



BOOK CLUB KIT

# GET READY TO HOST YOUR BOOK CLUB!

We're so glad you've decided to host a *Burst* book event! Inside this kit you'll find an author Q&A with Mary, a reading guide to help prompt your discussion, and more. Stories are best when shared, and we hope your time together is fun and engaging!

If you're new to hosting a book event, don't worry! We've got you covered. Here's what you'll need to do to get ready for your gathering:

- Determine if you'll meet virtually or in-person.
- Save the date!
- Reach out to your local bookstore. You can direct your guests to purchase the book through the store ahead of time or coordinate with the store and have them sell the books at your event.
- Invite friends! Make sure your guests know they're welcome to attend even if they haven't read or finished the book!
- Plan to have some food and drinks, but don't stress about this! Keep it easy by stopping at Trader Joe's for some wine (or sparkling water), cheese, and crackers. Or go all out with homemade snacks and treats. You could also divide and conquer by asking a few close friends to bring an appetizer or dessert!
- Relax and have fun! Book clubs are enjoyable because of the connections, not the cocktails or the charcuterie board. Allow everyone an opportunity to share or ask questions. Be mindful of those who haven't had a chance to read the book by discussing the themes rather than the specifics.

# Q&A WITH MARY OTIS

## 1. What was the genesis of your novel *Burst*?

*Burst* originated from my short story, “Flight,” which sprang from the image of a mother madly driving down the freeway with a child in the back seat of her car. Once the story was published in *Zyzzyyva*, I thought I was done with the characters, but apparently, they weren’t done with me. It was a favorable and urgent haunting—powerful enough to carry me through many drafts and revisions of this novel until I finally reached the jubilant days when the story locked into place.

Often, synchronicity came into play. Once, after a long day of writing, I took a walk in the park and saw a woman who bore a close resemblance to a character I’d just imagined. While writing a story or novel takes work, I have great respect for the invisible and mysterious signs and signals that guide us along the way, when it seems the world leans in and conspires with us to write.

## 2. What author or authors inspired you when you first began to write?

Two authors that inspired me when I first started writing are Alice Munro and Joy Williams. Alice Munro's ability to inhabit and reveal the hidden, complex lives of her characters, her skill in moving forward and backward in time, and her ability to illuminate emotion with depth and precision showed me what was possible in scope and scale in a short story. Joy Williams' writing is ominous and comic, and I am in awe of her spiky observations, ferocity, and ability to upend expectations, as well as the symbolic poetry of her language. I recommend *Friend of My Youth* (Munro) and *The Quick and the Dead* (Williams) as a starting place.

# Q&A WITH MARY OTIS

**3. In the early chapters of *Burst* you write partially from a child's point of view. You've also created younger narrators in some of your other work. What compels you to write about kids?**

I'm pulled to write about children, particularly about their secrets, worries, and desires. Writing from a child's point of view offers me the opportunity to access a kind of "clear channel radio" to the subconscious. With children there is that immediacy, lack of a filter, and extremely high stakes (even when the stakes are forgotten five minutes later). The writer Penelope Fitzgerald once said, "I like to bring in children because they introduce a different scale of judgment, probably based on one we taught them but which we never intended to be taken literally." I find that very funny and true.

**4. What is one of the central themes of *Burst*?**

Risk is one of the unifying themes in my novel. In the opening scene of *Burst*, ten-year-old Viva and her mother Charlotte are barreling down the "suicide" lane in their old van. This was a type of highway that used to exist in numerous parts of the country—one in which drivers could pass going in both directions. In my novel, I wanted to illuminate the risks inherent in addiction as well as the emotional risks that need to be taken to flourish as an artist.

**5. While you write about artists of all kinds, dance is central to your novel. Why did you choose to write about dance?**

Dance is the ultimate harnessing of the ephemeral to the corporeal, and it's a powerful way to express emotion and story.



# Q&A WITH MARY OTIS

Sometimes words are ineffective and dance taps into human instincts at a visceral level. It's an incredibly demanding art form, and unlike writing, which one theoretically could continue into old age, the length of a dance career is fleeting, and because of that the stakes are even more compelling. I wanted to explore the commitment with which my character Viva pursues dance, its costs and rewards, and how it becomes the organizing principle of her life.

## **6. What did you want to convey about alcoholism with this book?**

One of the themes I wanted to explore in *Burst* is how artistic purpose and tenacity can lead to transcendence, and yet, how when artistic impulse is thwarted, that energy can express itself in destructive ways. I'm also interested in alcoholism as it dovetails with a crisis of personal faith or as a response to anxiety or deep and private pain. We're an addicted culture, with some addictions being more obvious than others, and some being more accepted than others. I was pulled to explore how this plays out in different ways for my central characters.

## **7. What is your writing process?**

My writing process has to do with being captured by something to the extent that I become somewhat obsessed about it. The emotional challenge is to head fully toward something that intrigues me, frightens me, or gives me great joy. I've been surprised to find that the emotion that yanked me into a story in the first place can crack open another emotion—usually one I didn't expect. Finding something hilarious that on its face seemed tragic comes to mind. My intellectual challenge is to learn something I don't know (or learn something new about something I do know) and share it in a way that readers can deeply connect to.

# Q&A WITH MARY OTIS

## 8. What part of the writing process do you find the most invigorating?

The “gathering” part, when I’m finding my way into a piece of writing, is invigorating and mysterious in that sometimes very unexpected things make their way into the work. The rigor of completing something is also compelling to me, and I love the feeling of being so deep in a piece of writing that I’m kind of living a double life—my actual life and the life of the story that, hidden, runs parallel to it when I’m working. I also actually like to revise, so, for me, each part of the writing process can be energizing.

## 9. Where do you find inspiration?

I often find inspiration simply by going about my day—running errands, walking in the park, going to the store, watching people at a stop light. I see and hear so many things that compel me, whether it’s the way someone moves or something they say, and I frequently write these things down on an index card. Sooner or later the image or line usually makes it into a piece of writing or provokes me to begin something new.

## 10. How do you hope readers will connect to your novel *Burst*?

Many readers are familiar with complex family dynamics as well as the processes of acceptance and forgiveness—each of which are often ongoing and not a conclusion. In all my work, I’m interested in illuminating character interiority and the mystery of people’s hidden lives, and I’m compelled to explore wonder and shame, longing and will. I hope that my readers will feel less alone and that they’ve had the opportunity to take a deep look into the mysteries of the human heart. I hope people will find that grace sometimes happens when you least expect it.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you first met Viva and Charlotte, what did you think about their relationship? Were there any emotions under the surface that you noticed? What did you think about their nomadic life?

2. On pages 15 and 16, Viva is watching her mother, noting how beautiful she is. At one point, Otis writes, “Viva obsessively practiced her mother’s face when her back was turned. It seemed to her, if she did this enough, Charlotte’s features might one day become her own.”

How does this scene characterize Viva’s feelings for her mother? How does this intersect with (or contradict) how Viva seems to feel about Charlotte’s behavior?

3. On page 25, when Charlotte is returning from having passed out on the beach, Viva is lying in bed listening to what is happening outside. “Like a song cutting through static on the radio, Viva could hear something else: shame. But you had to have a trained ear to pick it up.”

What is Viva’s role with Charlotte, compared to the anticipated role of a daughter with her mother? How do you think Viva feels about being able to pick out when Charlotte is experiencing shame?

4. When Charlotte puts Viva in a free dance class (pg. 29), Otis writes, “Even without shoes, she could see Viva had something the others did not. It was there in her sense of rhythm and the ease with which she picked up the choreography.” Later (pg. 44), Charlotte tells Viva, “I’m going to give it to you straight—your dancing needs work, but I think you’ve got something.”

Why do you think Charlotte is so forthright with Viva? How does Viva handle these moments of tough love?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

5. While Charlotte is watching Viva dance in that first dance class, Charlotte discovers she envies Viva's energy (pg. 30). "Charlotte would give anything to feel the sense of transport she saw Viva experience when she danced. She felt a stab of guilt. What kind of mother envied her own daughter's joy?"

Have you ever had an experience like this, where you were surprised by feelings of envy? Do you think Charlotte's feelings here ever translated to how she treated Viva? Why or why not?

6. Viva was always wanting to know more about her father, and on page 54, Charlotte finally tells her that he never met Viva. Viva feels joy and happiness from this information "because if a person has never met you, how could they not like you?"

What about Viva's childhood might make her worried that her father might not like her?

Were you surprised by Viva's reaction to this news?

7. In Chapter 13, Viva is practicing her senior solo and is having trouble remembering some of the steps. She realizes that she is struggling with a fear that she isn't good enough to compete with professional dancers.

Where do you think this fear came from for Viva? Do you think that fear is the only thing impacting her ability to remember the steps?





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. On page 113, Viva calls Charlotte, admitting that she is worried about performing. Charlotte tells her she believes she can do it “because you’re talented, and if you can’t believe that right now, I’ll believe it for you. Now, go in the theater, and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Did you think that Charlotte was going to see Viva before she performed? Was it a surprise to you that she didn’t? Why do you think Charlotte felt that sitting in the audience would be enough? Why do you think Charlotte later tells Viva that she “helped” her with her dance?

9. After Viva hurts her knee and is staying with Charlotte, she and Charlotte get into a fight when Viva tries to correct Charlotte’s posture. Viva tells her mother, “You don’t know what it’s like to put in the time,” to which Charlotte responds, “I put my time into you.”

How did you feel about Viva’s response to Charlotte saying she put her time into Viva? Do you think Charlotte resents Viva for being born? Or do you think she resents her for leaving? Or both?

10. On page 157, the reader learns that Charlotte knew she was pregnant while she was still with Wilson and decided to leave him because he “didn’t love her as much as she loved him.” Later, on page 190, Charlotte decides to write to Wilson to tell him about Viva.

Why do you think Charlotte felt that Wilson wasn’t someone she could raise a child with? What changed her mind about telling him?



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

11. In Chapter 18, the reader meets Calla Fortuni, one of Viva's students at Findley Academy.

What do you think Viva saw in Calla that made her spend more time supporting her? Do you think Viva saw some of herself in Calla? Why or why not?

12. On pages 216 and 217, Charlotte goes to the beach and is swept away by the large waves.

Did you initially recognize that Charlotte had died? Why or why not? What about Charlotte dying this way surprised you? What didn't surprise you?

13. Viva's drinking has already been getting worse and worse since she hurt her knee, but it spirals out of control after Charlotte's death and even gets her fired from her job.

Viva never wanted to turn out like her mother, but in some ways she did. What do you think got her to that point? What about Charlotte's death amplified her drinking? As the book ends, it looks as if Viva is attempting to be sober. Do you think she will be able to do what Charlotte couldn't and stay sober? Why or why not?

14. While Viva is meeting Wilson, she recalls a moment from her childhood when Charlotte was braiding her hair and traced the words "You Are Mine" on her back.

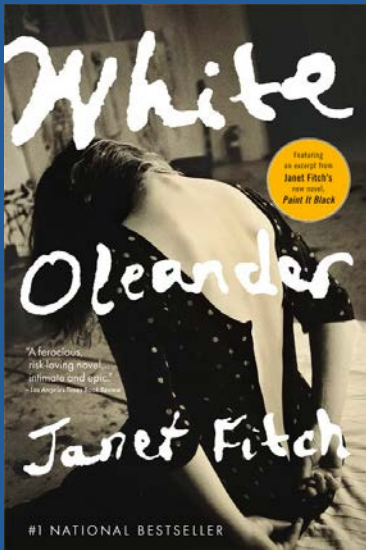
How do you think this influenced Viva's conversation and relationship with Wilson? Why do you think Charlotte was so intent on Viva being *hers*? What does this say about their relationship as a whole?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

15. On page 4, Otis writes, “When Viva learned the planets in science class, Mrs. Kenmore said that when Earth is closest to the sun that point is called a perihelion, and that was how she thought of herself and her mother. She was the closest anyone could get to Charlotte, maybe until the end of time.”

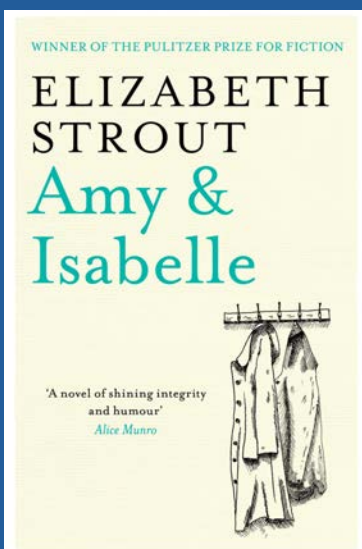
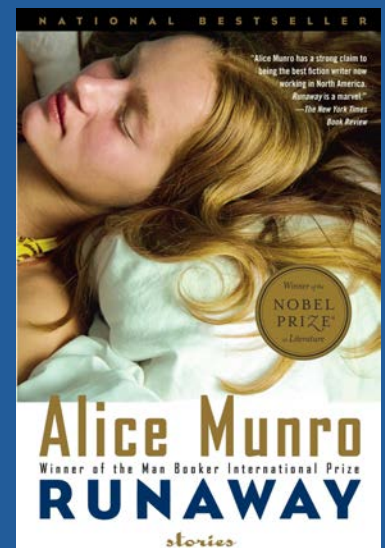
How did you feel about this line when you first read it? Have your feelings changed now that you’ve completed the book? Do you think this statement is true of Charlotte and Viva? How did this statement foreshadow the remainder of the book (or did it)?

# RECOMMENDED MOTHER/DAUGHTER STORIES



The coming-of-age story of Astrid, a young girl who is separated from her eccentric and narcissistic mother and put into a series of foster homes. The novel explores themes of motherhood, the nature of art, self-reflection, survival, and perfection.

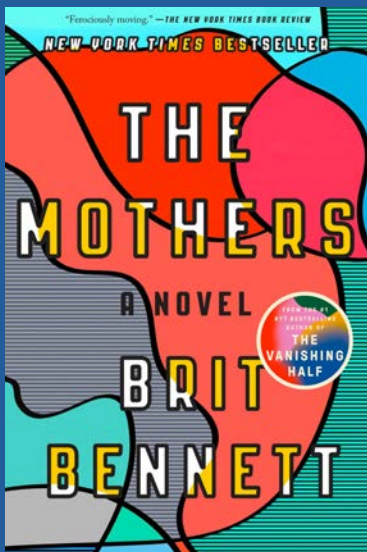
Alice Munro's book of eight short stories investigates themes of love, betrayal, and intimate relationships. She writes about women of all ages and circumstances, as well as the relationships in their lives. Three of the stories inspired the Pedro Almodóvar film *Julieta*.



Isabelle's relationship with her quiet teenage daughter, Amy, becomes strained after Amy's math teacher grooms her into an intimate relationship. In 2001 the novel was adapted into a "Oprah Winfrey Presents" television movie. Several key themes within the novel are motherhood, sexuality, secrets, and the relationship between a mother and daughter.

# RECOMMENDED MOTHER/DAUGHTER STORIES

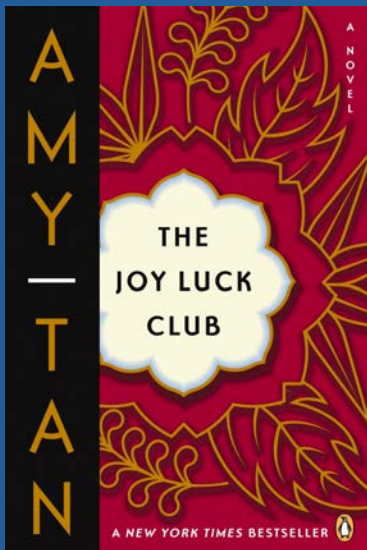
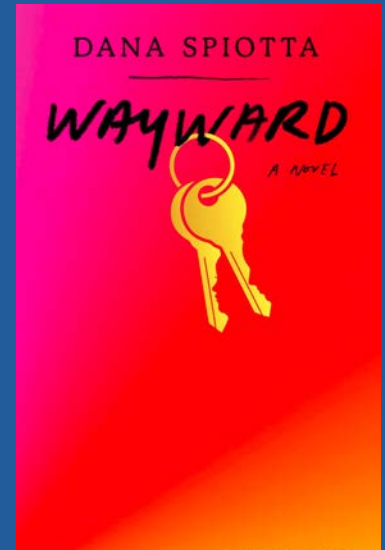
A multi-generational story of mothers and daughters. At the beginning of her memoir, Maya realizes her mother has Alzheimer's after an abrupt change in her behavior and guidance. Unable to keep track of the stories she once told Maya, Maya's mother starts sharing secrets and insight into her life in India, why she left, and her experience of motherhood, prompting Maya to reconsider her relationship with the mother she believed she was close with.



Nadia, a Southern California native, escapes her hometown after her mother's suicide, only to be called back during a family emergency. In Brit Bennett's mesmerizing debut novel, Nadia must confront family secrets, ruined relationships, and what really happened with Luke, the local pastor's son who is now married to her friend Aubrey. Bennett does an excellent job confronting the question of "what if?"

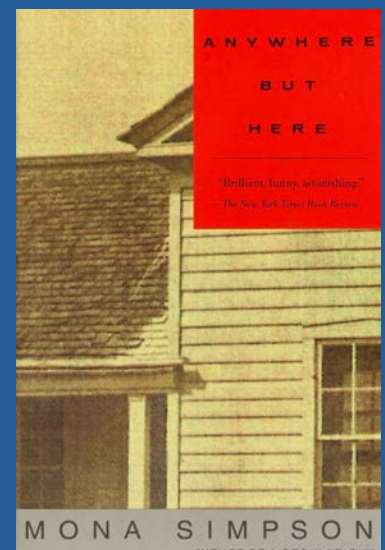
# RECOMMENDED MOTHER/DAUGHTER STORIES

Samantha Raymond contemplates her existence as a fifty-two-year-old woman dealing with her ill mother, her distant teenage daughter, and the state of the country. She escapes her life and family with the impulse buy of a stunning but decaying house in Syracuse. A novel that analyzes motherhood, mortality, aging, the female body, society, and female complexity.

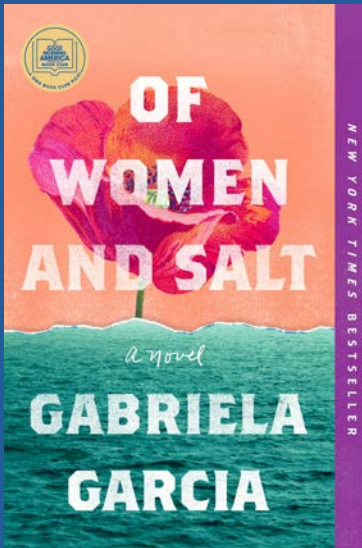


This iconic 1989 novel is about four Chinese immigrant families in San Francisco who start a mahjong community called The Joy Luck Club. The book is structured like the game mahjong and each of the four daughters share stories about their lives in the form of short vignettes. The novel was adapted into a feature film in 1993, directed by Wayne Wang.

The story of a narcissistic mother, Adele August, who leaves her second husband and takes her eleven-year-old daughter, Ann, to Los Angeles in hopes of making her a child star and finding a rich husband. Ann must navigate her mother's moods, neglect, abuse, and fantasies while torn between her feelings of love and rebellion.



# RECOMMENDED MOTHER/DAUGHTER STORIES



A story about addiction, the choices of mothers and daughters, and family legacy. Jeanne travels to Cuba to learn more about her family history, intent to see her grandmother and uncover secrets from the past. Her mother, Carmen, struggles with her own trauma and the difficult relationship with her mother while trying to help her wayward daughter. This novel spans time and place to explore the complexities of betrayal and motherhood.

Rose travels to a Spanish clinic with her daughter, Sofia, in search of a medical cure for Rose's paralysis. In electric, understated prose, this 2016 novel explores sexuality, unexpressed female rage, and the temptation of hypochondria and big pharma, as Rose and Sofia's frustrations simmer in the hot Spanish landscape.



# DANCE

## INSPIRARTION

Mary Otis assembled the below video of three dance clips of the type of modern dance that Viva would have performed in college and that is described in *Burst*. The final one is underwater, which also dovetails thematically as there is a great deal of water in *Burst*: the ocean in general, one drowning, one almost-drowning, and characters "in the drink."

[WATCH HERE](#)

If you're looking for more dance clips, check out these longer videos Mary recommends, along with her thoughts:

### **Painted: [Video Link](#)**

"I like this performance relative to the choreography and emotion, and it would be in line with the type of dance Viva does at her college final performance." (Chapter 13)

### **AMA: [Video Link](#)**

"This is also very moving and striking and unusual in that the dance is executed underwater in a pool! Exquisite. Also, there is a great deal of water in my novel."

### **Pina Bausch - "Dead Can Dance": [Video Link](#)**

"An amazing, emotive, wild group performance."

### **Paul Taylor Dance Company - "Esplanade": [Video Link](#)**

"This is a great energetic group performance."

