

"Perfect wife, perfect life? Think again. A bold and biting satire."
—NITA PROSE, #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE MOLLY THE MAID SERIES

YESTERYEAR

CARO CLAIRE BURKE

A NOVEL



BOOK CLUB KIT



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Caro Claire Burke's debut novel, *YESTERYEAR*. Following the rise and fall of social media phenom Natalie Heller Mills, *YESTERYEAR* takes readers through the dark alleys of influencer culture, challenges trends and expectations around modern motherhood and #tradwives, and invites readers to question their assumptions about the people they see performing—and how they themselves behave—in our online world.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did your opinion of Natalie change over the course of the book, especially as you learned more about her personal background, the origins of Yesteryear Ranch, and her transformation after Shannon's allegations?
2. Do you engage with accounts like Natalie's on social media? What's your relationship with them—are you an “Angry Woman” or a fan/sympathizer? How has reading this novel changed the way you view the real-life influencers on which Natalie is based, especially #tradwives?
3. Discuss the description of the first year of posts on Yesteryear Ranch's profile (chapter 26); did reading those stories change how you perceive posts on your own feed, including questioning what was actually happening in the moment that was captured, curated, and edited to look a certain way? Consider what the man from Caleb's chat room finds appealing about Natalie's profile: “Look at how hard this woman works. Look how exhausted and beautiful she is. This, my friends, is the true American dream” (p. 240).
4. Throughout the book, Natalie compares herself with her college roommate, Reena, whose views on motherhood/womanhood seem to be polar opposites of Natalie's—at first. Does Natalie sometimes long for, or admire, Reena's choices and views? How do you think Natalie's life would have progressed if she hadn't married so young like a “good Christian woman,” dropped out of Harvard, and had to create her own security?
5. Similarly, when Natalie runs into her high school classmate at Target, she reflects: “Vanessa was liberated, sure—but I was happy. And it was such a shame, wasn't it? The way some women so willingly compromised every ounce of themselves in the name of building a life for themselves that they didn't enjoy” (p. 23). At the end of the book, do you think Natalie sees how she's followed that path exactly, or is she still blind to her own delusion? Does meeting with Reena for the interview reinforce the truth, or the fantasy, of a perfect life?
6. Early in their relationship, Natalie identifies that Caleb lacks motivation and clarity in his life—traits that deepen the rift in their marriage over time. What was ideal about their traditional gender roles being switched—Natalie, the more dominant “breadwinner,” and Caleb, more passive and sensitive—for creating Yesteryear's success? How did it create problems when compared with the traditional roles they each played in the “Online” versions of themselves? Does this dynamic make Natalie's life more or less like Reena's?
7. How does Natalie and Caleb's marriage complicate the distinction between “man's work” and “women's work” in terms of what tasks and responsibilities are valued, paid, seen, and innate? Reflect on your own relationships' “rules” or examples among friends and family.
8. How does Caleb's personality motivate Natalie to clarify and adjust her own personality? Discuss the strategies and tools she learns about self-presentation—how to pretend without looking like you're pretending—from her online classes and from Shannon (lessons she passes on to Clementine). Is being in the public eye a sacrifice and challenge for her, or a fulfillment of something she's always wanted?

- 9.** What do you think would have happened if Caleb had had the chance to run for office? Would his public performance have hurt or helped Yesteryear, their family—and America? Do you think their life would have been happier, easier, more “successful” if he’d become a kindergarten teacher as he had wanted? Consider what happens at the “initiation” into manhood that Old Caleb leads Abel through on his thirteenth birthday—what lesson does the boy learn about his responsibilities and entitlements?
- 10.** Discuss Natalie’s relationship with her father-in-law, Doug. How do they manipulate and exploit each other for their own gains? The Mills family’s power, image, and influence strongly shape the outcome of Natalie’s life, and yet the family itself is something she might not have found if not for marrying Caleb—what was the cost of that choice? Consider what Mary says when Natalie threatens to run away: “You know, there are people in the world who don’t have a family at all. And how would you like that? Being all alone in the woods, no one to save you when you stumble into a trap?” (p. 152)
- 11.** How does Doug’s campaign reflect the current state of American politics, as well as historical trends? What do his campaigns and vision for America suggest about what people fantasize life, or “freedom,” should and could be like—and the kind of leader who promises to make that happen? How do those fantasies cross over into other spheres of culture, like social media—and is that collaboration effective or harmful? Consider what Natalie tells Shannon at the rally: “It’s a performance, Shannon. It’s political theater. Not real” (p. 297); and Doug’s rule that “a good politician doesn’t change his policies, just the messaging” (p. 246). Does politics or social media seem more cutthroat in this representation?
- 12.** In her morning gratitude recitation, Natalie says that she is thankful for “the Inheritance” (with a capital I). What do you think she’s referring to here? Discuss the different inheritances she receives (and takes)—examples of motherhood from her own mother, Amelia, and from Abigail; of womanhood from her relatives and Reena; of wealth and popularity; of the expectations to be “perfect at being alive” (p. 4), etc.
- 13.** Natalie’s mother constantly berates her with the same refrain: “Why is it so hard for you to be kind?” What did “kindness” give Natalie’s mother, or any other woman in the book? Is kindness mutually exclusive of safety and agency? Consider how Natalie describes her role as an influencer vis-à-vis what people expect of women: “The goal of the influencer is not to be lovable, and it is not to be unbearable. The goal is to be both at once. In other words: addicting” (p. 247). What opposite of “kindness” would fill in this formula for “addicting”? Does Natalie figure that out?
- 14.** In the past/future version of Yesteryear—fashioned in the true homesteader style of the 1800s—Natalie acknowledges that “for the first time in my life, I am being properly satisfied by a man” (p. 259). But “Old Caleb” is the same Caleb she married—so what, or who, do you think changed? Was Caleb empowered in some way to be more masculine, or Natalie disempowered? Did each of their definitions of marriage change in this attempt to radically alter time?
- 15.** Compare Natalie’s first set of children (Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, and Junebug) with her later children raised in the traditional ranch (Mary, Noah, Able, and Maeve). Why do you think she doesn’t recognize the latter as her own at first, even when their shabby “costumes” are the same aesthetic she desired and probably paid a lot of money for? What is she

trying to protect her later children from that she couldn't with her first set of children by building this elaborate fantasy? How do Clementine and Mary play similar roles in mothering their mother, including offering her a compassion she was not able to give or receive as a mother herself? As she says of Mary: ". . . this daughter who is not my daughter, this teenager who is also my mother, my captor, my savior, in this cold unforgiving world" (p. 235).

16. Discuss Natalie's criminal charges: sexual assault, aggravated assault, improper working conditions, wire fraud, animal abuse, and child abuse. Especially regarding the latter—what is the price the children pay for being forced into this masquerade, maybe even conceived for the sheer purposes of this image? How are these charges both a sentence and a liberation for the whole family? After her experience of postpartum depression with Clementine, do you think Natalie would have had more children if not for Doug's stipulations—or any children at all?
17. Something that changes Natalie's experience of the 1800s farm is believing that her "audience" in this world is God (perhaps with some help

from pharmaceuticals). Does her faith in this moment, and throughout the book, strike you as genuine? Where are Christian mores and tenets authentic in her life or part of the performance? If she had God in mind in her modern-day life, as a guide and "audience" member, do you think she would have done things differently?

18. Was Natalie ever truly happy? Do you think she knows what that would have looked or felt like? Are there moments of authentic happiness in the book—that may or may not have made it to her feed?
19. What do you think happened to Natalie after the Shannon incident? What pushed her to such an extreme solution—or was she moving away from sanity all along?
20. In the acknowledgments of the book, the author shares, "If I ever have a daughter: sweet girl, I wrote the ending with you in mind" (p. 394). Based on how the book closes, what do you think she wants for her daughter, and herself? Which character's future does she want for a little girl growing up in our times, and for a woman coming into motherhood?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

THE MOTHERS by Brit Bennett

WHAT KIND OF PARADISE by Janelle Brown

PARABLE OF THE SOWER by Octavia E. Butler

THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD MOTHERS by Jessamine Chan

GIRL ON GIRL: HOW POP CULTURE TURNED A GENERATION OF WOMEN AGAINST THEMSELVES
by Sophie Gilbert

MOTHERHOOD by Sheila Heti

THE MOTHERLOAD by Sarah Hoover

ALL FOURS by Miranda July

SEA OF TRANQUILITY by Emily St. John Mandel

MEET THE NEWMANS by Jennifer Niven

WORKHORSE by Caroline Palmer

THE BELL JAR by Sylvia Plath

DAISY JONES & THE SIX by Taylor Jenkins Reid

YOU WILL NEVER BE ME by Jesse Q. Sutanto

HOW DO WE KNOW WE'RE DOING IT RIGHT?
by Pandora Sykes

Q&A WITH AUTHOR CARO CLAIRE BURKE

Q: How did you become interested in the #tradwife segment of social media?

A: In the winter of 2024, I was a very burnt-out writer who had been writing fiction for years and needed to take a break. On a whim, I downloaded TikTok. I ended up becoming involved in conversations about feminism and media literacy as they pertained to the tradwife discourse, which incidentally entered the zeitgeist the same month I downloaded my account. TikTok is a wonderfully democratic platform: If you share a video and enough people resonate with it, then you're in, so to speak.

As a person who had spent years trying and failing to get a foot in the door at traditional cultural institutions (pitching culture essay ideas to magazines, for example), it was a shocking experience for me to find a side door. In short order, I grew a following and became a major player in a large cultural conversation which spanned weeks, and one morning in that period, I woke up with the full synopsis for a novel in my head. I even had the title.

Q: You cohost a culture podcast—*Diabolical Lies*—that, among other things, has covered tradwives. How did your work on one inform the other?

A: My work on *Diabolical Lies* is often jarringly interconnected with my work as a novelist, even though these are technically two extremely different projects: One exists firmly in the world we live in, requiring me to abide by facts and a basic understanding of reality, and the other allows me to dip into another world entirely, empowering me to diverge from the rigid structure of “fact” in the pursuit of another kind of truth. But both, at the end of the day, come from the same urge to better understand the world around me. Each job influences and fuels the other immensely. I'm lucky in that way.

Q: You've talked about tradwives as a culture critic and have written about them as a debut author. What appealed to you about writing a novel versus a nonfiction book on the subject? What drew you to making it a thriller, specifically?

A: I don't think any of these questions were ones I considered in any deliberate sense. I suppose I chose a novel because that's the field I trained in for years; I got my MFA in fiction, and have been writing fiction, both published and unpublished, for over a decade now. It wasn't a decision so much as a creative tic, one I'm sure another writer would recognize: Once you have an idea for a story, you're a dog with a bone. It's not rational. It's instinct.

As for the question of genre: When I was writing the first draft of the novel, I actually wasn't certain how the book would be marketed. It makes complete sense to me that people see it now as a thriller, but at the time, I was focused on all kinds of things: how it operated as a thriller, yes, but also how it operated as a black comedy of sorts, and a social satire, and in some ways a strange kind of coming of age.



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Q: What questions or feelings did you find yourself working through or exploring as you wrote Yesteryear?

A: Ha! How much time do you have? Let's just say I see myself in every character in this novel. At this point in my career, it's not clear to me if writing fiction about patriarchy, religious extremism, and structurally enforced misogyny works as a crucial form of emotional catharsis for me, or if I'm slowly marching my way to the nearest asylum by spending so much time immersed in these topics. TBD, I guess.

Q: One of the most fascinating parts of the book was Natalie's relationship with a few core ideas. How would you describe Natalie's relationship with the very ideas of womanhood and motherhood?

A: Natalie has a very transactional relationship with motherhood, womanhood, and spirituality. This relationship is also quite childlike. She is constantly finding herself disappointed, shocked, and/or outraged by the nuanced way in which each of these realms of identities appears in her adult life. I think her perspective on other women's lives is equally limited. She has an almost pathological ability to misunderstand what another person is thinking or feeling, which means she ends up living in a world of absurdity. I didn't intend to write her this way; it just happened. Every scene that involves Natalie becomes hysterical, mysterious, or terrifying.

Q: What about her relationship with patriarchy, both as a system and as individual men?

A: I often end up thinking about novels as houses, especially when I'm in the middle of a draft, and in Yesteryear, I view patriarchy as the scaffolding for Natalie as a character. She has built an entire worldview out of patriarchal assumptions, confident that these would hold steady for her entire life—but as everyone knows, scaffolding is a definitionally temporary support system, one you remove when the real work of building something that will last forever is completed. Unfortunately for Natalie, she leans on the flimsy thought structures of patriarchal thinking too hard, thinking they'll hold her. They don't.

Q: The question of choice feels so central to this novel—how much of what happens is Natalie's choice, and how much isn't, for example? Another crucial element is the concept of performance, which is first verbalized by Natalie's mother as a coping mechanism she used to get through daily life while raising her kids. How do those concepts—choice and performance—intersect?

A: FREE WILL! Now I feel like we're talking on my podcast, where we joke that every conversation always ends up with me with my hands thrown up in the air, gesturing vaguely at the notion of free will. The question of performance is equally dizzying as the question of choice—once you start to think about it, you run the risk of overthinking every element of your life. It's true that we perform versions of ourselves online; that kind of performance is one people tend to feel the most comfortable admitting and discussing with others.

But it's also true that we perform at work, and in fitness classes, and at home with the people we cherish most in the world. I'm not convinced anyone has a choice in any of it, but I tend to be a free will pessimist. This reminds me of a line Natalie thinks at one point, one that came to me early and was critical in unlocking the rest of the novel: "Motherhood is its own kind of curation. Which is to say: Every woman I know lied to me about what it would be like, before I became one myself."

Q: What role do you think nonsupportive spectators (the social media followers Natalie calls the Angry Women) play in the perpetuation of tradwife performance and popularity?

A: Every performance demands an audience.

Q: Yesteryear feels like it's written to be talked about. What are you hoping readers take away from that interplay?

A: I have no expectations or hopes for how readers react to this novel. On a personal note, there's nothing more interesting to me as a writer or a person than the grand performance of womanhood. I plan to talk about that for the rest of my life.

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