women talking about those issues, having those conversations, out loud.

If you’re lucky enough to be a member of an intergenerational book club, this novel would be a perfect pick for you. Alternately, your book club could invite your mothers or daughters (or both) or friends and relatives of different ages to the meeting at which you discuss The Possibility of You.

The seed of the idea for The Possibility of You involved both my grandmother and my daughter, who never met. But looking up my grandmother’s name on the Ellis Island website, discovering she’d arrived in 1911 when she was 23, I realized she was the same age as my daughter, who had just moved to Paris. Two young women, separated by four generations and nearly a century, both embarking on independent lives in foreign countries and having experiences that, in the end, must have felt very similar.

I suddenly was able to imagine my grandmother as a young woman in a way I never could before. While the reality of her individual life in New York was unknowable – she wouldn’t talk about it, and there was little written about the lives of Irish maids and nannies beyond the grossest stereotypes – I was able to research the era and create a Bridget who might have been her.

I moved to New York in 1976 myself, and while there was no Maude or Bridget in my life, no Jupiter, and no baby either, I did spend a week in a friend’s grandmother’s apartment on the Upper East Side that felt a lot like the house on 64th Street, and I went through a pregnancy scare that left an indelible mark on me.

Of course young women today have so many more choices, so much more information than my grandmother or mother or even I had when I was in my twenties. And yet the feelings around those choices, the difficulty of those decisions is much the same.

Your copy of The Possibility of You includes questions for your book club to explore. Here’s a sampling plus some additional thoughts:

1. Why does Cait's unexpected pregnancy inspire her to search for her birth mother? How does the fact of her own adoption influence her feelings about being pregnant and the possibility of having a child?
2. Motherhood is a central theme in the story. Of the characters that are mothers, who did you find to be the most empathetic? How about the least? What does it take to make someone a mother – A genetic bond? An emotional one? – and why?
3. How does Cait's life—emotionally, socially, and economically—compare to Billie's when she was faced with an unplanned pregnancy more than 30 years earlier? Given Billie's situation, was her decision to leave her daughter and seek a new life for herself understandable? Why or why not?
4. Describe Bridget's relationship with Maude, both before and after Floyd's death. Why do you think Bridget remains with Maude for so many years? How would you define their relationship?
5. The scene in which Cait finally meets Billie is the only one told from both characters' perspectives. How does having each of their viewpoints enhance the story? During their conversation, what does Cait come to realize about her past and her future? What is her opinion of Billie?
6. In what ways does Cait's search for her birth mother give her a new understanding about Vern and Sally, her adoptive parents? How does her relationship with Sally, in particular, change over the course of the story?
7. From physical appearance and sexual preferences to upbringing and ambitions, Billie and Jupe appear to embody "nothing but contradictions." (p. 17) What accounts for their close friendship? How does Billie so misjudge their relationship?
8. How does the issue of race play out in the novel? Discuss the scene on pages 161-170 when Jupe joins Billie, Bridget, and Maude for dinner. Afterwards, Jupe disagrees with Billie that Bridget is the more racist of the two older women—and that Maude, in fact, was not being "really nice" throughout the evening as Billie believed. (p. 171) Whose perception of the situation is more accurate? How so?
9. Discuss the historical aspects of the story, including the suffragist movement and the Heterodoxy Club, birth control restrictions, divorce laws, the attitude toward Irish immigrants, and the polio epidemic. What, if anything, did you learn that surprised you?

10. *The Possibility of You* spans nearly a hundred years. What were the most dramatic changes from generation to generation in terms of choices and opportunities for women, including those related to marriage and motherhood? What things have remained essentially the same?

This is a Q & A that editor Megan McKeever did with me that's included in the book, with some additional thoughts added here.

There are two epitaphs to the book, one from Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and the other from Kara Walker's *Letter from a Black Girl*. What was it about these two passages that resonated with you?

The Philip Roth quote speaks to how unknowable our family histories, the lives of our mothers and grandmothers, are to us from the present. Cait goes looking for the truth about her parentage, and the reader finds out much more about her history and the foundations of her life than she can ever know. We all have that curiosity about a past that can never be fully revealed to us, and we're all shaped by experiences that we may never discover.

I saw an exhibition of Kara Walker's art, which I love, early in the process of writing this book. Besides being inspired by how she rewrites African-American and women's history, I thought the feeling in the quote of two people wrapped up in a hate-love relationship, the way Maude and Bridget in particular are, particularly resonated with this book.

What inspired the idea to have a character that searches for her birth mother? Is adoption a subject in which you were previously interested or one you have personal experience with?

Originally, this book was only about Billie and Bridget, and there was no contemporary story, so when I decided to add a present-day character, I needed to give her a compelling reason to dig into the past and that's how I came up with adoption story. Then, the more I read about the struggles of adopted adults searching for their identities, the more interesting the subject of adoption became.

While I am not an adoptive or a birth parent and was not adopted myself, I've had several close friends and family members who've had personal experience with adoption and have heard their stories and seen their struggles on every side of this issue for years. Even in a happy adoption, as Cait's was, there are struggles.

Can you share with us the significance of the title, *The Possibility of You* and how it relates to the story?

The Possibility of You connects with all the relationships in the book, from Bridget's search for the possibilities for her future beyond being a servant to Billie's quest for Jupe's love and for a family to Cait's curiosity about her birth mother. The babies to these women exist primarily as possibilities. And of course, most centrally, to the women in the story as well as to all of us, there is the possibility of who you can become as a person and what you can make of your life.

There is a lot of fascinating information in the novel, from statistics (Frank's clients searching for birth parents are 90% female) to historical snapshots (the mania that gripped the city during the polio epidemic of 1916). What sort of research did you do for the novel? How long did it take you to write it?

I worked on this novel for over five years and did a tremendous amount of research. I knew from my grandmother's marriage certificate that she'd gotten pregnant before she was married, a secret that provided the kernel of the book's drama across the generations. Early on, I visited the American Irish Historical Society on Fifth Avenue, whose gorgeous townhouse provided the model for the house on 64th Street. I also went to the Ellis Island library and listened to oral histories of Irish servants who came to New York in the years before World War I. At the New York Historical Society, I discovered a 1916 street atlas that showed something called The Hospital for Ruptured and Crippled Children, which led me to the polio epidemic. I interviewed a Yale medical history professor, Naomi Rogers, who's an expert on the 1916 epidemic, along with an adoption detective, genetic specialists, adopted adults and adoptive parents, experts on Irish immigration and the early birth control movement.

You're the author of several baby-naming books, including *Beyond Ava* and *Aiden: The Enlightened Guide to Naming Your Baby*. Do you use these resources when selecting character names? Along with *Bridget*, do any of the character names in *The Possibility of You* have special significance or meaning?

My first working title for this book was **The Bridget**. Bridget was my grandmother's real name and she changed it to Bertha or Bea; I never knew why until I discovered that The Bridget was a derogatory term for an Irish maid. Naming characters is different from naming babies in that you're not starting with a clean slate; when you choose a name, you have some sense of who you want this person to be. I kept changing Billie's name from Billie to Lily and back again, but once she firmly became Billie, she got a lot tougher than she'd been as Lily. I wanted Cait's name to be something that she would never have chosen for herself.

Reading about real-life figures like Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, with their actions put in historical context, is pretty powerful. Which women's rights advocate do

you find particularly inspiring? What more can you tell us about psychoanalyst Beatrice Hinkle?

Beatrice Hinkle was fascinating and has been largely forgotten. She was one of the first women psychoanalysts in the U.S., she translated Jung into English, she was an extremely prominent and influential woman of her day. But I was able to find out little about her until I gained access to a secret library in New York Hospital where they have her papers: amazing. But while Hinkle is amazing to me, Margaret Sanger is the women's rights advocate I find most inspiring. She went against the law and conventions to help poor women gain the right to birth control that wealthy women enjoyed via private doctors.

A memorable moment in the novel takes places when Billie is in a nightclub and speaks with a woman who had given up her own baby for adoption. That woman turns out to be Patti Smith. How did you discover this fact, and why did you work it into the story? Are you a fan of Patti Smith's music?

I am a huge Patti Smith fan – her rendition of Bob Dylan's "Changing of the Guard" is my absolute favorite song – and I was inspired to add this very late in revisions by reading her wonderful book, **Just Kids**. She wrote so honestly and movingly about giving up her child for adoption that I could imagine this scene very well taking place. It feels very real and vivid to me.

The Possibility of You spans three generations. What insights did writing the book give you into how things have changed for women over the last century? Were there any important issues you specifically wanted to address, such as post-partum depression or access to birth control?

Definitely access to birth control is huge, but beyond that, as a woman who came of reproductive age at the time Billie did, I really wanted to write about how relatively naïve and idealistic and also repressed people were about sex and pregnancy in the 1970s, supposedly the age of sexual freedom. I even got an original copy of **Our Bodies, Ourselves**, which every young woman had at the time, and there was lots about abortion but very little about pregnancy.

An interesting aspect of the story is how some of the women in the Heterodoxy Club, who are advocating for women's rights, have a derogatory attitude toward Bridget. Why the contradiction? Did you come across anything in your research that sheds light on this?

The women in the Heterodoxy Club, which was real and the common denominator of famous women of that day, were all wealthy and educated and upper class. There was then and for decades to come a casual classicism and racism among people who were on the other hand fighting for women's rights or other kinds of social equality. And the

Irish of course were seen as an inferior race; the parallels between that ethnic prejudice and also the prejudice against Italians and blacks was something I wanted to explore.

You say on your website that The Possibility of You started out as a historical novel focused on an Irish nanny whose young charge dies in the 1916 polio epidemic. How did it transform into a story set in three different time periods, including the present?

It started out as a historical novel with a much pared-down version of the 1976 Billie story as a framing story. But the framing story never really worked – it just wasn't compelling enough. One early reader said the 1976 story consisted of Billie saying, "And then what did you do, Grandma?" Zzzzzzzz. And so I kept looking for ways to make the framing story more modern and more compelling and also to make the events of 1916 matter more going forward.

What do you most enjoy about writing historical novels? What can you tell us about the one you're currently working on?

This is my first historical novel and I'm hooked. There was a steep learning curve: I remember asking writers I admire like Geraldine Brooks and Jodi Picoult how they knew when to stop researching and start writing, and whether they did all their research before they began. Research some, write some, research some more was the message. And at some point you need to let go of all that great history you've learned and just let the characters live and breathe.

I'm working on another novel set in 1916, which was an amazing year, in the Adirondacks at a great rustic estate owned by a young widow, modeled on Margaret Vanderbilt, whose husband has gone down with the Lusitania. Grief-stricken, she travels north to sell the place, only to encounter the amazing bed that the resident woodsman – hunky, naturally – has spent the winter building for her on her late husband's instructions. The story is told from the point of view of a young boy whose parents run the estate and who idolizes the woodsman. There is a modern story that right now is a framing story...but is threatening to grow.