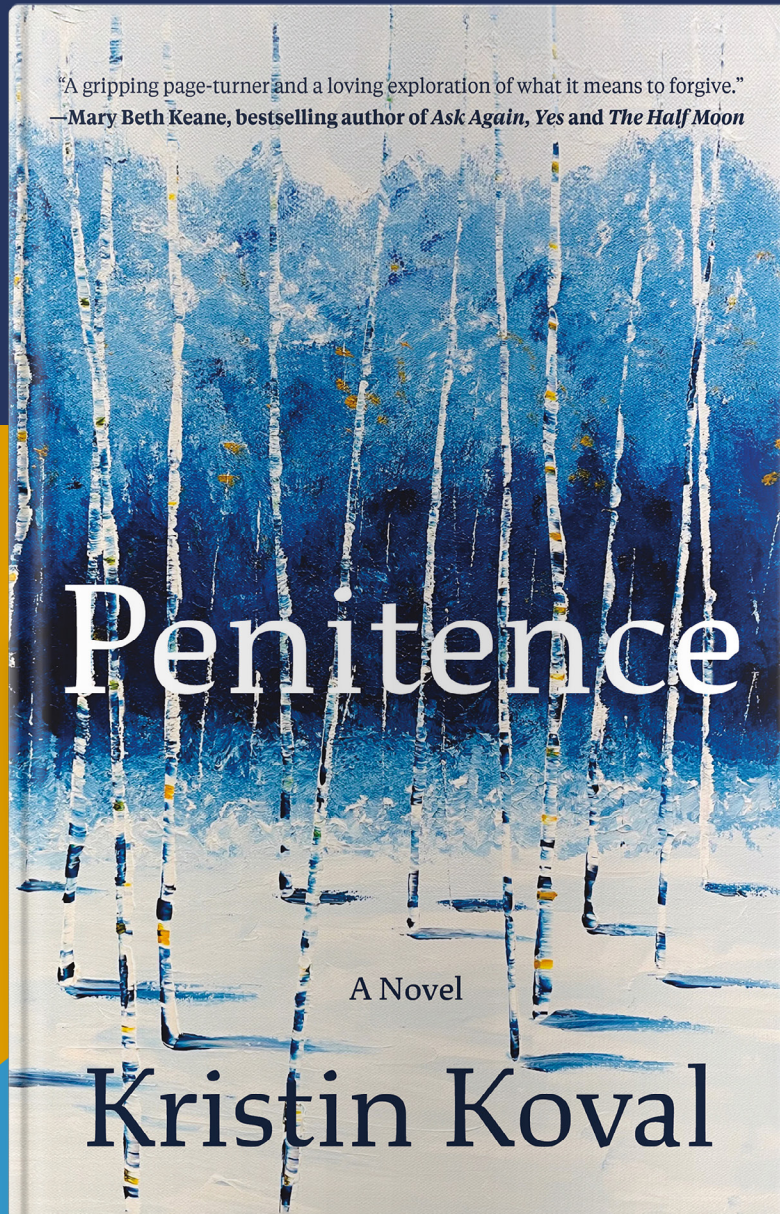


# Book Club Kit



**“LIKE A BEAUTIFUL PIECE OF ABSTRACT ART, DIFFERENT READERS WILL PULL DIFFERENT LESSONS FROM THIS STORY, MAKING IT A GIFT FOR BOOK CLUBS.”**

—MARY O’MALLEY, SKYLARK BOOKS

# Discussion Questions

- 1** In the opening scenes of *Penitence*, the reader learns that 13-year-old Nora has killed her older brother Nico. Nora and Nico's parents, Angie and David, have very different ways of handling the crime and moving forward. Were you surprised by either of their reactions? If you were a parent, what do you think you'd do in this situation?
- 2** Angie and David turn to local lawyer Martine and her son – Angie's former lover – Julian to represent Nora in court. Taking into consideration Martine and Julian's past relationship with Angie's family, why do you think each of them agreed to take on this case? Do you think they made good decisions?
- 3** At the beginning of the novel, Julian has an encounter with a tourist to Lodgepole who read about Nora's case on social media and made a snap judgment about Nora's guilt and what she might or might not deserve. Do you think this type of snap judgment happens frequently in our current society? How has this affected you directly?
- 4** When Julian and Angie were teenagers, Julian was directly involved in Angie's sister's death. Why did Julian keep his role in the accident secret for all these years? How did that secret affect his mental health, his career, and his relationship with Angie?
- 5** Angie kept her own secret from Julian. What do you think of her decision? Was there a time when Angie should have told Julian the truth?
- 6** Angie worked at a gallery and had dreams of becoming an artist. What role did art play throughout Angie's life? Did you understand the character more through her artwork?
- 7** Julian and Angie lived in New York City during the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11. How do you think the events of that day changed their relationship? Could Angie and Julian have stayed together if it had never happened?
- 8** After Nico's death, Nora stops talking. Why do you think she did this? Would it have helped or hurt her case if she had been willing to talk about what happened?

# Discussion Questions

- 9 While Nora is in prison awaiting trial, the district attorney tries to make a case for trying her as an adult. Do you agree or disagree with his reasoning? Should a juvenile ever be charged as an adult, and if so, under what circumstances?
- 10 Many of the main characters have experienced loss throughout their lives: the loss of parents, siblings, longtime partners, careers, and dreams for the future. How was that grief manifested through their actions?
- 11 Why do you think Nora killed Nico? Why do you think the author chose not to answer this question for readers?
- 12 Nico had been diagnosed with Juvenile Huntington's Disease, which had a bleak prognosis of quick-onset dementia and death within five to 10 years. Would Nora's actions be understandable if Nico had wanted to end his own life before suffering the effects of his diagnosis? In what scenario, if any, would her actions be justifiable?
- 13 How did your perception of the characters change by the end of the book?
- 14 The novel illustrates how guilt can linger for years. Discuss a character whose guilt seems to define their life. How does this unresolved guilt affect their mental and emotional well-being, and what coping mechanisms do they employ, if any, to deal with it?

Suggested by MJ's IRL Book Club (Ontario, Canada)
- 15 One major theme of *Penitence* is forgiveness. Should asking for forgiveness absolve guilt? What role do the concepts of blame, mercy, and empathy play in forgiveness?
- 16 Are certain actions unforgivable? To what extent do our worst actions define who we are — in the eyes of others? In our own eyes?
- 17 Is forgiveness approached differently in *Penitence* — and in our world generally — based on whether it's meted out by individuals, by the criminal justice system, or under the authority of a religion? Do you think this makes sense?

# AN INTERVIEW

## with Kristin Koval



**KRISTIN KOVAL** is a former lawyer who always wanted to be a writer but initially wandered down other paths. While writing *Penitence*, she completed a twelve-month novel generator class at Catapult Publishing. She's a member of the Lighthouse Writers Workshop, an alumna of Sewanee Writers' Conference and Aspen Summer Words, and her short story *Inheritance* was named a Finalist in the Salamander 2022 Fiction Contest. She attended Phillips Exeter Academy, Georgetown University and Columbia Law School. She lives in Boulder, Colorado and Park City, Utah with her husband, two sons and two great danes.

### Why did you title this book *Penitence*?

I named the book *Penitence* after writing the prologue, which details the hours after 13-year-old Nora Sheehan has fatally shot her 14-year-old brother: Nora in a cold jail cell, mother Angie Sheehan alone in their house, father David Sheehan knocking on the door of a small-town lawyer for help, the shock of the police and the lawyer because of Nora's age, and hints of Angie's mysterious past with the lawyer's son. I was drawn to the word because its multifaceted meaning conveys the emotional complexity of this tragedy. *Penitence* — which means sorrow for one's sins or faults — is an emotion every human being has felt and can relate to, because each of us is imperfect. We all make mistakes and we all commit wrongs. The key for me, though, is that the word's etymological cousins embrace related concepts on individual, systemic, and religious levels. The root word for *penitence* is the Latin word *paenitere*, which means to repent. *Paenitere* evolved into many other words: penitentiary (where we send people for punishment), penal (an adjective describing anything punitive or related to punishment), and penance (generally, an act performed to show sorrow or repentance for a sin but also a sacrament in the Catholic Church). And finally, a penitent is a person participating in that Sacrament of Penance, a sacrament that eventually leads to absolution or forgiveness — and forgiveness is where I want readers to land by the end of the novel.

### What other themes did you set out to explore in this novel?

I wanted readers to be attuned to the ideas of mercy (which we need to grant to others after they've made mistakes); empathy (which can help us arrive at mercy); judgment (although we all make mistakes, we persist in judging others); and truth and memory. I also touched on the role that both journalists and social media can play in judgment, but as I wrote into the novel, I realized I couldn't explore that concept as deeply as I wanted to. That's a big topic!

While the novel leans heavily into the themes of forgiveness and mercy on an individual level, I hope it also shines light on the lack of forgiveness and mercy within the criminal

justice system, on the many inequities and biases in the criminal justice system, and on the system's failure to handle juveniles fairly, especially in its practice of charging juveniles as adults.

### **Before becoming a novelist, you worked as a lawyer. Did you draw on that professional background — or any other personal life experiences — while writing this book?**

To be honest, I knew very little about the criminal justice system, because I was a trusts and estates lawyer, and I had to spend quite a bit of time researching in the course of my writing. Although I always intended the novel's focus to be on Nora's family and the concept of forgiveness rather than what was happening in the courtroom, I wanted the legal aspects of Nora's legal journey to be correct. My legal background made it easier to pinpoint what I didn't know and helped me access a network of other lawyers to answer technical questions and direct me to additional research materials.

My time as a lawyer influenced me in one way I never anticipated. Two of my favorite writers are Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. Their writing is magical, lyrical, and often nonlinear, and I always thought I'd love to write the way they do — yet my writing tends to be straightforward and logical. I think that stems from years of needing to explain complex concepts to clients in succinct and understandable ways — I suppose I developed a habit I couldn't break!

Finally, in addition to my professional background, I drew on a very important personal experience while writing this novel: I have been forgiven, and I have forgiven others. In each instance, forgiveness was a profound and beautiful experience. That feeling — a feeling I hope I captured in *Penitence* — was what drove me to write this novel in the first place.

### **What do you hope readers take away from *Penitence*?**

Sometimes we forget that making mistakes is a universal part of being human and leap to judgment without considering the role that forgiveness might play in that situation. I'm not saying forgiveness is uncomplicated or even always possible, but I don't think we should discard it as an option quite as easily as we do. Forgiveness can and should play a role in all of our lives.

If you decide to adopt *Penitence* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at [reader@celadonbooks.com](mailto:reader@celadonbooks.com) or post on social media using the hashtag #CeladonBookClub.