

## Questions for Discussion – WHAT PRETTY GETS YOU by Chandra Hoffman

- 1.) This story began twenty-three years ago, inspired by a physically beautiful, morally bankrupt college friend. Watching her blitzkrieg through lives, leaving chaos and broken relationships in her wake, I was struck by how her appearance bought her endless entrance into new groups. I also wanted to shine a light on something sacred, bigger than this physical phenomenon, and that thing was a family. Have you known any Maia's in your life? How has their story played out?
- 2.) Maia boards a plane based on the flirtations of a stranger. She talks about trying on versions of herself 'like Buffalo Exchange dresses.' Can you remember moments in your life when everything seemed possible, when you were ready to reinvent yourself at a moment's notice?
- 3.) As a reader, I'm attracted to survivalist stories, both deserted island and post-apocalyptic tales. I admit that sometimes, my kids and I binge-watch *Naked and Afraid*. I had fun imagining the practical aspects of Maia's needs, from phone charger to food, when she strands herself in these situations.
- 4.) Themes of beauty without substance carry over into setting and character. In what ways are some of the secondary characters or even the location itself examples of these?
- 5.) Because this novel was twenty-three years in the making, in creating the final draft, I noticed how much things have changed since I started writing it in 1998. September 11th created changes in air travel/airport policies, cell phones/internet created ubiquitous and instant connectivity, and ride share services replaced taxis/buses for transportation. But one of the biggest things that changed is a positive. Modern beta readers struggled with the idea that Maia would get into Maurice's van without some hint of authority. They insisted young women today are savvier, less careless and have a stronger sense of self-preservation. Do you agree with this change?
- 6.) In the scene with Maurice, Maia gives up her body in a bargain to save her life but won't let him take the necklace. Was this believable? How do we compromise parts of ourselves for security?
- 7.) One of the taglines of the novel is 'the privilege and peril of physical beauty'. How do these themes play out in the story? The privileges are easy to see, but what are some of the perils of being pretty?
- 8.) In the Carter house, Carolyn and Maia both need and learn things from each other. What are some examples of how their relationship was an agent for each other's growth?
- 9.) Author Maggie Gallagher is quoted as saying, "Getting married is the boldest, most optimistic thing that most of us will ever do." Does the book offer any hopeful notes

for long term relationships/monogamy? If you were Joel and Carolyn's marriage counselor, what questions would you ask? Could their relationship be salvaged?

- 10.)** It can be easy to paint Joel as a villain, but my intention was to present him as simply human. There is a scene where Carolyn feels sorry for him, 'for all men around the Maia's of the world'. Does Joel have any redeeming moments? Where do you picture him now?
- 11.)** The best endings are equal parts inevitable, satisfying and hopeful. In twenty-three years of drafts, this novel has had so many alternate endings they got nicknames:
- Strong feminist
  - Lesbian twist
  - Nothing changes/depressing literary
  - Thelma and Louise
  - Bald journalist saves the day
  - Cheese stands alone
- How did the final ending rank? Did it fulfill the criteria of a 'good ending'?
- 12.)** Where and how do you picture Maia and Carolyn a year from now?