

"A heartrending story,
urgently told, about family,
trauma, and the salvific power
of forgiveness and love."

—ELIZABETH WETMORE,
New York Times bestselling
author of *Valentine*

PERISH

A Novel

LATOYA

WATKINS

BOOK CLUB KIT



DEAR READER,

When I was a young girl, I'd sneak my mother's mass market paperbacks after she was done reading them. I didn't grow up in a home with lots of books, but my mother was a reader. She was also a factory laborer, which meant that time to read was a rare luxury for her. I always noticed when she'd found time because there was always a new book for me to sneak. The stories I'd find were often written by writers who created characters and worlds I was happy to escape to but couldn't identify with or see myself in. I found writers like Danielle Steel, Jackie Collins, John Grisham, and Stephen King, among so many others.

I'll never quite forget running across Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*. It was the first story that stayed with me long after I closed the book. It was the first novel I ever reread. When I was older, I realized that despite not seeing myself or anyone who looked like me in the work, despite the heaviness of the story, and despite those times I wanted to turn away from the world Conroy had created, the Wingo family's suffering and their audacious attempt to survive it was the most relatable thing I'd ever read. I wanted to experience more of that. I wanted to see more of that from writers who looked like me. It was then, as a girl, that I was inspired to write a story about family—about suffering, silence, and love.

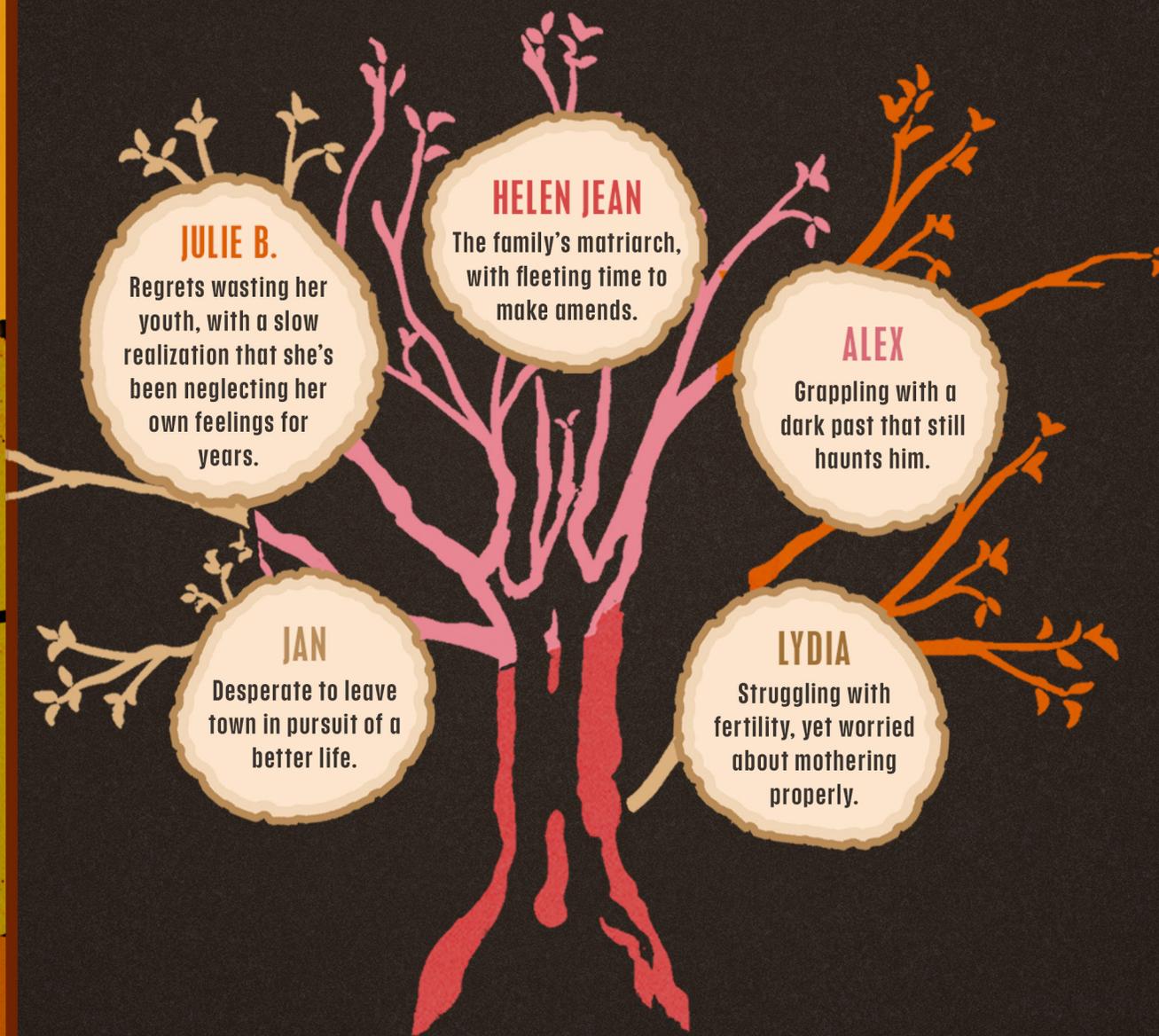
Essentially, *Perish* is a story about a family's attempt to survive generational lack of access to healthy ways of coping with what's been done to them and what's been done by them. In part, it's a story about what this family's love looks like when the members haven't experienced love or been taught to love. The ways in which the family reach for and pull away from one another are all rooted in experiences that they've chosen to bury; the growth from these buried things is painful and messy. Nonetheless, working at the roots is the only way they can promote healthy growth, to move forward.

I created Helen Jean because I wanted to explore the journey of a character who is both powerful and powerless, who yearns to grow in productive ways but is rooted in an environment that isn't conducive to that kind of growth. Her grandchildren have similar yearnings; however, unlike Helen Jean, they are willing to rattle their hearts, minds, and bodies, to do the root-work for the sake of growth. For the sake of change.

I am grateful to all who are willing to take the journey with this family. My hope for *Perish* is that we may all realize the type of growth our roots are producing. That, if needed, we might be brave enough to dig past the tangled pain and nourish those roots. That we might all make way for healthy, productive growth and continue that practice throughout our lives.

LATOYA

Turner Family Tree



JULIE B.

Regrets wasting her youth, with a slow realization that she's been neglecting her own feelings for years.

HELEN JEAN

The family's matriarch, with fleeting time to make amends.

ALEX

Grappling with a dark past that still haunts him.

JAN

Desperate to leave town in pursuit of a better life.

LYDIA

Struggling with fertility, yet worried about mothering properly.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “Bear it or perish yourself” is a recurring quote we read from Helen Jean throughout the book. Discuss the meaning of this quote and how it affected the characters’ lives.
2. *Perish* is told by different narrators, how did their point of view impact your view of their character or other characters in the story?
3. Describe how the author creates a distinction between the east and west sides of Jerusalem. And in what ways do you think the areas shaped the family’s lives?
4. Is there someone to blame for the fate of Wayne (or Alex)? Did you empathize with them? And if so, when and why? Should they be forgiven for their actions?
5. There are several significant moments in the novel that revolve around burning a hog. What do you think the hogs symbolize throughout the story?
6. Why do you think the author chose to wait to reveal Wayne’s name? Discuss your view on why Helen Jean refers to her son as “the monster” before readers know his real name.
7. In this multigenerational story, we see the reverberations of the choices made by Helen Jean, and the scars they have left on her children (Wayne, Julie B., Ruby Nell, and Marie) and grandchildren (Alex, Jan, and Lydia). In what ways do those scars reveal themselves, and is it possible to break the cycle?
8. “Men can’t continue to do this to these girls and go unpunished. This shit stops now. You mark my words.” Discuss this quote. Why do you think Helen Jean blamed Soweo for Laverne’s disappearance?
9. What did you think about the treatment of Wayne from childhood to adulthood? Do you understand the reason behind Helen Jean’s actions?
10. How did you interpret the ending? Discuss what you think is the overall theme of this story.