

JULIE GERSTENBLATT



DAUGHTERS *of* NANTUCKET

"Three very different women learn to navigate a society bound by constricting rules about race, gender, and class.... A moving story of hope, loss, perseverance, and survival."

—CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author

**Book
Club Kit**

A novel

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. How familiar were you with Nantucket before reading this novel? In what ways did the book either alter or reinforce your perception of the setting, the time period, and the people who lived there?
2. Discuss the significance of the title.
3. **DAUGHTERS OF NANTUCKET** is a work of historical fiction. Maria Mitchell is a true historical figure and the rest of the characters were created by the author. What did you think of the blending of the real and the imagined?
4. Do you read a lot of historical fiction? If so, why? If not, what genres do you prefer and why?
5. **DAUGHTERS OF NANTUCKET** begins with a prologue. What effect, if any, did this have on you as a reader?
6. The novel has a three-act structure: Heat, Flames, and Ash, with additional section breaks of the days that signal a countdown to the fire, and a tally of the first eight days after. Discuss the novel's structure and its impact on your reading experience.
7. The book alternates between three points of view: Eliza's, Maria's, and Meg's. Discuss the role of the rotating narrative style. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story this way?
8. Did you have a favorite character and/or storyline?
9. How is America in 1846 similar to – and different from – the United States today?
10. Were there times you disagreed with a character's actions? What would you have done differently?
11. What did you learn and/or what surprised you most?
12. Writers inhabit lives that are not their own in order to create compelling narratives. It can be argued that, if done well, anyone can tell any story. Others feel that an author should not write about diverse characters unless they themselves come from a similar background or lived experience, especially when those experiences are of marginalized or oppressed people. In this story, Gerstenblatt writes from the points of view of women who are both white and Black, gay and straight. How can we increase understanding while also being sensitive to another's culture and identity?
13. The author leaves the book a little bit open-ended. How did you feel about this? What do you think happens next? What would you want to know if 10 more pages were added?



Author Q & A:

What was your path to publication like?

I have been a writer my entire life. The summer before college, while working as a waitress at a beach club in Mamaroneck, NY, I wrote fictionalized short stories about the staff and then read them aloud to everyone in the kitchen on rainy days when business was slow. I remember the way the cooks and wait staff hung on every word, and it felt amazing. I have always loved to write, to create, and to entertain, but, when I graduated from college with a degree in English, my parents thought that I should get a “real job” and go into a profession with a steady salary and benefits. Think education, journalism, or the business side of publishing. I ended up getting a job offer as an editorial assistant for The Babysitter Club books at Scholastic on the same day that I was accepted to graduate school at Teachers College, Columbia University, and decided to go directly to grad school. I became a middle school English teacher, thinking I’d write during the summers, but instead I worked at my father’s office every July and August to make extra money and found little time for my writing.

It took me a very long time to take my writing as seriously as I needed to if I was to become an actual author. I eventually left my full time teaching job to raise my children, work on my doctoral dissertation, tutor students, and teach college part-time...and yes, write a novel. After a year working with a literary agent who could not sell my first novel, I decided to self publish it in 2011. While that was a fun experience, self-publishing did not lead to the readership I hoped for. It’s very hard to stand out as a self published author, and many bookstores would not carry my novel. So I kept at it. Three literary agents and four novels later, in the fall of 2021, I got the call that I’d been waiting for my whole life, telling me that an editor at MIRA/HarperCollins had made an offer on my novel. Even though I had self-published previously, this book is called my debut in the industry, because it is the first to be traditionally published. So, in that way, I became a debut author at 52 years old.

So, what’s the moral of the story? What advice would you give to others interested in pursuing their dreams, whether in publishing or elsewhere?

I would say that you have to prioritize what you love to do, and really believe in yourself. I felt foolish sometimes telling people at parties that I was working on a novel – like, here, come meet my imaginary friend! She’s really terrific! I know you can’t see her, but she’s totally there! – but I knew that if I didn’t strongly believe in this novel, then who would? And, at the risk of sounding selfish, there are just times when you have to put your needs first. The laundry can wait. Dinners can be simplified. Ask for help and carve out time to work towards what it is you want. And, if you are a writer, keep to a schedule. Mornings are my most productive time. I keep a small calendar on my desk, like the kind you can get at CVS, and I write down my word count total every day, aiming for 1000 words. Additionally, I give myself a daily grade of a check plus, a check, or a check minus – because I’m still a teacher at heart. Looking at all of those marks on the calendar at the end of a month is tangible and motivating.

Also, in order to find success, you may have to pivot within your chosen field. I was not finding success writing contemporary fiction, so I switched to writing historical novels, and that’s when everything changed. Same but different.



Lastly, find a community to support you. Take courses and classes in the field you love, connect with others who share your interest, and be open to criticism and use it for growth. This thing you want will not happen overnight, so patience is key – as are having cheerleaders to clap for you when you feel defeated. Ultimately, I would have always kept writing, even without a traditional publishing contract, because writing feeds me and makes me so happy.

Given all of that, how long did it take you to write DAUGHTERS OF NANTUCKET?

I began research in the fall of 2018 and started writing in the spring of 2019. My agent at the time said something like, “I’ll see you in three to five years!” and I felt my heart literally sink to my stomach. (While I was working on the book, that agent and I parted ways.) In the end, I wrote and edited the entire novel in just over two years, found a new agent, and got the offer three years after first coming up with the idea. Historical fiction can take a long time to write, so I was very pleased with my pace. As is true for a lot of writers, I thank the lockdown of 2020 for forcing me to be so productive.

What was the hardest part about writing DAUGHTERS? The easiest?

The hardest part was convincing myself that the time period of the 1840’s was...what’s the term to say here? Cool enough? Had enough fun sex appeal for me to write about? Because let’s face it, some historical settings have romance built in – Elizabethan England, the Italian Renaissance, France always – and others do not, like (to me, anyway) America before the Civil War. The least “sexy” period if you ask me is Colonial America, but the 1800’s run a close second. I will take complete ownership of these feelings and do not know if anyone else out there feels the same. Perhaps there will be a huge backlash against this sentiment, but it’s just my opinion. This is my bias because of staid school trips to Philipsburg Manor in Westchester County where every spring I watched people in period dress shear sheep and churn butter, or to Colonial Williamsburg, where I watched other volunteers shear more sheep and churn more butter...and maybe dip candles too. So much hay! Point being, these memories are tied to some kind of vague childhood sadness and a worry about contracting cholera, and did not inspire me to feel very inspired.

Also – America was founded on Puritanical beliefs, which are just not sexy. Women in literature written about that time period, from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* to Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, were always being punished for having a sex drive, for having wants, and of course, for witchcraft. How could I create female characters to inhabit that place and time authentically while also making sure they felt and acted less burdened by their place and time?

So I had to really think around the problem of my bias of place and time by reminding myself that people from history are not flat, one-dimensional pages from an outdated and heavy social studies textbook gathering dust on a shelf in an 8th grade classroom. They lived as real human beings always have lived, with flaws and desires, and with worries that got addressed and hearts that got broken. And that meant they had secrets. And their own biases. And then my characters came to life and started knocking on my brain, and I knew I’d have fun writing them. And I knew, too, that at least one of them would be taking off her clothes. Just sayin’.



The easiest part of writing **DAUGHTERS** was the fire. I just could picture it all so clearly in my mind's eye. To get psyched up for writing that section of the novel, I made my daughter Zoe watch disaster films with me, like *Titanic* and *The Perfect Storm*. (After which she said something to the effect of, "Mom, I am never getting on a boat again, or sleeping, so thanks for totally ruining my life!") But these action films were great studies in story arc, in the power of dramatic irony, and in how to keep an audience engaged. At one point while I was writing, I complained to my friend Trisha (who is in my writing workshop) that I just wanted to get to the fire already. I was writing too much exposition – 100 pages of which would eventually get cut – and I couldn't seem to make my way to the actual big event. "So just jump over stuff and write the fire now!" Trisha said, probably inserting an eye roll that I couldn't see since we were talking on the phone. Like, duh! And so that's what I did, and it was incredibly fun and helpful to just get it all out. Those 100 pages are still mostly as they were when I first wrote them, requiring the least amount of editing. It turns out that I really like writing action sequences. Who knew? (Stay tuned for more action in books two and three in the **DAUGHTERS** series!)

So, you're writing others in this series? Can you share more about that?

Yes, I am, and yes, I can! These are stand-alone novels and they do not need to be read together or in order. However, those of you who have read **DAUGHTERS OF NANTUCKET** will be happy to know that the second book begins on Nantucket five years after the fire, and revolves around Eliza Macy's best friend, Nell Starbuck. As Eliza helps Nell pack for her adventures, readers will get some answers to open-ended questions left at the end of **DAUGHTERS**.

Nell is about to embark on a global shopping spree via clipper ship with her merchant husband Peter and their 20-year-old daughter Winifred. Their travels take them to San Francisco at the height of the gold rush and then to China, where calamity ensues. Several characters from book one will make an appearance – and one of my favorite characters from book one will play a pivotal role in this second tale. The third book will tell the story of two sisters from Nantucket who go off on a European tour in the 1860's. I don't know much about the particulars of the plot yet, but I can assure you that at least one of them will be taking off her clothes.





JULIE GERSTENBLATT

holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Teachers College, Columbia University. Her essays have appeared in Huffington Post, Kveller, Cognoscenti and Grown & Flown, among others. When not writing, Julie is a college essay coach, as well as a producer and on-air host for A Mighty Blaze, which has grown into a leading resource for author interviews. A native New Yorker, Julie now lives in coastal Rhode Island with her family and one very smart shichon poo. *Daughters of Nantucket* is her first novel.