

READING GROUP GUIDE
for
AN UNFINISHED SCORE
by Elise Blackwell

by Jenn Northington

SUMMARY

For years, Suzanne has been hiding an affair from her husband, Ben, and best friend, Petra. When her lover Alex dies suddenly in a plane crash, matters quickly spiral out of her control. As she struggles to conceal her grief and guilt, Suzanne begins to receive phone calls from Alex's widow, Olivia. Then, an unfinished musical score arrives in the mail -- which Suzanne believes has been written by Alex, a gifted conductor who never composed. Olivia insists that Suzanne, a talented viola player, finish the score for a public performance.

As Suzanne grows increasingly obsessed with the score and her memories of Alex, both her friendship with Petra and her marriage to Ben are strained. How well did Suzanne really know Alex? What does Olivia truly want from her? As revelation after revelation strips away Suzanne's certainties, she has to decide how to move forward in a life that is far from what she planned.

AUTHOR BIO

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Suzanne believes that she loves both Ben and Alex. Is it possible to love more than one person at a time? Does that make her affair more or less excusable?
2. If you were in Olivia's position, would you want to meet Suzanne? If you were Ben, would you rather know or not know about Suzanne and Alex?
3. Suzanne and Ben are aware of Petra's drinking problem, and do their best to minimize its affect on Adele. However, throughout the course of the novel, they don't encourage her to quit or seek help -- at one point Suzanne offers to buy Petra a bottle of wine. Why do they enable her drinking? What would you have done in their place?
4. Petra, Suzanne and Ben struggle with the right course of action for Adele. Ben argues that a deaf lifestyle would be better for her, and Suzanne fears that Adele would never be fully hearing or fully deaf, but something in between. Ultimately Petra decides to go ahead with the operation; whom do you agree with?
5. When did you first know that Petra and Ben were having an affair? Do you believe Petra when she tells Suzanne that it was really about trying to get closer to her?

6. Should Suzanne tell Ben about Alex? Has the opportunity to tell him (when he revealed his affair with Petra) passed her by? The novel ends without us knowing for sure if she confesses – do you think she did?

7. There is a great deal of musical description in UNFINISHED SCORE. How did reading the passages that described the experience of hearing music affect you? Were you able to imagine the music?

8. When did you first realize that Olivia, and not Alex, had written the score? What, if anything, tipped you off?

9. Blackwell tells us only Suzanne's perspective. If you could pick a different character to view the events of UNFINISHED SCORE from, which would you choose?

10. Did you find Suzanne easy to sympathize with? How did you feel about her behavior throughout the novel? Which character did you sympathize with the most, and why?

11. Did you like the ending of the book (Ben, Suzanne, and Adele in Paris)? If not, how would you have changed it?

12. The characters in the novel are deeply involved with classical music. Discuss your own favorite musical genre (or musician, composer, or band). Are there songs that define particular moments in your life the way that *Harold in Italy* defines Suzanne's relationship with Alex?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1. What did you listen to during the writing of this book? How does music shape the writing process?

Because the main character is a viola player, I listened to the viola repertoire over and over, particularly Berlioz' *Harold in Italy*, Hindemith's viola music, and large numbers of string quartets. I also listened repeatedly to the music that is portrayed in the novel, including Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, Crumb's *Black Angels Quartet*, and Ysaÿe's *Six sonatas for solo violin*, which is the music that accompanies one of the novel's sex scenes. As both research and a source of inspiration, I also attended many concerts in many cities, some of which are the basis of the live performances described in the book.

2. What kind of research did you do in order to get all the little details of musician life right? Have you ever composed a score yourself?

I have never composed a score, only interviewed composers and read their accounts as well as accounts of their lives. In addition to attending many performances, I also sat in on practices, master classes, and a composers' institute. At concerts I would lurk backstage when I could, eavesdropping. Hearing musicians talking amongst themselves

was probably the greatest help in learning the details of their lives and work. And I read biographies of composers and listened to interviews with performers. I also drew from my experience as a writer—thinking about the ways that composing music is and isn't the same as composing a novel. There are similarities, though a key difference is that a composer depends on the talent of other musicians to bring the work to life, and the differences between writing a life performance are many.

3. The musicians in your novel have deeply emotional and personal connections to music, particularly the classical genre. Tell us about your own relationship with music.

I have always loved music and never had much talent for it. I still remember very clearly my frustration at not being able to make my viola sound like I thought it should. When I was about nine, my grandmother took me to a lesson and when my teacher told me to stand up straight, I announced that I could play “all hunched over” and proceeded to hunch down on the floor and play bent over. My grandmother used to tell the story when asked about her most embarrassing moment. My musical career didn't last much longer, though I have always listened to music, both classical and popular. In college I worked as a disc jockey and took a lot of youthful pride in my knowledge. Writing this book I realized how little I really knew and how much I wished that I'd been born with a real ear.

4. What books and/or authors have influenced your development as a writer?

I grew up in the shadow of southern American writers, including Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty, Percy, and Hannah. While I don't write like any of them, all influenced me in identifiable ways, particularly in those early years. In college and immediately following, my biggest contemporary influence was probably Michael Ondaatje. Now I read all kinds of things—as of late, more European than U.S. fiction—and I feel lifted by many voices when I work. My favorite writer these days is W.G. Sebald, particularly *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*. When I get deep into a book, though, my influences come from within the work, as choices are made by character, structure, and the language itself.

5. Who was your favorite character to write? Who was the hardest?

Petra was my favorite! I actually make fun of this book in *Grub*, my satire of the writing life. In that novel, a character named Eddie Renfros is writing a book titled *Conduct* that is basically the first draft of *An Unfinished Score*. He calls the Petra character a “shameless slut of a violin player,” and that's how she started. Petra's kind of a party girl who has been forced to take on a responsibility she wasn't ready for. So she's conflicted and has had to grow up, but it was her love of fun and passion for joke-telling that made her an enjoyable character to write. Working with Petra always energized the work for me. The hardest character to write at first was Ben; it took me awhile to get a full take on him, to portray him as someone Suzanne would have married and stayed with across many years. But ultimately the most difficult character to write was Olivia. I wanted the nature of her revenge to absolutely surprise the reader but in a convincing way. She's

smarter and more patient than I am, and so she was a challenge for me to create. I also didn't want her to be easily "the woman scorned" or merely diabolical but rather complex and sympathetic to an extent.

6. You have a wide range as an author: your books UNNATURAL HISTORY OF CYPRESS PRESS and HUNGER were historical novels, and GRUB was a satirical look at publishing. How do you shift gears from book to book? Does your writing process change as well?

I'm definitely one of those writers whose books are not alike, and part of both the pleasure and the challenge of my writing comes from developing something new with each project. My process is remarkably steady, though, with the exception of *Grub*. (Because it's a retelling of an older novel, I had a blueprint. That fact, combined with my primary goal of humor and lampoon, allowed me to write it very quickly.) I start thinking about a book a few years before I get much on the page—and generally while I'm working on another book. Then I take some notes here and there across a few months. And then I write the first draft, revising a great deal as I go. The third draft (which means parts of the book are really at the tenth-draft stage and others are new material inserted during revision) is what I usually send to my editor. And I'm lucky to have a real editor, which means the work isn't over when I hit "send." An important part of the process for me is the thinking—being alert for anything I hear or see or read that fits in or inspires or complicates what I'm making. There's a balance between living in the book I'm writing and living in my life, and sometimes I get that balance wrong. I think I'm getting better at it, though people I know might well say the opposite.

7. What made you decide to tell the story from Suzanne's perspective? Did you ever consider bringing in other characters, or telling the story in a different way?

With some of my books I have changed the point-of-view scheme after starting, but this was always Suzanne's story, always third person but very close to her, always in present tense. It simply was that way from the beginning.

8. Suzanne expresses frustration with the South, and some of her marriage's most difficult times center around life in the region. You are originally from Louisiana, and currently live in South Carolina. Do Suzanne's difficulties echo your personal experience?

No. Like most people I know—and not just southerners—my relationship with the place I come from is complex. I have a very clear idea about what's wonderful about the south and what's not wonderful at all. But it is home; I am southern. I am someone from the south who left the south and then returned, and slowly I have embraced the label of "southern writer." My second novel is very southern, and the book I'm working on now has a Louisiana setting, though I think of it as an international novel because of its characters and themes (and because the south itself is international these days). Unlike me, Suzanne is not southern, but her negative experience of the south has less to do with her "Yankee" status than with the particular situation she finds herself. One of my oldest

and best friends lives in Charleston, and so I go there a lot. I *love* Charleston. Suzanne does not love Charleston—in fact she dislikes it—but that’s because of her familial situation. The Charleston she’s exposed to is the one defined by rigid class structure. As someone who grew up poor, and someone who descends from two ethnic groups that have historically been looked down on, Suzanne’s experience of that class structure is painful. Much of it, though, is particular to the circumstances of the family she married into—and the fact that she lost a child in the city. And then her own insecurities and feelings of not being good enough color her experience.

9. Adele’s deafness is a defining factor in Suzanne’s “family.” What or who inspired her character?

I’ve always been fascinated by the senses, including what their absence means. In *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish*, I wrote a character who has no sense of taste and whose other senses are opaque. Deafness particularly interests me, in part because I love music so much and also because I’ve met a number of intriguing deaf people over the years. I’ve studied some American Sign Language, though that was long enough ago that I’ve retained little. In my research, I noticed over and over the cultural associations between music and deafness, in part because stories of composers who lost their hearing (such as Beethoven) move people. And as a mother, I wondered what it would be like to have a child who couldn’t share in the thing you love most in the world. It’s also an incredibly weighty responsibility to care for anyone in the world, all the more so when that person is deemed by others to be somehow different or fragile.

10. One of the ties that bring Suzanne and Alex together is their escape from poverty through their musical talent. With the continuing cutbacks in education, particularly in the music and art fields, do you believe these kinds of opportunities are being lost?

I’m glad that you saw that, because for me their mutual experience of an impoverished and largely unhappy childhood is a powerful force uniting Suzanne and Alex. After music, it is the most powerful draw. Where she feels resentment against the privilege of Ben’s family (though she later learns they have their own real troubles), her affinity to Alex is deep because of their similar experiences. There’s intense sexual attraction between them, of course, but there’s a deeper form of recognition—both of the childhood pain and of the love of music and talent and tremendous will power to escape that past and invent a usable self. To answer the second part of your question, I do worry that the impoverishment of education (including in the arts but also in the sciences and any other field where talent and intelligence can count more than class and status) risks the social and economic mobility that has been central to the best of the American experience. There needs to be a way up and out for children who seek it. As someone who teaches at a large public university in a relatively poor state, I see the intelligence and drive of many students from backgrounds which have given them no leg up in the world. I see how hard some of them are willing to work and what a waste of talent it would be to live in a society that didn’t make any space for that, that never threw anyone a rope. Many kids

who might be musical (or artistic or mathematical) geniuses never know that, and that impoverishes our culture and the history of human accomplishment.

11. Your characters struggle with many kinds of family dysfunction – extramarital affairs, depression, and addiction foremost. It reminded me of the famous Tolstoy line, “Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Do you believe that you have to experience these things in order to relate to them, or is there something universal about family struggles, regardless of the specifics?

That’s a tough question. I’ll start by saying that, no, a writer does not need to live through particular forms of family dysfunction in order to portray them. I’m not sure someone who has led an entirely happy and strife-free life can or would put pen to paper, but I don’t know anyone who has led an entirely happy and strife-free life. Everyone gets a least a small taste of pain and trouble, or witnesses it. It’s difficult to reach my age and not know people who have suffered depression or battled an addition or had an affair. Ultimately, though, writing fiction is an act of imagination. Writers ask myriad versions of “What if?” and “What was that like?” or “How might a different kind of person experience that?” or “What if that thing that happened to her had happened to me?” So, yes, it means tapping into something universal.

12. What are you working on next?

I’ve started the next novel, which I’m calling *Water Damage*. It’s set in post-Katrina New Orleans, and one of the main characters is an art conservator who specializes in the restoration of water-damaged paintings. Another is an artist, another works for the Art Loss Registry, and another is a troubled young man from a prominent family. My idea is that each of these four major characters is damaged in some unseen way that makes them dangerous to each other. The plot centers around a stolen painting from the past and a murder overlooked in the chaos of the Katrina evacuation. I want to explore how some people’s lives are dramatically altered by external forces, while others’ fates are shaped by their past or their own will.

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