



A Soft Place to Land

Description

After their parents are killed in a plane crash, half sisters Ruthie, thirteen, and Julia, sixteen, are shocked to learn of the instructions left in the will. These tight-knit sisters, who grew up in the shadow of their parent's romance, will be sent from their Atlanta hometown to separate coasts, to live with very different families. Cautious Ruthie adjusts to a new life with her generous, fun-loving aunt and uncle in San Francisco, but rebellious Julia struggles against the conventionality of her birth father and disapproving stepmom in a small town in Virginia. The vast differences in their new lives strain the sisters' relationship to the breaking point, and they drift in (but mostly out) of each other's orbits for the next twenty years, until an unexpected turn of events brings them together again.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do Ruthie and Julia so obsessively imagine their parents' ill-fated Vegas vacation and the airplane crash that killed them? Julia feels "to tell the story was to control it, somehow." Do you agree?
2. White gives clues early on as to pivotal events in the girls' futures: that Julia will become a writer, that Ruthie will have

an abortion. Why does she include these flash-forwards? How did anticipating these events change your reading of the story?

3. When she hears there has been an accident, Ruthie's first fear is that Julia has been hurt, not her parents. Discuss the sisters' bond. Why are the sisters so intensely connected? Do you think Julia and Ruthie would have been as close if their parents had not been so centered on their romance with each other?
4. Was Phil and Naomi's romance worth the pain it caused others, particularly the pain it caused Julia? Ruthie realizes she "had always viewed her parents' story through their eyes, the eyes of the victors." How do you think Julia viewed Phil and Naomi's relationship?
5. Did Naomi and Phil have any choice but to leave instructions in their will that in the event of their deaths Ruthie and Julia would go to separate guardians?
6. How does San Francisco shape Ruthie? How does Virden shape Julia?
7. Were you angry with Julia for writing about Ruthie's abortion in her memoir? Are you able to see both sides of the issue?
8. As girls, Ruthie and Julia's relationship is filled with games of Julia's imagining. One simple but meaningful game they play is "Biscuit and Egg." As children, what are some of the games you played with your siblings and friends? Retrospectively, what insights about your childhood do these games reveal?
9. How did you feel about the book's ending? What do you

think happens next, for Ruthie and Julia, and for Ruthie and Gabe?

10. How do you think the sisters' lives would have turned out if their custodial arrangement had been switched?

11. Discuss the title of the book. Think about where Ruthie and Julia have "landed," both physically (Atlanta, New York), in their careers (chef, writer), in their relationships with others, and in their relationship with each other.

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Play “Seven Steps to an Unlikely Outcome” or “Who the Hell Is He?”
2. Ruthie becomes a chef, and the book includes many delicious descriptions of cooking. Reread the Thanksgiving dinner preparations in Chapter 8, and try making one of the dishes Ruthie and Uncle Robert create together. Or make Ruthie’s signature dessert, “Elvs” (peanut butter cookies filled with roasted banana ice cream, the sides of which are then rolled in crumbled caramelized bacon).
3. *A Soft Place to Land* focuses on the relationship between two sisters. Talk about your relationship with your own siblings and family members. Is there anyone you feel compelled to reconnect with?

Author Q&A

What inspired you to write *A Soft Place to Land*? How did you choose to include real-life events, such as 9/11 and the plane crash on the Hudson? Did you begin with the end in mind, or did those elements simply find their way in?

Frankly, I was inspired to write *A Soft Place to Land* because my mind is filled with morbid “what ifs.” These morbid thoughts especially come to play when I’m on an airplane. Now on a rational level, I know that air travel is actually the safest form of transportation. And on a spiritual level, I think travel is a sublime practice—it’s important to experience new places, new cultures, new foods. But these are all thoughts my mind only allows on the ground. Once airborne, my rational thinking flies right out the pressure-sealed window. I think it’s because airplane crashes, while rare, are so dramatic. Usually everyone on board dies, and the last few moments are a horror. Add to that the fact that if parents are on the same plane, a child’s family can be wiped out in one swoop. And what if those parents had daughters, and the daughters were actually half siblings, and one still had a biological parent living . . . ?

I’m going to jump ahead to the third question and then work my way back to the second. I had no idea what the ending of this story would be when I started writing about Ruthie and Julia. All I knew was that I was going to tell of half siblings who were split apart after their parents died in a plane crash. In fact, initially I had four siblings in the story, but the more I wrote, the more I realized I needed to boil the sibling relationship down to its essence: that it needed to be about a particularly intense relationship between two sisters. I knew, too, that after the crash the girls needed to land in very different places, and that those places needed to have a profound impact on who they would become.

In terms of incorporating real life events: well, 9/11 occurred during the time span of the book (1993–2009), and it was such a terrible and defining event with such long reverberations. I don’t

think there was any way *not* to include it. Especially because the actual day of September 11, 2001, was one where so many former grievances seemed petty. It was a day when people reevaluated their lives.

The “Miracle on the Hudson” was, for lack of a better expression, a strangely happy accident. (Not to diminish the horror experienced by those on the plane as it went down; still, the outcome was astonishing.) I first heard about US Air Flight 1549 while driving in my car. They were talking about it on the radio, how a plane had crashed but it looked like everyone on board might survive. I burst into tears while driving. It was just so poignant. Here was this hope, this proof that doom was not always inevitable. It was such a powerful story; I couldn’t stop thinking about it. (Who could?) And then it occurred to me: let Julia be on that flight! That way she could experience what her mother went through in the last moments of her life, an experience that would allow her to try for true reconciliation with Ruthie.

I know that you have a sister; can you tell us a bit about your relationship? Are there any parallels between you and your sister and Julia and Ruthie?

I actually have two half sisters and three half brothers. I have many memories of being the youngest of all of those kids, being caught in the giddy and chaotic swirl of a big family. But my oldest sister Lauren and I did have a special bond. She was, simply, a great deal of fun, and she and I spent an enormous amount of joyful time together. So yes, I absolutely based the love and intimacy that Julia and Ruthie have in their early years on Lauren’s and my relationship. Lauren was a fantastic inventor of games and stories, and I wanted to create that sense of childhood play on the page. (Full confession: Lauren and I did play “Biscuit and Egg,” and if she were beside me now she would insist I tell you that she was the one who made it up.)

That said, Ruthie and Julia are invented characters. And they

change so much after they are separated by thousands of miles. So pretty much once the Grand Canyon crash occurs, and the girls are split apart, the resemblance between my fictitious sisters and Lauren and me evaporates.

You include great descriptions of both Atlanta and San Francisco. You grew up in Atlanta, and currently live there. You also spent time living in San Francisco. Did you need to do much research for the settings of your book, or were you already well versed in these cities?

Though I know mistakes happen, I really strive for verisimilitude in my stories. My feeling is that if I want my characters to seem as if they are made of flesh and blood, then I need the world they inhabit to match the world as it is, or as it was during the time the story takes place.

While drafting the book I didn't do much research about Atlanta, but I did go to San Francisco for about a month, just to reconnect with the feel of the city. During that time I spent a couple of afternoons at the San Francisco public library, researching newspaper headlines from 1993, mainly so I could figure out what Mimi and Robert might discuss during dinner. After I finished a draft of the book I did a *ton* of research, to make sure that I was accurately describing the way Atlanta and San Francisco would have been over fifteen years ago. It's amazing the changes that a decade and a half bring.

Here's a minor example: initially when I wrote the book I had Dara and Ruthie meet at Peet's Coffee on Market Street in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco. (This is the scene during which the two friends play "Who the Hell is He?") But then I called my friend Ellen Sinaiko, who has run a café in the Castro since the early eighties, and I casually asked whether or not Peet's had been there in 1993. I was fully expecting her to say yes. But it had not! So I had to change the location to Café Flore, which, in fact, I think works better as a meeting spot for the two girls. So

serendipitously, by fact checking I actually found a better place to set the scene. Or maybe serendipitous isn't the right word, maybe this minor example just proves how good things will come from sweating the details.

There are great descriptions of meal preparations in the book. Do you cook? Did you invent Ruthie's signature dessert, "Elvs"?

I love to cook. I think of it as my second passion, behind writing. I read cookbooks for pleasure, and spend time imagining which foods might taste good together.

I did invent "Elvs," but I was greatly influenced by two sources: 1) the "phatty cakes" at Cakes & Ale restaurant in Decatur, Georgia, which are sandwiches of two spicy ginger cookies with a marscapone cream filling, and 2) a dessert I had at Woodfire Grill in Atlanta. I don't remember the exact specifics of the dessert, but I know it included caramelized banana, caramel sauce, and bacon crumbles. It was both earthy and sublime.

You've mentioned that you have a fear of flying. What made you decide to tackle that fear by incorporating two plane crashes into *A Soft Place to Land*? What do you imagine your last thoughts would be?

Wow, I wish I had tackled my fear of flying by writing this book. Unfortunately, I have only intensified it, especially after researching the details of the "Miracle on the Hudson" flight. That said, I think it's important for me not to give into the fear, so I've learned to deal with it by 1) getting a prescription for Xanax for flights, 2) adopting the mantra, "It's probably going to be okay," and 3) making sure I have a charged iPod before I go to the airport, because listening to familiar music really soothes me on the plane.

I have some idea of what my last thoughts might be because I was once on a pretty intense flight that I thought was going to crash. Now, granted, I have an active imagination. Probably we

were just going through severe—and I mean severe—turbulence. But there was a moment in the midst of the turbulence—I was hyperventilating, mind you—when the plane must have dropped 1,000 feet and I suddenly became very calm. I thought, *Oh. This is it. This plane is actually going to crash.* And suddenly, I was more or less okay. I was distantly sad that I was going to die but I realized that—as Julia says—it happens to everyone. I was glad that I had experienced such a great love with my husband, Alan, and I hoped the crash wouldn't make the rest of my parents' lives too sorrowful.

Eventually the turbulence subsided, and I realized we were going to be okay, and I felt panicky all over again, felt like I had to get off the plane *that instant* even though it was an international flight and we had about six more hours to go. But in those few moments when I honestly thought my death was imminent, I experienced a strange and comforting peace, which I allowed Julia to have during her own experience on Flight I549.

Julia's memoir incorporates personal details that Ruthie would rather not share with the world. Julia's writing seems to be cathartic for her, but it has almost an opposite effect on Ruthie. Do you believe Ruthie is right to want to hold back details she remembers about their childhood? Which sister do you side with?

I don't side with either. I absolutely understand why Ruthie felt betrayed and I absolutely understand why Julia included the detail about Ruthie's past abortion, especially because in her memoir she never refers to Ruthie by name, only as "Biscuit." My showing both sides of the story was probably my way of wrestling with what it means to be a writer.

Have you ever considered writing a memoir?

While I love my life, and feel immensely grateful for it, I'm not sure it warrants a memoir. Basically all I do is read (a lot), write,

teach, cook, eat (a lot), walk the dog (not as much as she'd like), spend time with my husband, and eat meals with friends. And do laundry. In the summer I garden. Occasionally I go to the movies. And I'll take any opportunity I can to escape to New Orleans or New York for a few days. (And in New Orleans and New York what do I do? I read, I spend time with my husband, I eat meals with friends . . .)

Which is all to say that the stories I make up are probably more interesting than my own life.

What are you working on next? Would you ever write a sequel to *A Soft Place to Land*?

I have just started working on my third book, and while I'm not yet ready to talk about the details of the story, I will say that cooking plays a huge role in it, and a good portion of it is set in New York City during the late 1940s.

Right now I'm not planning on writing a sequel for *A Soft Place to Land*, but who knows how I'll feel later. I certainly imagine I'll continue to explore its themes in my writing.