"Few books capture the zeitgeist the way this one does."
—Karin Slaughter, *Parade*

We Are All Good People Here

a novel

BOOK CLUB FAVORITES
READER'S GUIDE

Susan Rebecca White

READING GROUP GUIDE

a novel

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INTRODUCTION

We Are All Good People Here is a gripping, multigenerational story inspired by true events. It follows two best friends through their political awakenings in the turbulent 1960s and the repercussions of their actions after their daughters encounter the secrets they thought they had buried long ago.

Eve Whalen, privileged child of an old-money Atlanta family, meets Daniella Gold in the fall of 1962 on their first day at Belmont College. Paired as roommates, the two become fast friends. Daniella, raised in Georgetown by a Jewish father and a Methodist mother, has always felt caught between two worlds. But at Belmont, her bond with Eve allows her to finally experience a sense of belonging. That is, until the girls' expanding awareness of the South's caste system forces them to question everything they thought they knew about the world and their places in it.

Eve veers toward radicalism—a choice pragmatic Daniella cannot fathom. After a tragedy, Eve turns to Daniella for help in beginning anew. But the past isn't so easily buried, as Daniella and Eve discover when their daughters are caught up in secrets meant to stay hidden.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1

A lot of attention is paid to Eve and Daniella's appearances. Daniella's first impression of Eve is that "she was not a girl who would ever fade into the background" (p. 5). How does the theme of appearance and visibility recur throughout the novel?

2

Eve has brought a silver tea set to Belmont, a gift from her grandmother. It's the same silver pattern as the one Daniella was left by her maternal grandmother. How do you think this silver sets the tone for the novel? (p. 5)

3

Eve's activist awakening occurs because of the treatment of Miss Eugenia, the maid at Monty House, who reminds Eve of her beloved Ada, the family's maid in Atlanta. But Eve's attempt to advocate for Miss Eugenia get her fired, and Eve's good if misguided intentions have dire consequences. How are the reverberations of this incident felt through the years?

4

Early in the novel, Eve is portrayed as a somewhat naïve debutante, and Daniella comes to realize that "she was responsible as Eve. Before the two girls met, Eve was blissful in her ignorance" (p. 19). How does Daniella continue to feel responsible for Eve and Eve's actions, even when she is not directly involved?

5

When Daniella is not invited to pledge Fleur because of her Jewish father, Eve stands by her, and both transfer to Barnard. But "It wasn't so much Jewish girls that Eve noticed when she arrived at Barnard as northern girls, northern girls who operated from a different code of conduct than she had been taught. That first month of school she was always getting her feelings hurt" (p. 47). What does Eve sacrifice for Daniella? Do you think she comes to regret it?

6

Why do you think Eve is drawn to Warren? If she and Daniella had both been accepted to the Mississippi Summer Project, do you think that the course of the novel would have been different?

7

In one of the most arresting chapters of the book, Eve, provoked by members of Smash, skins a cat (p. 113). What do you think this scene represents? How does it fit into the narrative of the novel?

8

When Eve and Daniella reconnect in Atlanta, after Eve finds out she's pregnant and after the bomb at the Linwood house, Daniella serves as the voice of reason and Eve's legal counsel. She comforts Eve, telling her, "'All you have to do is show up. Just show up, and life will push you forward'" (p. 154). How do the events of the novel confirm or contradict this sentiment?

9

The novel's title comes from a line uttered by Bob Powers, who says, "'Eve is our client, not a hostile witness. We're all good people here, all trying to muddle through this the best we can'" (p. 163). What do you think the title means in the larger context of the book? Do you think the title is sincere or ironic?

10

In the second half of the novel, Eve and Daniella's relationship is filtered through the eyes of their daughters. How does this change your perspective?

11

Sarah's summary of Eve's and Daniella's lives crystallizes some of the challenges each woman has faced. Sarah notes that "Mom says that she and Eve drifted apart after she met Dad. She says she was so head-over-heels in love with him that she let a lot of things drop from her life, and she knows she hurt Eve's feeling when she did" (p. 181). How does Daniella's relationship with Pete affect her friendship with Eve? And how does his death cause another shift?

12

In the second half of the novel, Daniella is concerned about money, to the point that Sarah notes: "After Dad's accident, she started talking about money all of the time" (p. 175). How does Daniella's obsession with money affect her relationship with her daughter? How does it affect her relationship with Eve, who has much more of it but doesn't control the family purse strings?

13

How does Sarah and Anna's friendship mirror or differ from the friendship of Daniella and Eve? How do you think their mothers' relationship influences theirs?

14

Toward the end of the novel, Daniella bemoans that Eve's "'life has offered her so many opportunities, so many second chances—second chances no person of color would ever get, by the way. Yet she continues to bury herself again and again in the dogma of whoever has captured her attention at the moment'" (p. 281). Do you think this is a fair assessment? Why might she be predisposed to this behavior?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1

Discuss your own life at eighteen. Did you have a close friend like Eve or Daniella? Did you go to college? Join a sorority or an organization like Fleur?

2

Research the lives of American female radicals, including Diana Oughton, Kathy Boudin, Cathy Wilkerson, Bernardine Dohrn, and Sara Jane Olson. Though these women were once members of violent organizations such as the Weather Underground, many of them have gone on to have productive—and still somewhat public—lives. Discuss the effects of their youth, the culture of the 1960s and 1970s, and the different paths their lives took after the dissolution of the extremist groups to which they once belonged.

3

Read *American Heiress* by Jeffrey Toobin, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* by Mark Rudd, *Fugitive Days* by Bill Ayers, or *Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left* by Susan Braudy for a nonfiction perspective on fringe, radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s.

A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN REBECCA WHITE

YYou've published three previous novels, but this is your first in five years. What do you think makes this novel different?

I wrote my other books during a more optimistic time, when I happily assumed that the arc of the moral universe was inevitably bending toward justice and that equality for all was on the horizon. I lived in enough of a bubble that I could believe such things. Honestly, I knew enough history to know better, but still. (It was the "inevitable" part of the bend that I got wrong—justice takes human agency.) And then events occurred in my personal life, and in the larger world, that no longer allowed me to think in such a way. Which is not to say that I am without hope. I possess a wellspring of hope. But I have come to view history as cyclical rather than triumphant, and I have come to believe that we repeat, again and again, that which we did not get right the first time. And both on a personal and a global level, when we bury our past without any sort of reckoning, without any sort of reparation, it will haunt us, dog us, make us miserable. And it goes without saying that the turbulent and troubling political times we are currently living through helped me better understand how Daniella and Eve might have been feeling in the 1960s and 1970s.

What sparked your interest in this time period and in these characters?

I've always been interested in the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I wondered what my own role would have been had I lived during that time. I imagine I would have been politically involved, as political involvement has defined much of my adult life—canvassing for candidates, helping to register voters, that sort of thing. But unlike some of my characters, I've stayed well on the right side of law and order. Indeed, I've turned into such a rule follower that when the flight attendant says to review the safety information card from the back of the seat in front of me, by God, I take it out and start looking it over! So naturally I'm fascinated by those who break the rules in the course of their activism. I deeply admire some of the rule breakers—Jesuit priest and antiwar activist Daniel Berrigan, for example—and I'm deeply disturbed by those who believed so fanatically in their cause that they valued it and the ideology that supported it above actual human lives. In my exploration of the mind-set of such dangerous ideologues, I got to ask the question: How is it that some people get so wrapped up in "pure" ideology that they lose both their minds and their humanity?

Many of your novels are set in Atlanta, where you're from. What do you think makes your hometown such a ripe setting?

Atlanta is a city in flux, sometimes to its own detriment, in that it seems to embrace an ethic that new development is always a positive and that any old building can benefit from being knocked down. But the transient nature of Atlanta, the fact that so many people from other parts of the world live here, that marginalized people from all over the South move here to find acceptance, that the city is a nexus of black political and intellectual power, anchored by the historically black colleges and universities Spelman, Morehouse, and Clark Atlanta, that the Southern Center for Human Rights and the King Center and the Carter Center are all located here, as well as the Bitter Southerner and the High Museum of Art, not to mention the Center for Civil and Human Rights, and the BeltLine and, and, and . . . I could go on and on, but my point is that such a wealth of arts and culture and activism makes Atlanta dynamic, generative, interesting—an antidote to the stereotype of the South too often perpetuated. All of that said, we are also a largely segregated city with terrible traffic and poor infrastructure and gaping income inequality and sometimes shallow and regressive ideologies. It's a mixed bag, my town. And it's ripe for fiction.

Daniella and Eve are such distinct characters. Was it difficult to write in alternating perspectives? Was one easier to write than the other?

To oversimplify: I was more like Eve as a young woman, more like Daniella in my middle age. (Although Daniella's work with the Southern Center for Human Rights makes her heroic in ways that I could never be.) As a young woman I was more impulsive, more certain about my convictions, more absolute. In my middle age, though I actually believe my core beliefs have strengthened, I'm a lot more comfortable saying "I don't know." I'm a lot more tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty, of recognizing that two seemingly competing facts can both be true. So, it was not hard for me to go back and forth between Daniella and Eve.

This novel covers an incredible span of time—from the early 1960s to the 1990s. How did you choose what parts to dramatize and what to summarize?

Good question, and one I wrestled with during the course of writing this book. I had a harder time figuring out what to dramatize and what to leave out of the first half of the novel, which takes place from 1962 to 1973. I realized that instead of attempting to somehow sum up an era (impossible!), I would instead write about little moments that changed specific people. So, I focused not on the civil rights movement as a whole but on Daniella's specific experience in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, being so embraced by the Lewis family, having a gun held to her head by a young white man—those moments that would affect her for the rest of her life. With both Eve and Daniella, I tried to locate the moments that left a deep imprint, that shaped the women they would later become.

What kind of research did you do to bring the disparate elements of this novel to life so vividly?

I read a *lot* of biographies—I joked to my husband that it seemed that nearly every former member of the Weather Underground wrote an autobiography. And I read a collection of letters written by participants in the Mississippi Freedom Summer that gave me great insight into what Daniella would have experienced during that time (*Letters from Mississippi*, edited by Elizabeth Martínez). I read a lot of histories exploring the sixties and seventies, both from conservative and liberal perspectives; I watched a lot of documentaries. I also did some primary source research, looking up

old issues of Atlanta's now defunct underground newspaper, *The Great Speckled Bird*. I also looked into historical documents covering the razing of Buttermilk Bottom, the neighborhood where Ada once lived. I bought a vintage copy of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. And I researched some of the cases that the Southern Poverty Law Center has taken on over the years, and read Bryan Stevenson's magnificent *Just Mercy* to learn more about what Daniella might have been doing during her time working with indigent prisoners on death row.

What scene was most fun to write? What was most challenging?

I had fun writing the Fleur chapter, when Daniella and Eve went through rush. I started college at a big state university and was in a sorority during my one year there. I was always ambivalent about the Greek system. I actually dropped out of my sorority during the middle of spring semester, but the chapter president, thinking I would later regret it, never sent in my resignation papers, so technically I'm still a member. (Just as Grandmommy made certain Eve's resignation papers were never mailed in!) The experience of rush imprinted pretty deeply on me—it was so intense, both weirdly intimate and so very formalized. It was cathartic to write about it. Also, I wanted to tell the story of my friend's mother, who was excluded from the coveted sororities at Chapel Hill in the 1960s, because she was Jewish. Her story stuck with me, and I wanted to share it.

It's a no-brainer to say that the most challenging scene to write was the one where Eve skins the cat. First of all, I had to research the actual logistics of how one would go about doing that, and it quite literally turned my stomach (I looked up how to skin a rabbit). But also, I'm a cat lover, a firm believer that a home is not a home without a cat, so I just had to sort of turn off my brain while writing. That scene is based on rumors that members of the Weathermen skinned and ate a cat to show they had truly renounced their "bourgeois values," to prove that they would do anything for the Revolution. Former member Bill Ayers denies that anyone ever ate cat; indeed, he makes light of those rumors in the second of his two autobiographies. Mark Rudd, also a former member, and one whose witness rings more truthful to me, says it sounds very much like something they might have done, but if so, he never saw it. Whether it happened or not, it was the perfect metaphor for how "pure" ideology, removed from love and humility, can take you completely off the rails. But I hope I never have to write a scene like that again.

What inspired the dual timelines and friendships in this novel, that between Eve and Daniella and between Anna and Sarah?

writing about Eve and Daniella as young, idealistic women, who start out more or less on the same page. I was interested in the idea that two people can hold the same beliefs about justice, and then have those beliefs take them in such radically different directions. Daniella's early activism led to the strengthening of her true core, whereas Eve was led astray by Warren and by Smash's brutal ideology. After Eve goes off the rails and finds herself pregnant and alone in Atlanta, her longtime lover presumably blown to pieces by a bomb, she tries to reinvent herself as the soft, southern woman she was born to be. She meets Bob, who very much wants her to be that woman and who wants to claim the baby she is carrying as his own. After Eve latches on to Bob, it only made sense to jump to ten years later, when that baby is now a fifth grader, living inside the myth her mother had created about her life. Would the myth stay intact? How much would Eve have to contort herself in order to keep the myth alive? I could only explore those questions by exploring Anna and Sarah's story, too.

Smash bears some resemblance to the Weather Underground, which was active in New York during this period. How do you think the real-life group influenced your choices in the novel?

While Smash is its own beast, I was absolutely influenced by the Weather Underground. In fact, it was watching Sam Green and Bill Siegel's excellent 2002 documentary, *The Weather Underground*, that first inspired me to write this novel. That, and the 1999 arrest of former SLA member Kathleen Soliah, who had gone underground in the 1970s after warrants were released for her arrest, reinvented herself as Sara Jane Olson, and lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, along with her physician husband and three daughters. She acted in community theater, she volunteered, she cooked gourmet meals to raise funds for good causes, and . . . she was a fugitive from the law. (How could a novelist's mind not be sparked?)

The Weather Underground was fascinating to me because up to a point I agreed with their thinking on racism in America and imperialism abroad. But then, it seemed to me, their ideology became toxic, nihilistic, soul crushing. And I'm fascinated by how so many (though not all) of its former members have tried to reinvent themselves—not by denying their involvement but by sanitizing their past statements and actions.

Family ties—those chosen and those by blood—are a major component of this novel, as is the idea of Eve and Daniella's sisterhood. Are these common themes in your novels? Why?

All of my novels explore the idea of biological and chosen families. I think this is because my own family was confusing to me as a child. I am the only and much-loved biological child of my parents, each of whom had children from their first marriages. All of my siblings were "halves." My siblings had "whole," "half," and "step-" brothers and sisters. Some of us lived together; some of us did not. There was great disparity in the lifestyle of those who lived with my parents and those who did not: some of us went to private school, some public; some of us were raised in a mainline Protestant church, some in a fundamentalist church. Yet we were told that we were all one, big happy family, united by my parents' great love for each other. And there was some truth in that—in fact, my parents have had a wonderful, endearing love. But there were a lot of cracks in the facade of our unity, a lot of fractures, a lot of myths. And I think I've spent my entire adult life writing about the exposure of myths in fictitious families as a way of processing my own.

What do you hope readers take away from the novel?

For starters, I hope that readers who did not know much about the Mississippi Summer Project, i.e., "Freedom Summer," will come away with more knowledge of what happened during those months and will look deeper into the lives of modern-day prophets such as Bob Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer. And I hope readers will reflect on the fact that we are all culpable, all fallible, all very much human. Even Daniella, who I see as pretty morally centered, refused to help Ada purchase the house she so richly deserved, the house that would have changed the quality of her life for the better. So, I suppose I hope that this book will help readers look at their blind spots—God knows I have them. And I hope that readers, no matter where they fall on the political spectrum, will recognize how dangerous ideological purity is—removed from love, removed from mercy, removed from compassion. I hope this book encourages readers to seek justice, but with love.

What are you working on next?

I'm ust in the note-taking stage right now, but I'm interested in exploring a countercultural family living in a gentrifying neighborhood in Atlanta during the Reagan years, the father a left wing, activist Protestant minister.