

By the
author of
BRASS



Everybody
Says
It's
Everything

A Novel

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If you're reading this, you're at least considering *Everybody Says It's Everything* for your book club, and for that, I'm humbled and grateful. And if you're considering *Everybody Says It's Everything* for your book club, you've probably at least read the jacket copy and have a general sense for its "aboutness" (one of my favorite terms that I adopted from my days working as a librarian), so I thought I'd offer a little bit instead about how and why this book came to be.

Two separate pulls called me to this project: I wanted to write about siblings, and I wanted to write about the U.S.-based civilian effort that fortified the Kosovo Liberation Army during the Kosovo War in 1999, which I had both read about and indirectly experienced through my engagement with the Kosovar Albanians who settled in my hometown of Waterbury, Conn.

Regarding the first point, until this point, I never dared write deeply about sibling relationships because, in my experience, they're so knotty and complicated and deep that I frankly didn't feel mature enough as a writer (human?) to take the subject on. How can one share one's entire young history—not to mention genes, bedrooms, bathrooms, toys, and (whether permission was granted or not) a favorite sweatshirt—with someone who's literally witnessed and participated in the most formative years of one's life and yet, as adults, sometimes feel so alien from them? Complicating that further is the fissures and fusions of what we traditionally referred to as the nuclear family. I myself have one full biological sibling, four stepsiblings, and a number of half-siblings, and the amount of blood shared has neither determined the intensity of the relationship nor the similarities/disparities with them. While I still chickened out by narrowing in on merely a pair of siblings rather than the menagerie I called brothers and sisters growing up, I wanted to at least begin thinking my way through how shared origins don't always mean shared narratives, and swabbing one's cheek to send a sample off to 23andMe isn't really ever going to tell you a simple or complete family story.

Regarding the second point, my hometown of Waterbury, Conn. has long been home to a small enclave of Albanians who emigrated primarily in the 1970s, including my father, who landed there in 1973. The Albanian population of Waterbury really soared, however, in the late 1990s, following Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaign against Albanians in the then-Yugoslavian province of Kosovo. The geopolitics of this region has long been head-spinning and seeped in unrest, and instead of pretending to be an expert, I'll refer those interested to some additional reading by actual experts. I was more interested in the personal stories of the emigres I met around town, and also fascinated and mystified by the immediate trust and camaraderie they seemed to feel for me simply because I'm Albanian—even though, in truth, I'm a half-Albanian who'd lived my whole life in the Tristate area. This is when I began really learning about the concept of *besa* (and the code it's pulled from, the *Kanun*) and how a tiny nation whose diaspora population still dwarfs its native population has managed to retain such a vigorous national identity. That said, I didn't feel I had the authority to tell the story of the war when so few stories of actual survivors have been shared; instead, I wanted to approach the topic as the outsider I still feel like, with characters even more estranged from their roots than me, people who are searching for identity without necessarily understanding or examining the ones they find themselves clinging to.

My favorite thing about writing fiction is the permission it grants us to take seemingly wildly disparate subjects and coax them into some kind of cohesive narrative tapestry. (A few of the other secondary subjects woven into *Everybody Says It's Everything* are addiction, AOL chatrooms, gray-market adoptions, disability, and the terrifying open U.S. gun trade.) Maybe you'll detect some other subjects and themes that made their way onto the page subconsciously. In any case, thanks for considering this novel for your book club. (If you're more of a solo reader but made it here out of curiosity, thanks for that, too!)

Best,

Xhenet

Discussion Questions

Drita has always perceived herself as the “good” girl, a rule-follower who takes responsibility seriously. Is her goodness always virtuous? Is it always kind?

What do you think drives Drita’s decision to take Shanda and Dakota in? What drives Pete’s decision to help Valon and his father buy and export weapons to the Kosovo Liberation Army? Do you think either exemplifies the concept of besa, as explained by Valon?

Do you think Valon sees Pete as a true friend or partner?

Do you think Drita’s baiting of Valon is justified, given what’s at stake? How does her relationship to Valon change as their correspondence intensifies?

Why does Jackie withhold the truth of Drita’s and Pete’s adoption from them?

What do you think accounts for the transformation of Jackie from passive and traditional before her car accident to assertive and emboldened—if potentially rash and misguided—after it?

Do you imagine that Drita will tell Pete about the true nature of their familial relationship? Why or why not?

By the end of the novel, do you think Pete is ready to take on parenthood in earnest? What about Shanda?

At the end of the novel, Drita tells Valon’s father, “I want to understand.” What do you think Drita means?

Are there ways in which a seemingly noble concept like besa—a solemn oath of honor—can be misplaced, even corrupted?

Aside from the historical event that underpins the novel—the Kosovo War—what do you think is unique about the late 1990s that might drive the actions of the story in a way that couldn’t be replicated today?

Recommended Reading

These are the nonfiction books I consulted to fortify my very finite geopolitical knowledge and shoddy memory.

Be Not Afraid, For You Have Sons in America by Stacy Sullivan

Published in 2004 and now unfortunately out of print but available on used marketplaces, Sullivan brings a journalist's (and outsider's) lens to a remarkable story. The characters of Valon and his father Ramadan in Everybody Says It's Everything are utter fabrications, but other real-life men with whom Sullivan embedded with pulled off the kinds of operations my characters attempted.

Homeland Calling: Exile Patriotism and the Balkan Wars by Paul Hockenos

Focused more on the history and geopolitical conditions that led to the Kosovo War than profiles of individuals, it's still very readable and made even a simple English major like me feel briefly like a Balkan scholar.

And here are just a few of the many novels that served as models of how to marry complicated family dynamics and sociopolitical conditions without sacrificing intimacy, distinctive characters, or becoming didactic.

Infinite Country by Patricia Engel

I almost described this as a "classic onion structure," but is onion structure classic? It should be, and this book should be its exemplar for how it achieves its steady revelations of a migrant Colombian family through time jumps and point-of-view switches.

Forbidden City by Vanessa Hua

Tbh, I'm wary of a lot of historical fiction, as I find it often reverts to wish fulfillment rather than emotional nuance. This book, though, awes me as a reader and terrifies me as a writer, featuring a fictional heroine somehow even more complex than its primary historical actor: Chairman Mao.

Hell of a Book by Jason Mott

I'm not quite sure how Mott manages to pull off such striking tonal contrasts—from hilarious absurdism to devastating tragedy—so organically, but I'll keep studying this book in the hopes of absorbing some of his genius.

The Bee Sting by Paul Murray

I've always been a sucker for an Irish lilt, be it aural or literary. (Roddy Doyle is an all-time favorite of mine.) It's astounding to me how deeply Murray was able to mine the four individual members of the Barnes family while still cohering the overall family story.

The Vanishing Half by Britt Bennett

When I started to write, "The story of twins who take wildly divergent paths..." I wondered if I might have been subconsciously so struck by Bennett's novel that I inadvertently borrowed a plot point from it. (But I swear, I was long into the work on Everybody Says It's Everything before even reading The Vanishing Half!) I loved The Mothers (and damn, coincidentally, my first novel was also about a mother/daughter relationship) and Bennett's second is even more ambitious in scale and scope without losing the singularity of her characters.