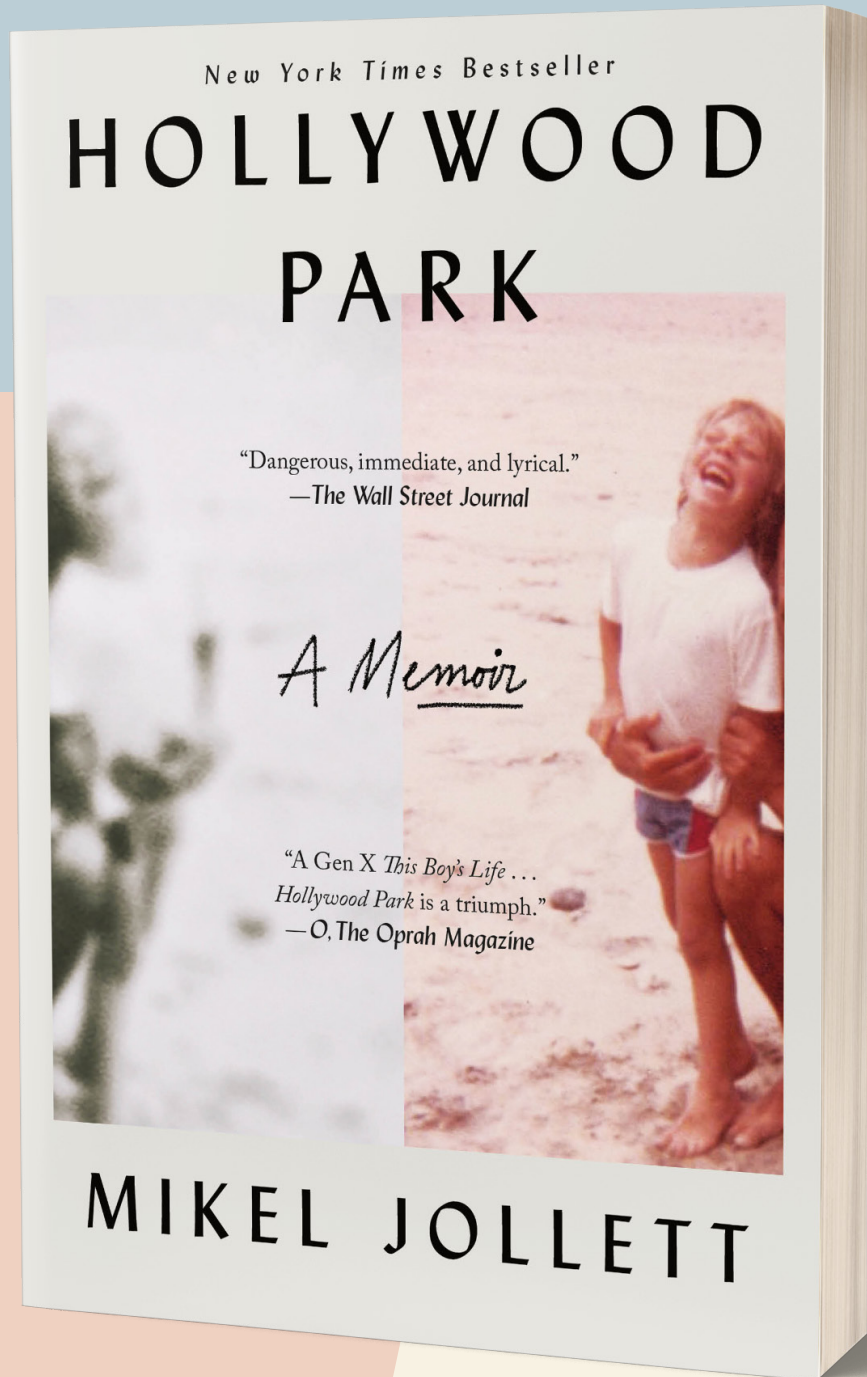


BOOK CLUB KIT



“I would highly recommend this book to any book clubs looking to discuss family, childhood, hope, and love.”

—THE BOOK WORMS (KANSAS CITY, MO)

ON WRITING

A Conversation with Mikel Jollett



Mikel Jollett is the frontman of the indie band The Airborne Toxic Event. Prior to forming the band, Jollett graduated with honors from Stanford University. He was an on-air columnist for NPR's *All Things Considered*, an editor-at-large for *Men's Health*, and an editor at *Filter* magazine. His fiction has been published in McSweeney's.

What books did you read while writing *Hollywood Park*, and how did they change the way you approached writing?

I read about 150 books while writing *Hollywood Park*. I probably read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison four times while writing this book. She really probes the idea of slavery as generational trauma, as psychological trauma. She never talks down to her readers. She presents mysteries that the reader has to solve. I felt like there was so much there, such fertile ground for how human beings construct their lives.

My feeling was that the tools usually associated with fiction writing — high concept, magical realism, shifting voices, etc. — be as much a part of the book as in any novel, because these aren't just the tools of fiction, they're how we construct our identities in our own minds, how we tell our stories of ourselves to ourselves. And I've always thought that memoir was a golden opportunity to explore that construction.

I wanted to have an unreliable narrator that said things that were patently untrue, to commune with ghosts, and to have people turn into animals and fly away, which all happens in the opening chapters. I wanted there to be moments of confusion, which is not usually the kind of thing that happens in memoirs, but I have this sense that the idea of unpacking this process — of lies that we believed wholeheartedly that turned out to not be true — is actually more like the psychological experience of growing up as a traumatized child.

So that's what I was working from — letting the reader slowly learn, as I did, what was real and what wasn't, and in doing so, mirroring that journey more accurately than if I just said, "Okay, I'm 40 years old, and here's all the stuff that happened." I had the benefit of hindsight already. I wanted to let the process unfold the way it unfolded for me. It was this puzzle I had to solve over a lifetime.

Hollywood Park is the name of both your memoir and the sixth album from the Airborne Toxic Event. Which did you write first — the memoir or the album?

I started writing songs first. My father died, and my world fell apart, and music was the way I dealt with it. I would write these very sad songs, then make big arrangements for them and just get lost in it. I don't know if it made me feel better — it was more like I needed to do it. It wasn't anything I thought I'd put out with the band, more like a private world I was constructing where I could be alone with the memory of my father and not feel weird about the grief I felt. Eventually I played the songs for the band, and they were like, "Let's just make this into a record."

Around this time I'd decided to write the book. I wrote more songs as I went, and eventually I realized that I was writing the soundtrack to the book, one that incorporated my father's life before I was born, my life as a child after we escaped the cult, my life as an adult man struggling with relationships because of the attachment disorder I had from being orphaned at a young age, and then trying my best to deal with my dad's death.

What was the editing process like?

I wrote about 500,000 words for the book. The final edit had about 140,000 words, so a lot of stuff ended up on the floor. I like the old edict: Cut the boring parts. I usually do some editing as I go, some when I finish sections, and then I'll print the entire draft out and go over it line by line. I did this 13 times with *Hollywood Park*. Writing sucks, it's just that not writing sucks more.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers who are hesitant to write about painful experiences with such vulnerability?

When I'm writing, it doesn't even cross my mind how I'm going to feel when other people read this. There's this bully inside me that's like, "The story is all that matters! You don't matter. You are just a tool of this process." I forgot for years that people are actually going to read about my life because I was just so wrapped up in trying to get the narrative, details, and emotional journey right. I wanted the jokes to land, the perspective to change, the stories to fit together. I wanted to construct this complex and probing narrative that felt like you were experiencing a life through the eyes of a child and eventually an adult. So I'd say, edit the shit out of it, and think of yourself as an artist — allow yourself to be weird, and let go of what you imagine people think about you. You aren't really in control of that anyway, and the dirty secret is people like you more if you are honest about difficult things because it makes them feel as if they can be too.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss the long-term impact the Synanon cult had on both Mikel and Tony . . . the ways they dealt with others, their relationships, and the paths they each chose.

Submitted by Reading Between the Wines (Basking Ridge, NJ)

What impact did Bonnie have on the boys' lives?

Submitted by the Nerdy Bookworms (Leominster, MA)

Discuss the stepfather figures in Mikel's life. What effect did they have on Mikel's sense of self?

Do you think Mikel would have become a musician if he hadn't had such a difficult childhood?

Submitted by Book Club (Salt Lake City, UT)

One thing Mikel accomplished so successfully was his ability to process and articulate his childhood trauma and memories. Have you had any instances where you look at a moment in your childhood differently now that you are an adult?

Submitted by the Book Worms (Kansas City, MO)

Do you think that writing is an effective therapeutic method? Have you ever written for yourself or others in order to work out a problem or issue? If so, do you feel it was helpful or ineffective?

Submitted by Women Who Wine and Occasionally Read (Twin Cities, MN)

The book's title, *Hollywood Park*, refers to the horse-racing track Mikel visited with his father. Why do you think he chose this title? What would you call your own memoir?



PLAYLIST

Hollywood Park - *The Airborne Toxic Event*

Heroes - *David Bowie*

Unloveable - *The Smiths*

Space Oddity - *David Bowie*

Disintegration - *The Cure*

Angeles - *Elliott Smith*

Another Brick in the Wall, Pt 2 - *Pink Floyd*

Thunder Road - *Bruce Springsteen*

Ceremony (Version 1) - *New Order*

Into My Arms - *Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds*

The Pretender - *Jackson Browne*

Perfect Day - *Lou Reed*

Exit Music - *Radiohead*

The Trial - *Pink Floyd*

Drive All Night - *Bruce Springsteen*

Nobody Home - *Pink Floyd*

Highway Patrolman - *Bruce Springsteen*

Tom Traubert's Blues

(Found Sheets To The Wind in Copenhagen) - *Tom Waits*

Come On Out - *The Airborne Toxic Event*



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