

The oh comely book club

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For this issue, we've been reading Julie Buntin's *Marlena* in London, Sheffield, and Liverpool. We chatted to Julie about the female friendships we're shaped by, what it's like to live in a small town, and how to figure out the kind of adult you want to be... →

After her parents' divorce, Cat has moved to a rural town in Michigan with her mother and her older brother, and she reluctantly sees the move as an opportunity to reinvent herself. No longer 'Cathy,' Cat is welcomed into a new friendship group, headed up by the slightly older and infinitely cooler Marlena, with whom she quickly develops a fierce friendship, more than willing to overlook her flaws and her addictions. Less than a year later, Marlena is dead, found in a shallow river in the woods. As an adult, Cat tries to sort through her memories of Marlena, and to move on with her own life.



What we thought

Our book club meetups discussed our own teenage friendships, whether Marlena had motives of her own, and whether we were satisfied with how Cat's life turned out.

"I did wonder how much Marlena actually liked Cat, versus how much she stood to gain from her."

"Cat's support system was able to swoop in and rescue her when things started to go wrong, but Marlena didn't have that."

"The idea of responsibility was interesting: Cat never really takes the blame for anything she causes, or really understands that her actions have consequences."

"For me it was on the nose and reminded me of intense relationships I've had."

"Does Cat even know Marlena very well? It's like Marlena is protecting her from seeing even worse parts of her life."

"Did Cat think she was above them for knowing better but still behaving the way she did?"

"Their relationship varies between love and repulsion, one moment they are obsessed with each other and the next there is a focus on negatives - like focusing on Marlena's greasy hair."

"Was the meeting with Sal at a later date a let-down or the right ending? Cat doesn't feel the need to order alcohol but most other questions are left unanswered."



Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow chats to Julie Buntin

I spoke to Julie Buntin about *Marlena*, and about her own formative friendships, as well as why those types of friendships are more interesting to write about than men having affairs with manic pixie dream girls...

Terri-Jane: Do you feel like you had a female friendship that was as formative an experience as Cat and Marlena's?

Julie: Definitely. When I think about the relationships that made me who I am, the friendships I had with my female friends in high school were just as formative as the relationships I had with my sister, or my mum, or my brother. I did have a couple of really close friends during my adolescence, and I had a friend who passed away when I was in my early twenties. It's a different story to the one in the book, but I did know that feeling - and I tried to capture it in the novel - of how intensely you feel the loss.

With my adult friends now, we're juggling jobs and families and our lives, and all of these competing pressures. When you're a teenager, you have summer vacation, and time where there's really nothing to do except walking around talking. I think there's something about friendships at that age that is so fraught. You're trying to find out what kind of person you want to be, and your friends help you decide what that means, for better or for worse. It's sort of friendship as a collaboration of identity.

T: A lot of adult friendships are kind of based on you already knowing who

you are; you already have your base personality figured out.

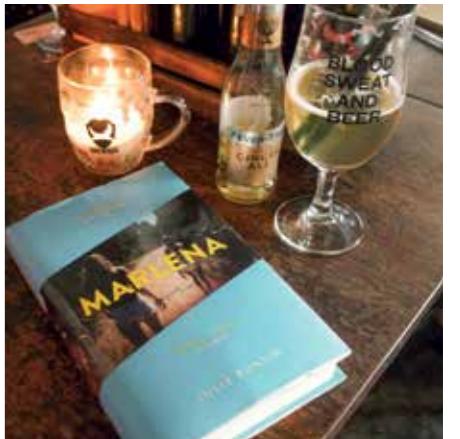
J: When I was a kid, one of my best friends said to me, in all seriousness, "Oh, it's such a good thing that you have brown hair - she had blonde hair - because if you had blonde hair, we couldn't be friends." This idea that in order to be best friends, we had to be one of each thing, we couldn't be the same. There had to be a smart one, and a pretty one, and all these specific things and what that meant was really interesting to me.

T: A lot of Cat's adult interjections have a kind of acknowledgement that she's looking back at Marlena through rose-tinted glasses.

J: We distort things when we look back on them and that seemed to me to be the hardest and the saddest part of losing someone, and that's definitely something that I feel. The more you remember someone, the more you change them, because memory can never be an exact documentation. In remembering and telling that story, you're building a story of the lost thing that isn't necessarily true, and that seemed so sad to me, but interesting.

T: Do you think that you would be friends with Cat and Marlena, or that you would be outside of that friendship group?

J: I think I probably would have been friends with them. Cat and I are obviously quite similar in a lot of ways, though sometimes her passivity was frustrating for me to write,



but I think we would have been friends. I hope it comes across in the book, but Marlena's character fascinated me. I wanted to always be near her on the page. I wanted it to feel like when she was in the scene, the scene was more alive for it. I think in real life that would have been irresistible too.

T: There's the sense that Cat escaped from the small town in a way that the rest of the group weren't able to; that their options were more limited.

J: I'm from a really small town in northern Michigan. It's a really pretty place, and it's not the same place as in the book, but there are similarities. There's a lot of economic disparity, and it's very much a summer place but then everybody leaves for nine →



months of the year when it's snowing, and it's a bit like 'why would you want to live here?' And yet, people come and spend tons of money to be there for just a second. I was interested in the people who are caught in the aftermath of that cycle. What does it mean to be on a paycheck to paycheck existence in a place without a college nearby, or any real scope beyond the town? How do you escape that and how do you find your own place in the world? When you don't have any kind of larger cultural centre, or anything like that, it can seem like there isn't much to go for, and it can feel really

move there, to isolate herself in this sort of a small community.

T: There have been lots of books recently with stories about female friendships. Do you feel like that's suddenly something that people are more interested in?

J: It's interesting, and I do think that the timing is a coincidence. I think that there are a lot of young female debut writers at the moment. There's more space for us to tell stories, we're more welcomed in. We've fought for places at the table, and when women are writing stories, we're asking what

"I want to read a novel about every best friend that exists. I will read them all"

limiting, and I did want to write about that.

T: I think that the town is almost another character in the book, in the sense of how much impact it has on the characters as they're growing up and figuring out who they are – and in the case of Cat's mother, that that's where she's gone to try to reclaim who she is.

J: And her choice to do that was probably a mistake, in a lot of ways. The idea that you might go to a place and think about how beautiful it is to spend two weeks there in the summer, but she actually chooses to

the most important things we have to say are. This story of adolescent friendship, and the relationships that women have with each other, that's important. It makes sense to me that if there's a boom in young women writing novels, this is a story that we will look at, because it's a part of how we came to be who we are. There's also the idea that all female friendships are the same. Certainly there are similarities, but they aren't the same. These relationships are about a million different and particular women. I want to read a novel about every different best friend that exists. I will read them all. ♦



For our next
#ohcobookclub,
we'll be discussing

Everything Under
by Daisy Johnson

As a child, Gretel lived on a canal boat with her mother, and together they invented their own language. But she hasn't seen her mother since she was 16. When she receives a phone call, Gretel begins to remember the private vocabulary of her childhood. She remembers other things, too: the wild years on the river; the strange boy who once stayed on the boat; and the creature in the water swimming upstream, getting closer. In the end there will be nothing for Gretel to do but go back.

Come join us

Our London bookclub is held at Housmans, London's oldest radical bookshop. Mention #ohcobookclub to pick up a copy of *Everything Under* with 20% off. We also have regular meetups in Sheffield and Liverpool. If you'd like to host a meetup, get in touch with our book club editor, terri-jane@icebergpress.co.uk.