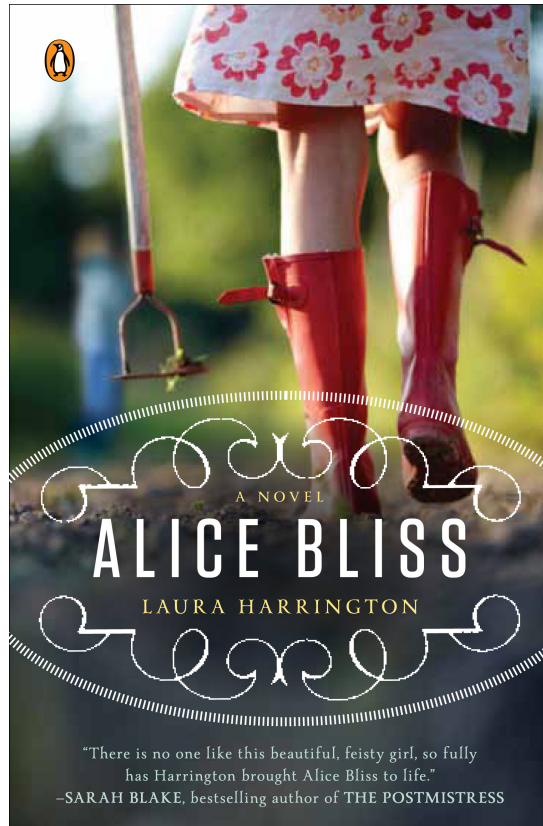


# A Reader's Guide for Alice Bliss



## A Kick-Off Question: What Do Writers Leave Out? And Why?

I'm intrigued by what good writers leave out. I believe that you actively engage readers by inviting them/ allowing them to enter the story imaginatively. Alice's physical appearance is never described directly. There are several hints throughout the book that allow the reader to put together a picture of Alice, but for the most part, the character is built through her thoughts and actions, her mistakes and her yearnings. Do you have a picture of Alice in your mind? Did this make it easier or more difficult to relate to this character? My hope is that every reader has their own Alice.

The other equally important reason I decided not to describe Alice is because we are constantly judging girls and women by their external appearance. I know this is nothing new, it is more omnipresent and more acceptable than it used to be.

## Lists



I've been thinking about lists a lot lately. Do you have a set of words to live by, such as Matt wrote for Alice? Can you remember some of the advice you were given by your parents? If your mother or your father were to write a similar list for you, what would it say? If you were to write a list for your daughter, what would it say?

## Are Our Expectations for Moms Unrealistic?

The character of Angie seems to galvanize people. I've had readers tell me that she truly embodies the ever changing face of grief. One military spouse wrote a long essay about how angry Angie made her because she wasn't supporting her husband by completing the "mission" at home. By the end of the essay she was admitting that Angie's falling apart was terrifying, and not something she could even allow herself to think about, let alone feel. Other readers have been furious at Angie for falling down on the job at home and relying too much on Alice. Why are our ex-

pectations of mothers so high? Are these expectations reasonable? Why is it so difficult to allow a mother a margin of error? Why do we judge mothers so harshly?

## Character Interviews

Part of my process when I'm writing is to write character interviews. I write a long series of questions so that I can learn about my characters in their own words. This is different than a character bio, which would be written in my voice. These interviews are written from the character's point of view and I always learn a great deal. The interviews always end with the same three questions: Who do you love? Who loves you? and, What are you most afraid of?

I'm working on character interviews for my new book, *A Catalogue of Birds*, and I stumbled on this question for Matt Bliss. This passage never made it into the book, although I hope that the feelings behind this passage did, but so many people have asked me about Matt's motivations, I thought I'd share this here:

What are you most afraid of?

Matt: "You know there's this thing about war, about proving yourself as a man, as a brave man, having the right stuff. That's the romantic myth I'm chasing. And I know it's a myth and I know there are a million ways to be brave – like what it takes for Angie to let me go – but I'm still compelled to test myself in this way. It's like this rite of passage that I'm really too old for; or this life question you'd think I'd have settled by now. I'm not really answering your question... I'm afraid that in the end I'm not really asking the right questions; that I got stuck over here in the bravery section and forgot ... Oh, hell, I guess I'm afraid of having regrets, of not living, of not rising to the challenge, of not

trying to make a difference. Why can't I do all of that right here at home, in my own back yard, you might ask? I don't know. It's a war. It's here. It's now. It's my generation.

"And then it's all mixed up, mixed up with Angie thinking I'm not ambitious, or not ambitious in the way she wanted me to be, the classic rising through the ranks in business, a guy in a suit; so maybe I'm still trying to impress her, trying to find the place where I can be ambitious and rise through the ranks and ...

"Shit, I guess what I'm most afraid of is that I've made the wrong decision. And that I could lose everything – not just Angie and the girls and our life together if something happens to me, if I die over there – but that if I do come back, maybe I've broken or damaged something between Angie and me that can never be put right. Will she forgive me? I'm scared about that. Will she forgive me?"

## A CONVERSATION WITH LAURA HARRINGTON

**Q. You provide a detailed and nuanced description of what it's like to live with the absence of a family member during a time of war. How might your personal experiences be similar to Alice's?**

I was thirteen when my two brothers enlisted in the air force, one just out of high school, one just out of college. I went from being part of a raucous family to an only child overnight. My parents, who had gone through World War II, believing it was the war to end all wars, were heartbroken. At the same time I remember the dinner table conversations before my brothers enlisted where my parents would say, "If you don't go, someone else will have to go in your place."

Those four years were a very dark and confusing time, personally, politically, for the nation. One of my brothers went to Vietnam, one worked stateside with NORAD; they both came home again. But of course they were not the same boys who left, and our family was never the same again. My mother would also say about my father, "The fellow who went to war didn't come home."

**Q. As a successful playwright and librettist, what drew you to fiction, and how does it compare to your other art forms?**

I was drawn to fiction because I wanted to be a beginner again, I wanted to do something I didn't know how to do, and I wanted to reconnect to the creative process by turning my writing world upside down.

How does it compare? At first fiction seemed like an utterly alien, strange new world. I would sit down to write every day and think, "How do you do this?" Finding my way forward into the novel also meant reaching back into my theater tool kit. And here's my favorite part about writing fiction: the good part, the fun part, lasts longer. A play or a musical is ninety to one hundred pages, double-spaced, with lots of white space on every page. A libretto for a full-length opera might be half that long. These are condensed, compressed mediums, more closely aligned to poetry than fiction. So the creative burst—the fun part of writing intensely—lasts for weeks, maybe a few months; certainly not the year or longer of a novel. Getting to live inside my characters and their story so deeply with *Alice Bliss* was a huge pleasure.

**Q. What was the genesis of *Alice Bliss*?**

*Alice Bliss* was inspired by the one-woman musical, *Alice Unwrapped*, I wrote with the composer Jenny Giering. At thirty minutes and almost entirely sung, we could

really only dramatize one key moment in Alice's life. And I realized that there was a much larger story to be told. Which is when I decided I wanted to write a book.

**Q. You make a brief reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* —"curiouser and curiouser" (p. 116)—and I'm wondering what other similarities you see between the two young women. Your Alice does go through a rabbit hole of sorts, into a very different world than she previously lived in. Is there a certain absurdity to grief and the limbo of waiting and hoping in which Alice exists?**

What an interesting question! I guess you can never call a girl Alice without invoking "the" Alice. Maybe I was thinking about the Orwellian absurdities of doublespeak that occur the minute we go to war. Or that Alice exists in a world within a world. The world of her family has suddenly been turned upside down. Her dad is gone, her mom is heartbroken, everybody's worried sick, Alice suddenly needs to grow up fast and help her mom. And at the same time, the world outside her family has not changed one whit; when she walks out her door, Alice lives among friends and classmates who have no idea what she and her family are going through. I think families of reservists can feel especially isolated. Not living on base means that they are not surrounded with other families going through the same thing. How does Alice negotiate those two worlds?

**Q. Some might find Angie a difficult character. While her struggle with loneliness and grief generates intense sympathy, readers might also be frustrated by her neglect of some of her responsibilities as a mother. What are your feelings toward Angie?**

I love Angie. I love the way she loves her family, the way she is still in love with Matt, the honesty and depth of her grief and longing. And I love her for struggling and failing and making mistakes. I have a soft spot for flawed characters; I feel you don't love someone in spite of their flaws but because of them. I also wanted to write a realistic portrait of a mother-daughter relationship when the daughter is a teenager.

Alice is terrifically well drawn. You present some of the confounding aspects of adolescent behavior with kindness and honesty, but you never condescend to her or make her simplistic—a flaw of many teens in fiction. How did you approach your depiction of Alice?

I listened to her. And I pushed her. And I let her make her own mistakes.

**Q. How did she change over the course of your writing?**

She grew, she deepened, she started to take chances. She found her courage. She didn't harden her heart, which is one of the things I admire most about her.

**Q. Angie considers the night sky and Matt's letter to her describing the moon in the desert. She thinks to herself, "My soul lifts up" (p. 100) but although the quotation is familiar to her, she can't place it. Where does the phrase come from?**

It's a fairly common phrase, found in scripture, a variation of it is in the Book of Common Prayer, and it seems to be frequently used in poetry.

Q. Reading over the letter of advice that Matt gives to Alice (p. 297), it's an excellent summary of common sense and consideration. What advice did your parents give you when you were young? Did it prove useful?

My life is deeply informed by both of my parents and their values. My father's spirit, in particular, informs almost every page of Alice Bliss. They might not have articulated the advice Matt did, but they lived it.