

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**KRISTAN
HIGGINS**

A LITTLE RAY
of SUNSHINE

"AN ODE TO MOTHER LOVE IN ALL ITS MANY FORMS, AND FAMILIES LOST AND FOUND."

—Ashley Poston, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Dead Romantics*



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a conversation with **KRISTAN HIGGINS**

How would you describe *A Little Ray of Sunshine*?

A Little Ray of Sunshine is the funny, poignant, tumultuous story of Harlow Smith, the oldest of five kids, now thirty-five. She runs a bookstore with her grandfather and prickly cousin. When the child she put up for adoption eighteen years ago appears one day, her life is thrown into chaos—and joy, because of course, she’s never forgotten the baby she had as a college freshman. His appearance throws the family into an uproar, since Harlow never told anyone about him. Now, over the summer, she’ll have the chance to reconnect with her son, meet his adoptive family, and redefine herself. In a sense, she’s been hiding since she came back to Cape Cod, and this event forces her to step into the light in a way, and really open up and become her truest self.



In your new novel, bookstore owner Harlow made the difficult decision to put her son, Matthew, up for adoption while she was in college and hid the truth from her family. What was the inspiration behind this story?

My husband and I had a chance to adopt a baby while I was pregnant with my son, and at the last minute, the birth mother changed her mind and kept him. She was a teenager, and while I respected and understood her decision to keep him, I always did wonder what our family—and that boy—would’ve been like if the adoption had gone through. My father was adopted by his stepfather (a beautiful story), but he never got to know his biological father, who had gone off to fight the Nazis when my dad was two. My dad always wondered what that relationship could’ve been like. And my favorite uncle is adopted. . . . about fifteen years ago, he found his half-brother, and they had a very touching meeting. So adoption has been something I’ve always thought about.

To me, a woman who chooses adoption for her baby has a special kind of selflessness. To acknowledge that while you ostensibly could keep the baby, he might have a better life without you. . . . that's heartbreaking, even when it's the right choice. I wanted to explore the emotional experiences of that situation from the perspective of both mothers—Harlow, and Monica, who is Matthew's adoptive mother.

This book returns to Cape Cod, which you call your “heart's home.” Why do you find this New England setting so inspiring?

Anyone who's ever been to Cape Cod knows its magic. The light, the air, the smell of the ocean and salt marshes. . . the sky seems closer there somehow, and the minute I drive over the bridge, I relax. My parents bought a house there when I was young, and that turned out to be the most generous, beautiful gift they could have given their kids. We're now on the fourth generation of the Higgins family loving that house and having those beautiful, simple experiences of running in the waves, watching the beam of the lighthouse sweep the Atlantic, eating clam chowder, and wandering through the maze of Provincetown. Setting books there is like writing a love letter to the Cape.

There is a fascinating juxtaposition between Harlow and Matthew's adoptive mother, Monica. What did you want to readers to see by creating two such strong, capable, and very different women?

Motherhood looks different on everyone. Both Harlow and Monica are shaped by being Matthew's mother, and both struggle with different aspects of adoption. Monica does the work of raising Matthew and loves him with all her heart, but she knows Matthew always wonders about his birth mother and misses her on some primal level. She adores her son, and she's trying to accept that he's eighteen now and moving away from her in every way.

Harlow, on the other hand, took a big chunk of her heart and tore it out of her chest the day she put Matthew in Monica's arms. Though she believed it was the right thing for the baby, it was like tearing her heart out of her chest. When he reappears in her life, it's both thrilling and terrifying. Though she didn't raise him, he's still the most important thing in her life. But his appearance forces her (and her family) to reevaluate who she is, and who she wants to be.

Putting them together for the summer was a writer's dream. Harlow and Monica

are both intelligent, sensitive, hardworking women. They both love their son. They both respect each other, but they also are a bit wary of the other. Their journey, their understanding and appreciation of each other, is one of my favorite parts of the book.

One of the main themes in *A Little Ray of Sunshine* is motherhood and the different ways a woman can parent and nurture. What did you want to say about motherhood?

The toughest job you'll ever love, right? No matter what form it takes—biological, foster, adoptive, mother figure—motherhood takes a woman to a place she cannot possibly imagine until she's in it. The terror, the joy, the work, the love just about break you open in the best way possible. And the influence mothers have on their children is everything, isn't it? Whether mothers are good, bad or indifferent, we are shaped by them more powerfully than any other influence in the world.

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You show multiple interconnected and blended families in this novel. What did you hope to reveal about the nature of family and its importance in our lives?

Family is hugely important to me. More than anything, I'm a mother, wife, sister, daughter, and now grandmother. But I have other family members, too, who aren't related to me. Friends I call sister. Godchildren and kids I would die for. Older people who have been like parents or aunts and uncles. Our families of origin shape us before we can even speak, but we shape ourselves with our families of choice. Sometimes those identities mesh, and sometimes they clash.

Harlow hasn't really dated with any seriousness, but she's becoming closer with Grady Byrne, her former classmate and friend from high school. Why is she hesitant about falling in love? Are there other romances in the book, and how do they play into the story?

This book does feature a lot of couples, past, present and future. The main romance between Grady and Harlow is really poignant and sweet. . . . they've known each other since they were kids, went to the prom together, then fell out of

touch. When Grady comes back to the Cape, divorced and with a three-year-old in tow, Harlow's absolutely ready to be his friend. More than that? She can't imagine herself as a stepmother. But there's more to Grady than meets the eye. If you like the strong and silent type, Grady is your man.

The other couples—Matthew's parents, Monica and Sanjay; Harlow's incredibly in love (and slightly obtuse) parents; her sister Addison and Addie's wife, Nicole; and even the memory of Harlow's grandparents—all shine a light on the challenges and rewards of commitment, what makes it real, and what we put first when it comes to romantic love.

Harlow never told her family about her pregnancy and Matthew's birth. That's a pretty big secret to keep for eighteen years. How does secrecy play a role in this book?

When you reveal a secret about yourself, you become vulnerable. Harlow (and Cynthia, Robbie, Rosie and Grady) all keep certain facts of their lives to themselves. Whether they're embarrassed or ashamed or just because they're not ready to share something, they all want to protect an aspect of themselves. You can't blame them, and yet you know they're hurting themselves by letting their secrets fester, too.

There's also a privilege in knowing someone's secret. Rosie, Harlow's best friend, has known all about the pregnancy and adoption and subsequent events. This infuriates Harlow's mother, who feels she's earned Harlow's trust. But has she? Cynthia, too, guards her secret from the rest of the Smith family for very different reasons. Busting open those issues, choosing who gets to know stuff and when, tells you a lot about the characters.

What message do you hope readers will take away from this book?

Love of any kind is never wasted. Love is worth the risk and heartache. And love can sneak up on you and add a dimension to your life you never thought you'd have. That's something everyone deserves.

discussion questions



1. Initially, it seems as though Monica has a more realistic idea of motherhood, compared with Harlow's idealized concept of it. As the book goes on, how do Monica's and Harlow's expectations about motherhood change, and why?
2. Monica worries that her son is manipulative for the way he blew up both her and Harlow's lives with the Cape Cod trip. Later, he pulls a similar stunt to meet his birth father, and the consequences finally catch up with him. Do you think Monica was right? Why are she and Sanjay upset? Why do you think Matthew felt the need to be so secretive?
3. Many young women are faced with unexpected pregnancies, and they have to make an incredibly difficult decision about what to do next. Why do you think Harlow chooses to give her baby up for adoption? Why doesn't she get an abortion instead? Why doesn't she keep the baby and let her family help raise him?
4. Harlow hid a huge secret from her family for eighteen years. Do you think Harlow's mother's reaction to her secret pregnancy was fair? How would you react if a family member had hidden the same secret Harlow did?
5. Harlow's life was comfortable but quiet on the Cape before Matthew came back. Do you think Harlow was happy before her son found her? She claimed everything was fine, but do you think that was denial or the truth?
6. At the beginning of the book, Cynthia seems self-centered and cynical, especially when it comes to family. How did Matthew's reunion with his birth family affect her character? Do you think Cynthia would have agreed to meet her sisters if not for Matthew?

7. No one knew that Cynthia had been adopted, yet she still felt like an outcast in the family. Her perspective on the family starkly contrasts with Harlow's. How much of Cynthia's isolation from the Smith family do you think was of her own making, and how much of it was reality? What could Harlow and her siblings have done differently to prevent Cynthia from feeling excluded?
8. Sanjay's relationship with Matthew is vastly different from Monica's, just as Monica's relationship with her son is different from Harlow's. Each of them has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to Matthew, but Monica's point of view reveals that she is resentful of the others'—Sanjay, who gets to be the easygoing parent, and Harlow, who receives Matthew's love without having done the work for the last eighteen years. Do you relate to Monica's frustrations, or do you relate more to Sanjay's or Harlow's perspectives? Do you think Monica has reason to fear Matthew's relationship with Harlow?
9. Harlow is surrounded by affectionate relationships: her parents, Lillie and Ben, her Grandpop and Frances. Even Sanjay and Monica seem infatuated with each other—
that's why she chose them to raise her son. Why, then, does Harlow keep romance at a distance, and how much do you think the absence of her son influences that? What changes at the end of the novel to convince her to take the leap with Grady?
10. Matthew's parents did the best they could to be transparent about his adoption, accepting of his emotions, and supportive of his decisions, but they still feel that Matthew betrayed them by staying with Harlow at the end of the summer. Why do you think he made that decision? And why does he decide to leave?
11. Both Cynthia and Matthew were put up for adoption by young mothers, but Cynthia's birth parents were forced to do so, while Harlow chose it. Cynthia's adoptive parents hid that fact from her, whereas Matthew's discussed it openly. Then Matthew sought out his birth family, while Cynthia's contacted her. Compare their experiences further and discuss. How do you think their lives might have changed if their parents had handled the topic of adoption differently?
12. Harlow suggests to Grady that they date quietly rather than move

toward a committed relationship. Grady rejects that idea and tells Harlow she's stuck in the past, still living a carefully curated life. What did you think of that conversation? How well do you think Grady knows Harlow?

- 13.** Harlow's family is full of complicated relationships, and Harlow's secret pregnancy and Cynthia's pessimism are only the beginning of them. But there is also a lot of love to go around. Would you want to be part of Harlow's family? What do you think are the good parts of being a member of your family? And what do you think are the hard parts of it?
- 14.** Rosie's alcoholism was a surprise to Harlow, as it can be for many loved ones of alcoholics. Why do you think Harlow never noticed it before? How did you judge Harlow's reaction once Rosie admitted to her addiction?
- 15.** Harlow's romantic life was never more than a distraction from the loss she felt without Matthew, until he finally came back and she let herself fall for Grady. Do you think Harlow's brother is just a distraction for Rosie while she copes with her addiction? Or do you think Rosie truly loves him and he will be part of her recovery?

16. Matthew's decision to stay with Harlow at the end of the summer was a huge change to his life—and Harlow's. Do you think Monica should have done more to prevent him from staying? Do you think Harlow was justified in agreeing to it?

17. Harlow has to quickly learn how to be a parent to her nearly adult child. Think about the parenting choices she made throughout the book, from their first outing—paddleboarding with a possible shark sighting—to relinquishing him back to the Patels. What mistakes did she make? What successes did she have? What do you think are the most important lessons she learned about motherhood?