

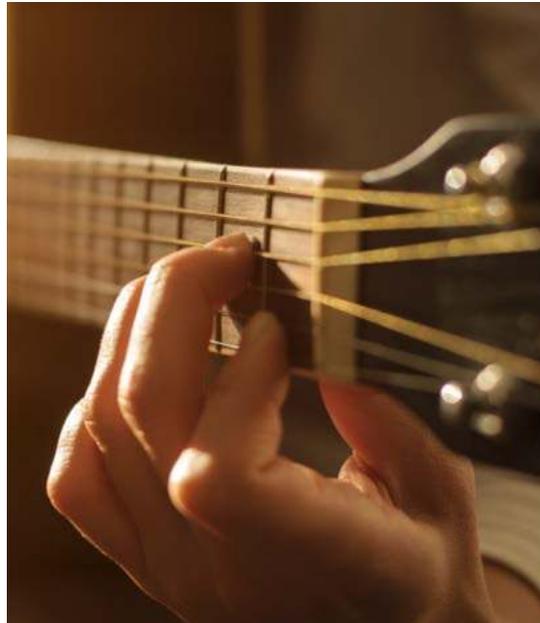
TIFFANIE DEBARTOLO



SORROW

BOOK CLUB KIT

# AN INTERVIEW WITH TIFFANIE DEBARTOLO



## 1 How have your own experiences influenced the novel's setting and characters?

I live in Mill Valley, the magical town where a majority of the novel takes place. I hike through the redwoods almost every day and find them just as inspiring as Joe and October do. I think a lot of the emotional core of the story, however, comes from my work in the music business. I've seen a number of talented musicians either abandon their dreams or sabotage them, usually because they're full of fear and can't get out of their own way. That kind of fear bleeds over into a person's personal life. Moreover, in the past, I've had the experience of being in love with someone who was too afraid to love me back, and that's a big part of what "Sorrow" is about.



## 2 Owning a record label, you have an established career in the music industry. How did that knowledge help when it came to crafting the plot and characters for the book?

My creative work always seems to begin with my love of and passion for music. Music informs everything I do. It has throughout my entire life and throughout my writing career. I think many authors have themes that they return to again and again because we have existential questions we're trying to answer, and one of my themes is music and the powerful role that art plays in our lives.



**3** The famous redwoods of Northern California are a good example of how a book's location can be a character in and of itself. Can you talk a bit about their significance and meaning throughout the novel?

It's interesting, because early in the writing process, I was struggling with discovering what made Joe tick, and I happened to run into a friend at the local coffee shop where I wrote a lot of the book (Equator Coffee, the same one Joe hangs out in!). My friend mentioned that he'd just read a beautiful book about redwood trees, and as we spoke about the trees for a while, something clicked in my head and heart. I was like, "That's it! Joe! The trees!" I immediately read the book my friend was talking about, and Joe's character blossomed into life. And, of course, the metaphor between Joe and the trees was so obvious and became a crucial component from that moment on. The more I learned about the trees, the more I learned about Joe.

**4** What challenges did you encounter writing your main character, Joe, from the male perspective? Are there things you would have done differently if you had decided to give that character a different gender?

To be honest, I expected it to be more challenging to write from the male perspective than it actually was. I originally began writing the book with October as the narrator, but I quickly realized that unless readers were seeing and feeling the world through Joe's eyes, they weren't going to understand him or empathize with him, so I switched to his POV. And my takeaway, after walking in his shoes for two years as I wrote this novel, was that men and women aren't as different as society has conditioned us to believe we are. Deep down, we all want the same thing — love — and we're all just trying to figure out how to overcome all the shit that holds us back from surrendering fully to that love.



### **5 Let's talk The National! The book was partially influenced by the band's music – how did they inspire your writing, and are there any Easter eggs fans of the group can find in the book?**

OK, so despite the fact that The National have a song called "Sorrow" which is referenced in the book and obviously inspired the title, the song that planted the seed that grew into this story was "Pink Rabbits." I remember listening to that song one day, hearing the line: "Somebody said you disappeared in a crowd/I didn't understand then/I don't understand now," and my mind conjured up a scene at an outdoor concert venue, a man standing in the middle of the crowd beside the love of his life and everything about to fall into place, and for some reason he breaks, just walks away and doesn't come back. That was the first scene I wrote, and obviously it developed into something more complex than that original idea, but the novel really grew around that nascent scene. As far as Easter eggs go, the homage to the "Pink Rabbits" song is the cocktail Joe makes in the scene where he and October talk in his apartment. Joe's version is a little different than the traditional cocktail, and he calls it a Brown Recluse. There's one more "Pink Rabbits" mentioned in the book, but I'll let the fans find that one on their own.



### **6 As the 21st century seems to get bleaker by the minute, what would you say to someone who is convinced their best days are behind them and that they're too old to act on their dreams?**

I've been revisiting the work of Joseph Campbell a lot lately, so to quote him, I would say, "Follow your bliss." It's never too late for that. And it's imperative to the experience of having a meaningful life. The past is gone and the future is only a possibility. All we have is this moment, and if you listen to your heart, if you take steps toward the life you desire to be living, if you just get on the right path, that's where you'll find the truth of who you are. That's where you'll find joy. It's not about success. It's not about money. This is a spiritual quest we're talking about. It's everything.

### **7 What do you hope people take away from this book?**

These characters taught me a lot, and I hope people take away from this book what I took away. Namely, that it's never too late to become a better version of yourself and that love and art can often be the portals to that becoming.

## SORROW

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# DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1 Joe is a sensitive character. How would you describe his relationship to masculinity? How do you think the constructs of a masculine society affect Joe's self-esteem?
- 2 What do you think it is about October that Joe finds attractive, given his own background and upbringing? How does he change as they become more involved? How does October change?
- 3 October says: "I think love is the ultimate art project. To me, there's nothing more beautiful, more powerful, or more meaningful than truly and purely loving another human. No expectations. No strings attached. Just the freedom to be who you are and to be loved in spite of that." Is this kind of love truly possible – to have love with no expectations?
- 4 Do you consider October to be the epitome of a young, accomplished, independent woman and artist? Talk about her character, her personality, work habits and motivations. Then discuss how she ended up in the love triangle between Joe and Cal.
- 5 Discuss Joe's obsession with trees and, in particular, redwoods. What role have the trees played in his life? Have you ever experienced nature in the way that Joe does? That is, nature as family, friend, or at least something so comforting and familiar, it strikes you with a sense of awe?
- 6 There are many big things in the book: a big dog, big trees, a big birdcage, big love, big friendship, and big art concepts. Let's add that Cal is also larger than life. Though both Joe and October are described as being physically small. Do you think the author is trying to show or tell us something here?
- 7 Discuss the birdcage project. What do you think it symbolized for October? For Joe?
- 8 After the birdcage performance, Joe says: "Art isn't about people who are better than us showing us how much better they are, it's about being reminded of the ways in which we are all the same." This is a powerful realization for the narrator, and, hopefully, for the reader. Does it ring true for you?
- 9 DeBartolo gives a nod to performance artist Marina Abramovic with October's Living Exhibit "Sorrow: This is Art." If you are with an in-person reading group, divide into twos and recreate the experience. Place your hands in each other's and hold each other's gazes for five minutes. If you are online, hold each other's gaze for five minutes. Discuss the experience.
- 10 Joe grapples with the fact that he's forsaken his dreams and desires at every turn, but he desperately wants to change that. Do you believe a person can change? Do you believe a person can right themselves back onto the path on which they belong, especially after so many wrongs? And is there a 'right' path?
- 11 Joe and Cal's friendship runs deep. What is Joe to Cal? Discuss the impact they've had on each other, in childhood and as adults. Would you have forgiven Joe, as Cal did?
- 12 You're attending October's "Sorrow: This Is Art" exhibit. You sit down across from her and take her hands. What emotions would she feel in you right now?



# SORROW: THE PLAYLIST

Check out some of the songs that not only inspired Tiffanie DeBartolo when writing her new novel, "Sorrow," but some of these also make an appearance in the book! Visit Spotify to see the entire playlist:

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4y5Wt05IYe6EOhe2tuSU9?si=7oo2yDjnQjSUjq\\_gxo5F4g](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4y5Wt05IYe6EOhe2tuSU9?si=7oo2yDjnQjSUjq_gxo5F4g)



## "SORROW"

**ARTIST:** The National

**ALBUM:** "High Violet"

**CHARACTER:** Joe — this song could be about how childhood trauma stays with us into adulthood, wreaking havoc on our hearts and dreams. It's also about loneliness. And underneath all of that, "Sorrow" feels like a song about unrequited love. And, well, that pretty much sums up Joe Harper.



## "PINK RABBITS"

**ARTIST:** The National

**ALBUM:** "Trouble Will Find Me"

**CHARACTER:** October — If a sonic dialogue existed between the two main characters of this book, "Sorrow" would be Joe speaking, and "Pink Rabbits" would be October's point of view. This was the song that sparked the idea for Sorrow, and everytime I hear it, it brings these characters back into my heart and mind, as if I'm visiting friends I don't get to hang out with that much anymore.



## "TAKE IT EASY"

**ARTIST:** Eagles

**ALBUM:** "Eagles (2013 Remaster)"

**CHARACTER:** Cal — This song is easy, breezy, and charming. A sonic reminder to lighten up and enjoy the ride. That pretty much sums up Cal in a nutshell.

## "DELICATE"

**ARTIST:** Damien Rice

**ALBUM:** "O"

## "FADE INTO YOU"

**ARTIST:** Inhaler

**ALBUM:** "Falling In"

## "THE WAITING"

**ARTIST:** Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

**ALBUM:** "Hard Promises"

## "MAGGIE MAY"

**ARTIST:** Rod Stewart

**ALBUM:** "Every Picture Tells a Story"

## "LIGHTS"

**ARTIST:** Journey

**ALBUM:** "Infinity"

## "BIG LOVE"

**ARTIST:** Fleetwood Mac

**ALBUM:** "Greatest Hits"

## "PEACEFUL EASY FEELING"

**ARTIST:** Eagles

**ALBUM:** "Eagles (2013 Remaster)"

## "CURTAINS"

**ARTIST:** Elton John

**ALBUM:** "Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy"

## "WONDERWALL"

**ARTIST:** Oasis

**ALBUM:** "(What's The Story) Morning Glory? (Deluxe Edition) [Remastered]"

## "SLIP SLIDIN' AWAY"

**ARTIST:** Paul Simon

**ALBUM:** "The Essential Paul Simon"

## "I WANT YOU"

**ARTIST:** Elvis Costello & the Attractions

**ALBUM:** "Blood and Chocolate"

## "TUMBLING DICE"

**ARTIST:** The Rolling Stones

**ALBUM:** "Exile on Main Street (2010 Re-Mastered)"

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# SETTING THE SCENE: MILL VALLEY



**Tam High (aka Tamalpias High School) where Joe and Cal met and forged their enduring friendship**



**Equator Coffee shop in Mill Valley: Joe's favorite hangout spot in town, and the location of a couple pivotal scenes in the book**



**A giant coast redwood from Humboldt Redwoods State Park – one of Joe's favorites**



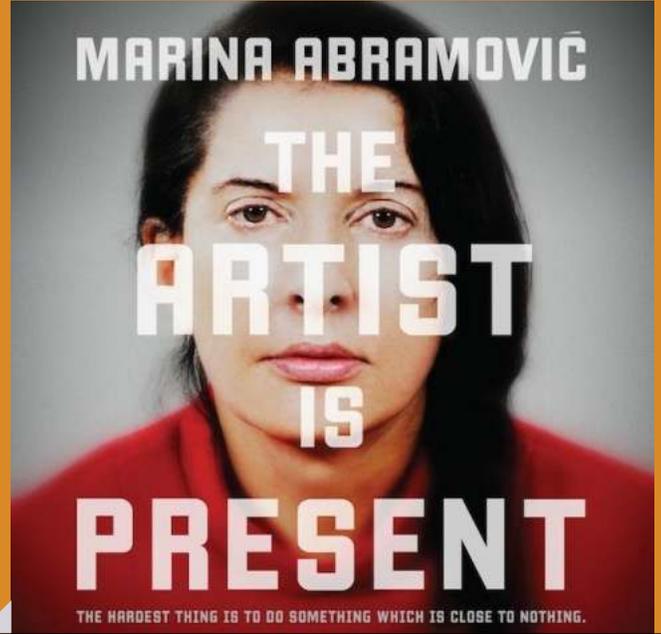
**The real-life furry inspiration behind Diego**

SORROW

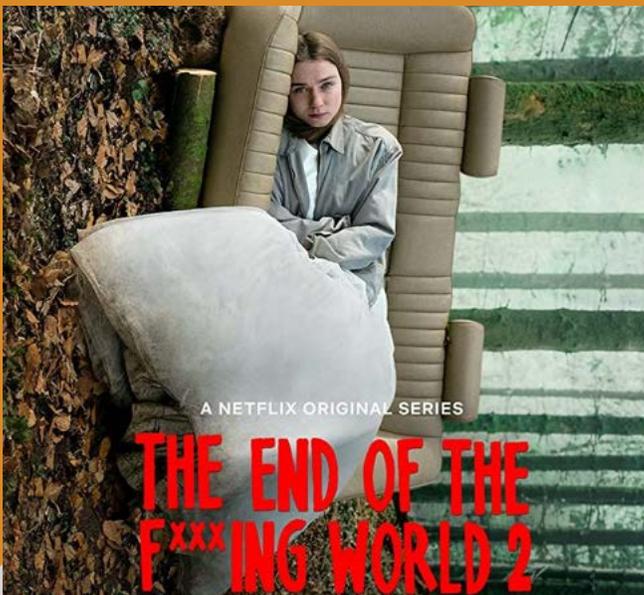
## READ THEN WATCH



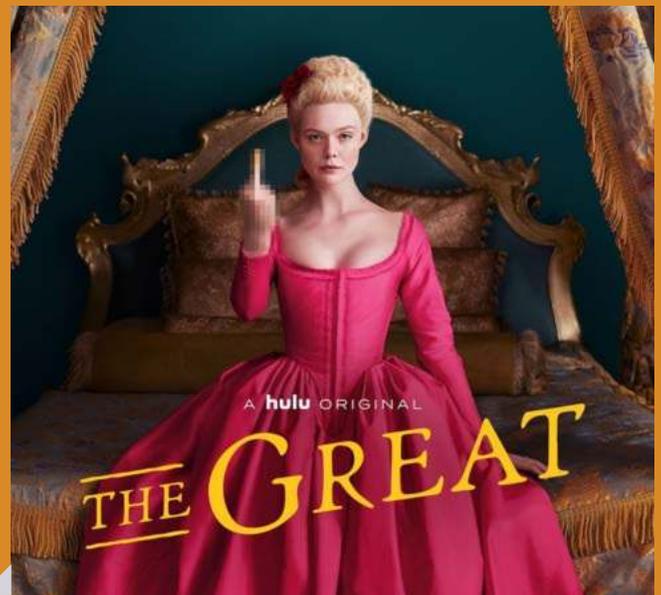
Want more of The National? Here's a documentary about the band. Sort of. It's also a film about family dynamics, sibling rivalry, and life on the road. Directed by the lead singer's brother, it's awkward, hilarious, and profoundly touching.



Marina was a big inspiration for Tiffanie when she was flushing out October's character, and this film is an incredibly moving portrait of one of the most fascinating and successful performance artists working today.



If Joe and October were middle class, angst-filled British teenagers who accidentally killed someone, this tv show would be their story.



This show has no real relationship to "Sorrow," but Tiffanie DeBartolo is obsessed. Elle Fanning's performance is off the charts, exceptional, and the whole show is hilarious.

## HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW

# THE NATIONAL?

- 1. What was the name of Matt Berninger's first band?**
  - A. Nations
  - B. Pansy
  - C. Nancy
  - D. The Nation
- 2. Which National album won a Grammy award for Best Alternative Music Album?**
  - A. "Alligator" in 2005
  - B. "High Violet" in 2010
  - C. "Trouble Will Find Me" in 2013
  - D. "Sleep Well Beast" in 2017
- 3. Which National band members are twins?**
  - A. Scott Devendorf and Bryan Devendorf are twins; Bryce and Aaron Dessner are brothers
  - B. Bryce and Aaron Dessner are twins; Scott and Bryan Devendorf are brothers
  - C. None of the band members are twins; there are two sets of cousins in the band
  - D. Bryce and Aaron Dessner are twins; Scott and Bryan Devendorf are cousins
- 4. Which band member(s) founded the record label that released The National's first album?**
  - A. Aaron and Bryce Dessner
  - B. Matt Berninger
  - C. Mike Brewer
  - D. Scott and Bryan Devendorf
- 5. What 2008 documentary film documents The National recording their 4th album?**
  - A. "The Boxer"
  - B. "A Skin, a Night"
  - C. "The National"
  - D. "Fake Empire"
- 6. True or False: Tiffanie DeBartolo's new novel "Sorrow" was inspired by The National's song "Sorrow"**
  - A. True: Tiffanie DeBartolo came across the song while developing characters in her book
  - B. False: The book was inspired by the song "Sorrow" by Wilderado, a band signed to Tiffanie's record label Bright Antenna
  - C. True: Tiffanie DeBartolo is a huge fan of The National and listened to the band often while writing the book
  - D. False: The book title was inspired by the Edna St. Vincent Millay poem "Sorrow"
- 7. Who is Mr. November, which features the lyric "I won't f\*\*\* us over, I'm Mr. November" written about?**
  - A. John Kerry
  - B. Barack Obama
  - C. Tom Brady
  - D. Mitt Romney
- 8. The artwork of "Boxer" was shot at whose actual wedding?**
  - A. Singer Matt Berninger's wedding to Carin Besser
  - B. Producer/Musician Peter Katis's wedding to Ann Risen Katis
  - C. Aaron and Bryce Dessner's parent's wedding
  - D. Drummer Bryce Dessner's wedding to French singer Mina Tindle
- 9. What National song features the following lyrics:**

"Don't leave my hyper heart alone on the water  
Cover me in rag and bone sympathy  
Cause I don't wanna get over you  
I don't wanna get over you"

  - A. "Terrible Love"
  - B. "Anyone's Ghost"
  - C. "Sorrow"
  - D. "Murder Me Rachel"

# QUIZ ANSWERS



Photo by Chris Godley

## 1 C. Nancy

Scott Devendorf and Matt Berninger started the band Nancy their first year in college at the University of Cincinnati with classmates Casey Reas, Jeff Salem and Mike Brewer. They named themselves Nancy, after Berninger's mom.

## 2 D. "Sleep Well Beast" in 2017

"Sleep Well Beast" won the Grammy award for Best Alternative Music Album in 2017 at the 60th Annual Grammy Awards. In 2013, "Trouble Will Find Me" was nominated for Best Alternative Music Album but did not win.

## 3 B. Bryce and Aaron Dessner are twins; Scott and Bryan Devendorf are brothers

Scott Devendorf and Matt Berninger started the band and Scott's brother Bryan Devendorf later joined along with twin brothers Bryce and Aaron Dessner.

## 4 A. Aaron and Bryce Dessner

Aaron and Bryce Dessner founded record label named Brassland Records with their friend Alec Hanley Bemis. The first two releases were debut albums by The National and Clogs.

## 5 B. "A Skin, a Night"

The documentary "A Skin, a Night" was made by French filmmaker Vincent Moon and released in 2008 simultaneously with the band's compilation "The Virginia" EP on May 20, 2008. The film documents the recording process of the band's fourth studio album, "Boxer" (2007).

## 6 C. Tiffanie DeBartolo is a huge fan of The National and listened to the band often while writing her novel "Sorrow."

This is true. Tiffanie has said both the song "Sorrow" and "Pink Rabbits" were big inspirations in the writing of the book.

## 7 A. John Kerry

Mr. November was written in 2005 during John Kerry's presidential campaign against George Bush. The title references the United States' election day: the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Berninger told Vice Magazine: "We made T-shirts for Obama that said "Mr. November," but that song was actually written about John Kerry and how uncomfortable it must be to run for president."

## 8 B. Producer/Musician Peter Katis's wedding to Ann Risen Katis

Peter Katis is a longtime friend and producer for The National. The cover of Boxer features a photo of The National performing in front of wedding guests at Katis's wedding. They performed The Geese of Beverly Road from the album Alligator.

## 9 C. "Sorrow"

The lyrics are the chorus from "Sorrow," off of The National's 2010 album "High Violet." They make multiple appearances in Tiffanie DeBartolo's novel "Sorrow." On May 5, 2013, the band performed this track for six hours straight at the MoMA PS1 in New York City, for an art exhibition presented by artist Ragnar Kjartansson. The performance was later released in 2015 as a nine-disc vinyl set.

## SORROW

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" 'Sorrow' hit me like a truck, and it's been years since I read a book that physically moved me and made me feel as deeply as this one did. DeBartolo masterfully crafted characters you'll fall in love with, root for, want to scream at, and ultimately see yourself in, with a story that is narcotically enthralling. 'Sorrow' reminded me of the power of literature to deeply move you, uplift you, remind you of all the possibilities, love and magic in this world, and help you fall deeper in love with life. It's a masterpiece."

– **Kyle Nicolaides, musician**

"An art-infused story about love with achingly beautiful characters."

– **Tarryn Fisher, New York Times bestselling author**

"Imagine you walk across a beautiful meadow filled with Indian paintbrush and Colorado columbine. Suddenly, you are struck by a lightning bolt. You're blown out of your shoes, you fly through crackling air and land hands-and-knees deep in a brook bubbling over moss-covered rocks, shaded by weeping willows. You realize you are alive, more alive than ever before. You howl for the love of life. This is how reading Sorrow by Tiffanie DeBartolo made me feel."

– **Tim Sandlin, author of GroVont Quartet and "Jimi Hendrix Turns Eighty "**

"This novel is a rare gem: a profoundly warm, witty story about art, love, and the journey of the soul from my all-time favorite author. Worth the wait! DeBartolo's emotionally rich characters remind us that it is both painfully difficult and astonishingly beautiful to be human."

– **Colleen Hoover, New York Times bestselling author**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tiffanie DeBartolo grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, where she insists there was nothing to do but read books and listen to music. It's no surprise then that after graduating high school a year early to study philosophy at UC Berkeley, she became a writer and founded a record label. Tiffanie's most recent novel is "Sorrow." Her previous works include "God Shaped Hole" (2002), "How To Kill a Rock Star" (2005), the graphic novel "Grace: Based on the Jeff Buckley Story" (2019), and the film "Dream for an Insomniac" (1996), which she wrote and directed. Tiffanie is the founder and Chief Executive Super Goddess of Bright Antenna Records, whose roster includes The Wombats, Sports Team, Wilderado, Prep and more. She also co-founded the ShineMaker Foundation, a charity organization dedicated to making the world a better place. And she is a faculty member of the Jackson Hole Writers Conference, where she teaches writing every June. In her spare time, Tiffanie is a runner, hiker, yogi, traveler, cook, poet, artist and feminist. She lives in Mill Valley, California, with her husband, Scott Schumaker, and her two Irish Wolfhounds, Dipsea and Kazoo. For more info, visit her website: [tiffaniedebartolo.com](http://tiffaniedebartolo.com).

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