



# MOTHERS AND OTHER LIARS

by Amy Bourret

## About the Author

- A Conversation with Amy Bourret

## Behind the Novel

- “A Muse Named Johnny”  
An Original Essay by the Author

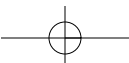
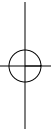
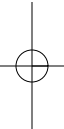
## Keep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

A  
*Reading  
Group Gold  
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions,  
visit [www.readinggroupgold.com](http://www.readinggroupgold.com).







## *A Conversation with Amy Bourret*

**A question authors seem to be asked the most is what parts of their work are autobiographical. And your answer is?**

That is easy. No, I have never found an abandoned baby, never given up a child for adoption. Probably the strongest link is Ruby's Midwestern sensibility and sentimentality. My grandparents, to whom this novel is dedicated, were proud Iowans. And I have very fond memories of time spent with them, working in the garden, "helping" my grandfather refinish furniture, and partaking in family races to see who could eat the most corn on the cob. The tool chest made from wooden Velveeta boxes is real; it sits on my own workbench now. My grandfather died while I was in law school. A decade later, I received the honor and profound gift to be able to move into their home to be with my grandmother during her last months.

**What was your inspiration for this book?**

This sounds kind of wacky, but I was on a walk when a "what if" popped into my head: *What if you built your whole life on a certain assumption and then years later discover that the assumption was wrong?* I am intrigued with exploring the personal past and discovering how it informs the present—the road not taken and all.

**You have a background in child advocacy. Is the novel based on an experience you had in the field or a case you may have worked on?**

Not any specific case, really. It's more just the general experience. A child builds her own life from the foundation of her family experience. If that environment she grew up in is abuse or neglect or incest, when she is removed from the situation she faces reshaping her life with a new definition of "normal." I think my experiences of working with scared and scarred children are wrapped into the reasons my protagonist, Ruby, makes the choices she makes.



*About the  
Author*

*"I've been a  
writer since  
before I could  
hold a pencil."*

**This is your debut novel, and you have created characters that are complex, believable, and ones the readers will really root for. How did you come up with their stories?**

I've been told since I was a young kid that I have an "old soul." I study people, try to figure out what makes them tick. I know the people in my own life very well, and my characters seem to be a patchwork of lots of different pieces of them and of me. That and pure invention from my arguably warped mind. Writers are lucky; they can call the voices in their heads characters while the rest of the world calls them crazy.

I'm glad the characters seem believable to the reader, because they became very real to me. My friends tease me about the time I was shopping for Christmas presents and didn't realize until I was up at the counter that I had picked out a gift for Ruby.

**The subject of the book is very sensitive. What are you hoping readers will take away from *Mothers and Other Liars*?**

Ruby faces some choices that make readers think about what they would do in that situation. People have strong feelings about her story; some tell me that they could never make those same choices, others that Ruby's path was the only one she could have taken. I'm thrilled that the story makes people think and engage in lively debate. In addition to their opinions about Ruby's choices, I hope readers also take away a different sense of what makes a "family." It is a privilege to be invited into peoples' homes, to have them give my story a chunk of their own limited time. I'm honored when they feel that their reading time was well spent, that the story sticks with them after they finish the book.



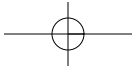
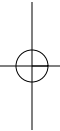
**You were a partner in a law firm before you published this book. What made you decide to become a writer?**

Oh, I've been a writer since before I could hold a pencil. *Mothers and Other Liars* is my debut novel, but my first publishing credit was a poem called—I kid you not, but my family kids me about it plenty—"Where Buffalo Where." It was a plaintive ode about the disappearance of buffalo due to overdevelopment of their land. I guess Lark gets her green streak from me. As a child, I also wrote short stories and kept journals. In high school and college, I was a writer for and editor of yearbooks and newspapers, and I think there still exist somewhere out there beside my parents' bookshelf a few copies of my college thesis, published by the university press. And in my law practice, I wrote a lot of legal documents and articles.

I probably shouldn't admit this, but when my parents moved a few years ago, I went home to clean out my stuff and found notebooks full of my old writing. There were these journal entries from when I was eight and nine where I wrote dreck like "I am a writer. It is who I am. It is the destiny of my soul." I asked my mother if she had seen that stuff and when she said she had, I asked her why she didn't get me into therapy!

At the same time, though, I've always been very analytical. "Dogged" and "Type-A" are some of the nicer ways I've heard friends and family describe me. Hence the law part. I guess I've just kind of lived in the middle space between my left and right brain, drifting back and forth from time to time. But my lifelong love affair with words, as my eight-year-old self knew even then, is what defines me best.

### *About the Author*





## *An Original Essay by the Author*

### **“A Muse Named Johnny”**

I went to law school because I wanted to be a child advocate. Yale has a terrific clinical program where students can take on real-life cases. My very first assignment was representing a twelve-year-old boy. Let’s call him Johnny Doe. A teacher had recognized signs of abuse in Johnny’s younger sister, and—warning, there’s an ick-factor here—an investigation had revealed that Johnny had been sexually abusing her. Johnny was being prosecuted in juvenile court for child molestation. And I was his lawyer. The kicker was—and this one really puts the “ick” in “kick”—that the children’s mother, a single parent with mild retardation, was sharing her bed with the boy. Johnny had clearly committed a crime, but he was no criminal; he was only doing what was “normal” in his little world.

In an instant, that boy’s little world imploded. He was taken away from his mother, his sister, his school, and thrown into a juvenile detention center. When I met with him, all I could see was a skinny, scared boy peeking out of a too-big orange jumpsuit. Johnny was book-smart. He excelled at science. And he didn’t understand why he was being punished for something he was “supposed” to do.

It’s been more than twenty years, and that boy’s story is still vivid in my mind, along with Janie, whose mother’s boyfriend found sport in dipping her in scalding water, and every other Johnny and Jane who I represented. Stories are never pretty in child advocacy. But the children, they were all beautiful enough to break a heart. Every time. Which is how I ended up practicing corporate law, and taking on one pro bono child advocacy case at a time—that was as much breaking as *my* heart could handle.

Over the years, more than just the details of those stories has stayed with me. The cases made me wonder, what would I do if one day my whole world changed? What if I discovered that the assumptions upon which I had built my life were wrong? The cases also made me think about nature versus nurture. Johnny’s actions were surely a product of his

Reading  
Group  
Gold



*Behind the  
Novel*

environment—he learned at the hand (or other body parts) of his “nurturing” mother. Or were those actions “nature”? Maybe both Johnny and his mother were hard-wired that way and would have acted accordingly in any environment.

And what about me? I have tight bonds with my family. When my sister’s friends meet me, of course they notice the dimples. No doubt my sister and I swam in the same genetic pool. Yet people also comment on how we make similar gestures, how our voices have the same timbre. I have my mother’s eyes, and her sense of humor. My interest in furniture refinishing is a piece of my grandfather that I carry around like a precious family heirloom. So which of these are nature, threaded through that double helix, and which are nurture, mere products of the times our family has spent together? Yes, I’ve been told a time or two that I think too much.

Like my character Ruby, I left one life behind and moved to Santa Fe. That area is like a candy store for a hiking lover such as myself. My meanderings are prime musing time—I ponder as I wander, so to speak. And somewhere along the way in those dalmation hills, spotted with piñon bushes, and beneath the shivering gold of the Aspen trees, I noticed that other voices were chiming in to the conversations in my head. Either I was in the midst of a psychotic episode, or all of those musings about nurture and nature and what is family and lives changing in an instant were weaving themselves into a story. I decided on the latter.

 **Recommended Reading**

**Amy's List**

***Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott**

For me, the best book about writing but also a great read about life in general. I'd recommend any of her books, especially her collected essays.

***Upgraded to Serious* by Heather McHugh**

When my work is "young," I read poetry rather than other novels so that I inspire but don't interfere with the fragile voices of my own story. Heather McHugh and Pablo Neruda are two of my favorites. *The Best American Poetry*, an annual publication, is a great book to find poets who inspire you.

***Day Hikes in the Santa Fe Area***

This is the Sierra Club book that Ruby carries on hikes (as do I). You can find it in Santa Fe bookstores and gift shops.

***The Furniture Doctor* by George Grotz**

Ruby used her grandfather's book, *Principles of Woodworking* by Herman Hjorth, but I find this Grotz book more accessible. First published in 1962 and revised several times, this is my woodworking bible.

***The Best Interests of the Child: The Least Detrimental Alternative* by Joseph Goldstein**

Speaking of bibles, this is the bible of child advocacy, written by my law school professor.



*Keep on Reading*



## *Amy's Favorite Book Club Reads*

### ***The Double Bind* by Chris Bohjalian**

Superb writing and a masterfully-executed twist.

### ***The Widow's Season* by Laura Brody**

This is not another *Good Grief*. It's an engaging look at the winding road through the shadow and light of life.

### ***Wildflower* by Mark Seal**

I was fascinated with this true story of Joan Root, a wildlife filmmaker, kind of *Great Gatsby* meets *Out of Africa*.

### ***Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal* by Christopher Moore**

Wet-your-pants funny and a very interesting take on history. Don't be put off by the title; my book club, which includes Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers, had a great discussion about this one.

### ***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**

My book club picks one classic to read each year. I could read this one every year. I also enjoyed the new biography of the author, *Up Close: Harper Lee* by Kerry Madden. Two timely reads for 2010, the fiftieth anniversary of the novel.



## Reading Group Questions

1. People seem to feel very strongly about Ruby's choices. What would you have done in her situation? Do you think her acts were selfish or selfless?
2. The theme of nature versus nurture is woven through this novel. Ruby believes Lark is the person she is more because of their shared experiences than because of Lark's biological heritage. Which do you think is the stronger component of a person? Which parts of your own character do you think are based on nurture and which come from nature?
3. The theme of water also "runs" through the story. What do you think about the contradiction in how Ruby sets out to find a piece of her mother on an ocean shore, yet she builds her life with Lark in the arid high desert of Santa Fe? In which parts of the story do the river themes resonate strongest for you? Where do you find your own peace, in a river, an ocean, a mountain, a person?
4. Chaz has strong ties to his family, yet he leaves not only Ruby but his entire family behind. Why do you think he did not return for his own child's baptism? Do you think that someday he and Ruby will have their fairy-tale ending? How is his leaving similar to and different from Ruby leaving her "second life" in Iowa?
5. Speaking of family, after her grandmother's death and until the end of the book, Ruby's own "family" is comprised entirely of people to whom she is not related. How do you think her story would have unfolded if she had not met Margaret in that parking lot?



*Keep on  
Reading*

6. Ruby talks about how every person has a pivotal moment that changes the direction of her life. Ruby identifies two, finding Lark at the rest stop and then putting into motion her plan to give up her biological child in exchange for Lark. Both of these moments, though, also drastically changed the course of others' lives. What moments can you identify as pivotal in your own life? Looking back, how do you think those moments impacted others?
7. Do you think Ruby's grandmother had some idea that she was dying when she sent Ruby to town? How do you think Ruby's own choices would have been different if, say, her grandmother had died after a lingering illness, with Ruby at her side?
8. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from Ruby's point of view rather than from an omniscient or alternating point of view? What aspects would have changed with different perspectives?
9. How do you feel about the choices of Darla, the "other" mother? In what ways does she exemplify the distinction between what we want and what we think we want?
10. Okay, go ahead and confess. What is the biggest lie *you* have ever told?