



Book Club Kit

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Discussion Questions

- 1 After Tyler leaves Lana, she makes a bold decision about becoming pregnant. If you were in Lana's shoes, would you have gone through with the embryo transfer after Tyler left? Was Lana wrong to not tell Tyler initially about the pregnancy?
- 2 The action that starts the chain of events in the novel is Lana following Katya off the subway. Would you have made the same decision Lana makes?
- 3 Lana and Katya, though quite different, quickly develop an intense friendship. What qualities does each bring out in the other?
- 4 Katya makes choices that both Lana and Josh sometimes find questionable. Did you find Katya to be a sympathetic character? Did your opinion of her change over the course of the novel, and if so, how?
- 5 What choice should Tyler have made when Katya blackmailed him? Discuss whether you think he did the right thing by leaving Lana.
- 6 Bulgarian culture, inspired by the author's own background, plays a rich role in *Her Daughter's Mother*. What flavor does it add to the story?
- 7 After reading the novel, do you think Lana and Tyler should end up back together? What do you think the future holds for these characters?

A Conversation with Daniela Petrova



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What is your debut, *Her Daughter's Mother*, about and how do you explore issues of infertility and fundamental definitions of motherhood?

Her Daughter's Mother is a suspense novel about a woman in her late thirties who has it all—an apartment in Manhattan, a great job as an art curator at the Met, a long-term live-in relationship with a Columbia professor—except they haven't been able to become pregnant after years of trying. Their last chance is a donor egg cycle they can barely afford. But when he unexpectedly leaves her three days before the precious embryo transfer, she faces the impossible choice of having to give up on her dream of having a baby or proceed without his consent.

Going through infertility is grueling and emotionally debilitating for a couple. It brings up a lot of issues of insecurity and ques-

tions of identity, especially when using a donor egg or sperm in order to conceive. I wanted to explore these feelings and complexities from the point of view of the mother, the father and, in the case of my novel, the egg donor. How far would a woman go in the quest for a baby? How much is she willing to sacrifice? What lines would she be willing to cross? What's it like for a donor to get to know the woman who's carrying a part of her? To look at the father and think, He and I are having a baby it's just that another woman is carrying it.

You drew on your own experiences with infertility when writing the book—how does Lana's story reflect your own?

My ex-husband and I struggled with infertility for years, trying nearly everything to get pregnant, including a questionable procedure that was banned in the US and we had to go across the border to Mexico to have it done. Eventually, we also tried an egg-donor cycle.

Unlike, Lana, I didn't get pregnant but as I was going through the cycle, I confronted a lot of the issues that Lana struggles with. I attended a support group where my friends and I debated the pros and cons of using an anonymous donor versus a woman we knew: What if she changed her mind and decided she wanted the baby? If we stayed anonymous, did we risk not knowing about future health issues? We were fascinated

by our donors and talked about them as if they were celebrities, hoping to glean as much information from their files as we could. We shared their photos, their health histories and academic accomplishments. We each had our priorities of what was most important to us, favoring some traits over others as if deciding on the perfect dress to wear to the prom.

As I was going through the process, I kept thinking what if I were to run into my donor by chance? What would I do? Would I follow her, hoping to learn more about her? That sounded like a good premise for a book.

What specific "complications" can arise when a couple chooses the egg donor route in order to conceive?

I have a lot of friends who conceived with donor eggs or donor embryos—some did anonymous cycles, others knew their donors. None of them have had any complications. But happy stories often don't make for interesting books. What propelled me to explore egg-donation as the topic of my novel was the potential for things going wrong in some very extreme situations. What if the donor becomes attached to the baby? What if the couple split up before the baby's birth? Before they've been named the legal parents. What if the father and the donor, who are the genetic parents, have a relationship? What if the child meets a half-sibling later in life and doesn't know it?

You grew up in Bulgaria and you've made both your main characters—Lana and Katya—of Bulgarian origins. What flavor does this add to the story?

It adds an international flavor, for sure, but more importantly it adds a layer of complexity to a story about conceiving a child that won't have any of the mother's DNA. We all want our children to be prettier, smarter, happier, which is why people tend to favor donors who are university graduates, who are pretty, athletic and have no family history of major medical issues. But we also tend to want our children to look like us. We want to see our parents in them. As an immigrant, you feel the importance of your heritage that much more and you want to pass it on to your children. Which is why Lana wants a Bulgarian egg donor.

Like Katya, you came to the United States as a young adult. But unlike her, you had to work before finding your way to college later in life. How did your own experience shape the story?

Unlike Katya, I grew up during Communism and immigrated to the US shortly after its fall. It was a huge cultural shock. I hadn't seen a computer, didn't know what a credit card was, and my English was rudimentary at best. I worked as a cleaning lady and a nanny, while taking evening classes at the YMCA, before eventually making my way to an undergraduate program at Columbia University. I enjoyed writing Katya's character as a rewrite of

my own situation—what I wished my immigrant experience had been like.

Lana's befriending Katya is extreme—but do you think many women who become pregnant through egg donation would want to become friends with the woman who has helped them conceive?

I can only speak for myself but I doubt that many would want to befriend their donors. Using the eggs of a younger woman in order to conceive is a complicated, emotionally-wrought process. It can feel like your very womanhood is negated. On a deep primal level, you feel like damaged goods. When my ex-husband and I scrolled through profiles of young, beautiful women on the donor egg agency's website, we joked that it was as if we were choosing a girl for a threesome. But to me it also felt like we were looking for my replacement—a newer, better model. It's not much of a stretch to think, "He can just make a baby with her. He doesn't need me."

So I would imagine that hanging out with the young woman who was your donor might feel threatening on so many levels. It would remind you that your baby carries her genes. You'll be watching her playing with your child and wonder about her intentions and about your child's feelings for her. You'll watch your child grow up to look more and more like her. It could be messy. But that doesn't mean that having some relationship with your egg donor is a bad idea, especially in terms of potential health issues.

Fertility treatments have become fairly common as

science advances, do you think there are dangers involved in “playing God,” as it were?

Depends on how you look at it. Some people feel that we shouldn't interfere with procreation, while others argue that fertility treatments are no different from other medical procedures. Infertility is an illness like any other. It's a malfunction in the reproductive organs like diabetes is in the endocrine system. In my opinion, conceiving with an egg or sperm from a donor is no different than having a kidney transplant. But again, some might disagree because we have a human being that's been created by three people. What does that mean? How does that alter parenthood roles? What are the implications—practical, religious and ethical?

What are some of the main ethical questions, in your view, that arise when one woman provides an egg for another?

Whose baby is it? The woman who is carrying it or the woman whose genes the baby inherits? Legally, the answer is determined by the context: if a couple has a baby with the help of a gestational carrier, then the woman who provides the egg is the mother. If a couple has a baby using a donor egg, then it's the woman who carries the baby. But ethically speaking, what responsibilities do all the actors involved in the process of making a baby through a fertility intervention have to each other? To the baby?

Does the egg-donor have a right to know what happens to the baby conceived with her eggs? What if the parents are negligent or abusive? Or die in a car accident? Can the donor/genetic mother claim the child, or should the legal grandparents be granted custody?

How about the donor's parents? Do they have the right to know that they're the genetic grandparents of a child? Do children conceived with donor eggs/sperm have the right to know? And who would enforce it? What if two children from the same donor meet not knowing that they're half siblings and have a romantic relationship?

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What if a woman who was an egg donor when she was young, finds herself in her late 30s unable to conceive, now that her eggs are old? Does she have any right to the couple's left-over embryos conceived with her eggs?

Would you classify what Lana does in the book as stalking? What is her interest in Katya and is it normal? Justified?

Lana doesn't plan to stalk her donor but when, one day, she recognizes her among the strangers riding with her on the subway, she can't help herself and follows her. She wants to learn more about the woman who has given her the gift of pregnancy and whose genes her baby will inherit. I think it's natural to want to know more about your egg donor, which is why some couples do not choose to go the anonymous route. In that case, both parties have made the choice and are aware of the risks. But Lana definitely crosses the line by following and be-friending her anonymous egg donor.

You explore some very serious and timely subjects through the devices of a suspense novel. Why did you choose this genre to tell your story?

I didn't choose it. It chose me. Suspense is an integral part of infertility struggles. Every month, every cycle, you wait in suspense. Will I get pregnant? Will it stick? Is the pain I'm feeling normal? Why am I bleeding? Will I miscarry? Is this girl the right donor for me?

Using suspense also allowed me to ask questions about situations that are not common but could happen and gave me an opportunity to highlight all the things that can go wrong.

Secrets, lies and obsessions—and their effects on relationships—play a big role in your novel. How did your

background in mental health counseling inform the story?

I have always been interested in psychology and especially relationships. The first graduate class I took, before enrolling in the Counseling for Mental Health and Wellness program at NYU, was on Couples and Family Therapy. I'm fascinated by how two people can read the same event differently, how we can hurt and undermine each other without meaning to, how we can misinterpret the actions of others. During my internship at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy, I was surprised how many of my patients presented very differently from the way they saw themselves. Beautiful girls felt ugly, anorexic ones felt fat. Successful, seemingly confident and in control people turned out to be consumed by self-doubt.

So often we unwittingly hurt those we love most because of our fears and insecurities, which we keep locked up deep inside. Lack of communication can destroy relationships, and I wanted to explore that idea by making the reader privy to the thoughts of my three main characters. If only they had been honest about their feelings, they wouldn't have hurt each other, and a lot of the unfortunate outcomes could have been averted.

While evil people can do a lot of damage, I find it more poignant and heartbreaking when well-meaning, ultimately good people end up the villains.

Tarator

A Bulgarian recipe from author Daniela Petrova

Tarator, or chilled yogurt and cucumber soup, is a traditional Bulgarian dish and my personal favorite in the summer. Cold and refreshing, it's very easy to make and is low in calories. Best of all, it's healthy. Both yogurt and garlic have been credited at one time or another for the large numbers of centenarians in the Bulgarian population.

Serves 4

Ingredients

2 cups plain Greek yogurt
(make sure L. Bulgaricus is one of the live cultures; I love the Organic Aussie Greek Yogurt made by Wallaby)

1 cup cold water

1–2 garlic cloves, to taste

1 large English cucumber

2 Tbsp. olive oil

2–3 Tbsp. fresh dill, chopped

½ tsp. salt

⅓ cup chopped walnuts

Directions

- In a large bowl, whisk together the yogurt and water.
- Push the garlic clove(s) through a press and add to the mixture.
- Dice the cucumber into small cubes and add it to the bowl. (Some prefer to peel it, but I like the extra color.)
- Add in the oil, dill and salt.
- Cover the bowl and chill in the refrigerator for 15 minutes or up to 2 hours.
- Remove from refrigerator and ladle the soup into small bowls.
- Top with the chopped walnuts and some extra dill as a garnish and serve.