

Three Questions Every Book Club Asks Christina Baker Kline

1. How close are the events you describe in the novel to real life? Did you exaggerate/make things up? How important was it for you to stick to the facts?

Almost everything that happened in ORPHAN TRAIN actually happened to someone in real life (including, for example, the story of the boy who was traded by a farmer for a pig). Many train riders ended up with their names changed more than once, and many went into multiple homes. I didn't have to exaggerate; each real-life train rider story I heard or read was filled with drama, heartache, coincidence, and surprise. Some stories I heard were much more dramatic, in fact, than the one I told, but I didn't want to stretch credibility. It was important to me that a train rider or a descendant could read this novel and know that I told an accurate story. I fact-checked every aspect of the book, from the Children's Aid Society to the draft in World War II. So far, the only factual error anyone has pointed out is that apparently there is no such thing as a pink crocus. A botanist in the audience one evening raised her hand and announced it!

2. Did you know everything that would happen in the novel when you started, or did you change things as you went along?

I had a plan for the novel, but as we all know, the best-laid plans... While I was researching the orphan trains I jotted down ideas that particularly interested me, and when I started writing I had a good sense of the arc of the story. The part that changed the most was the final third of the book. I knew there would be a reunion of some kind, but I wasn't sure whether it would be with Maisie or May/Sarah. And I didn't know whether Molly would be present. I had to write my way toward the major scenes of conflict before I understood the characters' motivations enough to decide how they would react in a given situation. For example, I originally thought that Molly -- despondent over coming to the end of her time with Vivian and wanting some kind of memento -- would steal Vivian's necklace, and that Dina would find it, (rightfully) accuse her of stealing, and throw her out of the house. By the time I got to that point in the novel, I knew that Molly would never do that to Vivian; they had become too close. It made more sense for Vivian to give Molly the book and for Dina to wrongly accuse her of stealing it.

3. And finally... the question every book club asks: Why did Vivian give away her daughter?

There are a number of reasons Vivian gave up her daughter -- and truthfully, if I could, I would do a better job of articulating them in the novel. First, Vivian was despondent over Dutchy's death; she was grieving, vulnerable, and alone. Though Mrs. Nielsen has been kind, and loving in her way, she was not a nurturing presence. Vivian didn't trust that she had the capacity to take care of a child on her own, without the ballast of a loving husband. Second, as Vivian says she didn't want, "ever again, to experience the loss of someone I love beyond reason." Every person who had mattered deeply in her life had been taken away: her grandmother, her parents, her sister, Dutchy. Vivian was afraid that if she allowed herself to love this baby she would be setting herself up for another profound loss. And finally -- a number of train riders told me that they were afraid of becoming parents because they had no model for how to be good ones. They had been abused, abandoned, and put to work. Like children of alcoholics who fear becoming alcoholics themselves, and children of abuse who worry that they will become perpetrators, Vivian was terrified that not having grown up in a stable, nurturing environment, she wouldn't know how to create one herself.