

**A conversation with
Miranda Beverly-Whittemore,
author of *June*
(On Sale May 31, 2016)**



Credit: Kai Beverly-Whittemore

What is the central issue or question that JUNE addresses?

This is a book about legacy. It's about the gap between the stories we tell about the people who raised us, and what actually happened. Writing this novel gave me the opportunity to explore the schism between generations, the assumptions we make about our ancestors and descendants, and how secrets protect and hurt at once. And it was a blast to create characters that resonate across the ages; there is one mother/daughter pair, in particular, who although we meet them sixty years apart, I really wanted to show as being cut from the same cloth.

It's also a book about cultural legacy, about the people we put on pedestals—our movie stars—and the distance between how we perceive them and who they really are. In that way, we don't treat the famous all that differently than we do our forbears.

What was your inspiration for the novel?

My maternal grandmother lived until she was 103 (and I was 33), so I've spent the bulk of my life visiting her in Ohio. She'd been born in a small town that hasn't changed all that much since her birth in 1906, and that place, and the stories about it, and her big photo album with black and white photographs, had this kind of mythic hold over my knowledge of her. She was very sharp—even past a hundred, she could name every single person in a photograph of her first grade class (which I certainly can't do!).

After she died, we went back to her birthplace and were able to spend an afternoon in her "Uncle Lem's" house—her great uncle, this local legend, was an oil wildcatter who built an outside yellow brick mansion in the middle of this small town. The moment I stepped inside that house, I just knew I had to write about it (it's called Two Oaks in the book), and that town (which I renamed St. Jude), and a granddaughter's relationship with her grandmother. The rest of the story is completely made up (except for the fact that there is a character named Uncle Lem), but Grandeur's history was the real jumping off point.

JUNE intertwines two story lines—one taking place in the present, one in the past. How did that structure develop? Did one part come to you before the other?

JUNE takes place over the course of two Junes—1955 and 2015. I've always thought of the book as having a complete arc that begins on May 31st, 1955, carries through the end of that June—when a schism occurs that shakes the lives of all the central characters—and then picks up in mid-June 2015. At least as far as the main storyline of the book is concerned, not a whole lot changes in the passage of those sixty years. What does change is that the inciting incident of the present-day narrative forces to light all of the secrets and passions of that long-ago summer, requiring the descendants of those main players in 1955 to come to terms with what actually happened during that June six decades before, which, in turn, makes them redefine their assumptions about their legacies.

Part of what's fun about weaving back and forth in time is getting to drop gifts in for the reader that resonate across the ages. Because the family home, Two Oaks, is central to both time periods, there were plenty of tricky ways to play the past and present off of each other, which I really enjoyed.

How did you decide to incorporate the Hollywood elements into the novel?

I've wanted to write a book about Hollywood ever since I was on the producing team of the adaptation of my first novel, *The Effects of Light*, which was made into a short film in LA in 2010. The experience of being on set was so transformative; I realized that movie-making is like a machine, every gear in its place. It was just incredible to watch ultra-professionals work together to make cinematic magic.

Then there was this anecdote that had hung around me for more than a decade: early in my time in New York, I found myself at the home of a relatively famous movie star (a mutual friend had invited me to a party at her house). In her living room, this star had dozens of framed photographs of her dog standing in front of monuments—the Eiffel tower, the Coliseum, etc. The day after the party, the star called our mutual friend to report that one of the photographs was missing, and to ask if I had stolen it (since I was the only person at the party she didn't know). Of course I hadn't! I love this little story for what it says about the isolation and strangeness of that particular lifestyle, of the paranoia it can breed. I wanted to write about an actress who could do the same thing (it actually became a scene in the book).

And finally, I've always been fascinated by how we treat Hollywood stars like gods. I loved the conceit of an ordinary person who discovers she may be descended from a line of incredibly famous people. What would any of us do when faced with the opportunity to establish personal relationships with our heroes? Would their untarnished reputations really hold up? What happens when you start to know your heroine well enough that she reveals her true self?

How did you go about researching JUNE, specifically the Ohio town where it is set?

Even as I wanted to write a fictionalized version of the small town in which my grandmother grew up, I was nervous about depicting it correctly, since it's not a place I've ever lived. I knew I needed to put in some time there, so my mother and I spent a beautiful week there in June 2014. A local, elderly, self-taught historian shared innumerable articles and artifacts, which only whetted my appetite, as I realized how many layers deep so many of the stories in this town are. And the town library gave me unfettered access to their archives, which was immensely helpful.

The family that lives in the house that serves as inspiration for the book welcomed us with open arms, letting us measure and photograph its three beautiful stories for days on end—truly, these people could not have been more lovely. And the house itself is just such an odd, wonderful lark—from the third floor ballroom, to the cylindrical office on the main floor, where even the windows are curved. After spending time there, I began to understand that a house like that holds memory; it isn't exactly haunted, but it does feel imbued with a kind of knowingness. That became a vital element of the book, and it wouldn't have made it in there if I hadn't spent all those hours getting to know it.

JUNE is a love story, but also a story about a friendship between two girls, June and Lindie. Can you talk a bit about that aspect of the book?

The love story between June and Lindie is the engine that drives this book. Lindie is in love with June—the attachment goes beyond friendship for her—although the restrictions of the era, and the fact that she doesn't yet understand her own sexuality, means she doesn't quite have the language to describe this feeling. June

adores Lindie, but not at all romantically, and this unequal balance in their relationship lies at the root of the misunderstanding which propels the plot into motion.

Lindie was a very accessible character to write—she’s scrappy and stubborn—and in early drafts of the book I found it hard to show why someone like her would love someone like June—who’s reserved and obedient—so deeply. I wanted June to be an enigma, because what motivates her life decisions is really the mystery at the center of the book (both in 1955, when she’s eighteen, and in 2015, when she’s dead and gone). But I didn’t want Lindie’s passion for her to seem unrealistic. So I had to figure out the best way to demonstrate her kindness and loyalty without sacrificing her essential iciness.

So much of the novel depends on which characters know what secrets, and when they find out about them. How did you keep track of this flow of information throughout the book?

One of the most valuable lessons I learned in writing *Bittersweet* was to decide early on which secrets to keep under wraps and which to reveal right off the bat. In JUNE, you know from almost page one that Lindie, the little girl at the center of the book, is going to kill someone. I decided to play that card right away because it’s so incongruous with the child we meet—how could she possibly be capable of something so horrific? On the other hand, there’s a big twist about three quarters of the way through the novel—something that requires most of the present day characters to reassess everything they’ve believed—and yet, it’s revealed a little later on that one of these same characters has actually known aspects of this secret all along. It says so much about this character that although s/he knew the truth, s/he kept it under wraps. For years.

Choosing where and when to reveal secrets isn’t just about propelling the plot along; it can do a lot to reveal character. So building a narrative with so many secrets woven in didn’t feel all that complicated once I was writing it, because the internal logic of each character—when they were opening themselves up, when they were holding back—absolutely made organic sense to the book.

On a related note, how do the characters’ opinions and judgments evolve over time?

Ultimately, this is a book about acceptance. Each character in the present day has a preconceived notion about how the world is, and every one of those notions is challenged by what is uncovered about the past. I knew, the moment I sat down to write the book, what the last scene was going to be. But it was a long road to get there, and many times it was nearly impossible to see how I would, since the three main characters in the present day are so polarizing, and, often, opposed.

In the end, the house was the key. I saw the story from the house’s perspective, if that makes sense. Its story is one of being full and happy so many years ago, and then being a helpless witness to the series of events that leads to it becoming empty and alone. By the time the present-day part of the book begins, it has been sitting mostly empty for almost two decades. The house is suffering because of its emptiness. I asked myself what the house wanted, and the answer was: to feel full again. And then I just had to figure out how to give it back a family.

For more information, or to schedule an interview with the author,
please contact Rebecca Welbourn at 212-782-9634 or at rwelbourn@penguinrandomhouse.com.