

"A delicious daydream of a book."

—ELIN HILDERBRAND

Lady Sunshine

A NOVEL



AUTHOR OF *THE SUMMER LIST*

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THE STORY BEHIND

Lady Sunshine

It started with Wilco's song "California Stars."

San Francisco, 1998. I was twenty-five, and the plaintive tune had become my "earworm"—an ugly word for beautiful music. I played it on my red iPod Shuffle in the dingy studio apartment I shared with another girl and her boyfriend, and when I jogged along the foggy Marina. I listened to it when standing on packed buses to and from my dispiriting job as an advertising analyst, and when I couldn't sleep, which was often. I was lonely after a breakup, and the lyrics, about longing to rest one's "heavy head" on a bed of stars, became my lullaby.

A month after I first heard the song, I learned the story behind it from a radio show, and that became as much of an obsession as the song itself. The lyrics were part of a treasure trove of unrecorded Woody Guthrie lines that his daughter, Nora, had brought to Billy Bragg and Wilco so they could set them to music—which became the album *Mermaid Avenue*.

The gutsy intimacy of this project fascinated me. How brave it was to take a dead genius's words and meld them with your own music. How did Nora Guthrie feel about Bragg and Wilco's interpretations? What secrets of her father's might the lyrics hold? These questions became the seeds of **Lady Sunshine**—about a woman, Jackie, who unexpectedly inherits her folk-singer uncle's iconic estate and the tribute album that a rising producer convinces her to record on the property.

For Jackie, the album further complicates the already-difficult task of preparing her estranged family's estate for sale. She spent just one summer there as a teen in 1979—falling into an intense friendship with her cousin Willa, discovering her own musical talent and plunging into a free-spirited bohemian lifestyle—but it abruptly ended in a tragedy that changed her forever.

I began to wonder, what if Jackie's legendary uncle wasn't who everyone thought he was? What if excavating his music reminded her of a lost time—and a lost self—she desperately wished she could recapture? Younger Jackie worshipped powerhouse female singers like Donna Summer and Debbie Harry, just as folk-loving Willa revered the brilliant "J singers"—Joni Mitchell, Joan Armatrading, Joan Baez and Judy Collins. These women were strong and outspoken, like Jackie once was, but she now lives a quiet, safe life as a piano teacher.

As an adult, Jackie discovers a startling clue buried in her uncle's lyrics—and realizes that she may be wrong about what happened that summer long ago. She must choose whether to run from her task, and the truth, or to let the music come to life and provide the answers she's been looking for all these years. **Lady Sunshine** is my tribute to the inescapable tug of the past, the generous spirit and hypnotic bass line of the 1970s and the endurance of art and music against all odds.

Billy Bragg said that while recording *Mermaid Avenue*, one lyric struck everyone in the studio: "I may go/Down or up or anywhere/But I feel/Like this scribbling might stay."

It's such a bold, joyful statement. I hope **Lady Sunshine** captures a fraction of that joy, and my determination to write novels that stay in readers' hearts for a long, long time.

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Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



- 1) Several characters note the Sandcastle's isolation, describing it as walled off from time or the modern world. How does this affect Jackie's stay there in 1979? In 1999?
- 2) Voyeurism is a major theme in the novel. Why do Jackie and Willa spy from the treehouse? Is it ultimately constructive or destructive? Who else in the book engages in voyeurism, and why? How are their motives different from or similar to Jackie's and Willa's reasons for spying?
- 3) Jackie and Willa are opposites in nearly every way, but they idolize each other. Do you think they see each other clearly when they're teenagers? Adults? How do their roles reverse over time?
- 4) Jackie is obsessed with Debbie Harry and Blondie, while Willa loves folk singers like Joni Mitchell and Joan Armatrading. Who were your favorite musicians when you were a teenager, and why? Have your musical tastes changed over the years?
- 5) As a teenager, why is Jackie drawn to Graham? What does she find in him that she doesn't find elsewhere in her life? How does this connection impact her reaction to the revelation about his treatment of Angela?
- 6) How do the following characters approach their musical talent differently?—Graham, Willa, Bree, Jackie, Shane. Why are some people able to handle fame and attention, while others are not?
- 7) Can you separate a creator from their art? Can you appreciate their work even if they have not behaved appropriately as people?
- 8) If you left behind unfinished art like Graham did, would you want someone else to complete your work? Why or why not?
- 9) In 1999, Willa hints that Graham's accident might have been for the best. Do you agree? How are she and Jackie able to look at what happened to him differently as grown women than as teenagers in 1979?
- 10) Why do Jackie and Avery toss the album review into the ocean? What do you imagine life will be like at the Sandcastle for Jackie and Avery and for future generations? How will it be different or the same?

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THE ALBUM

Side A—Jackie

“On the Radio,” Donna Summer

“Heart of Glass,” Blondie

“The Hustle,” Van McCoy

“Jackie Blue,” Ozark Mountain Daredevils

“I Feel Love,” Donna Summer

“Sunday Girl,” Blondie

Side B—Willa

“California,” Joni Mitchell

“Ain’t Life a Brook,” Ferron

“Suite: Judy Blue Eyes,” Crosby, Stills & Nash

“Down to Zero,” Joan Armatrading

“Trouble,” Yusuf/Cat Stevens

“Who Knows Where the Time Goes,” Nina Simone

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