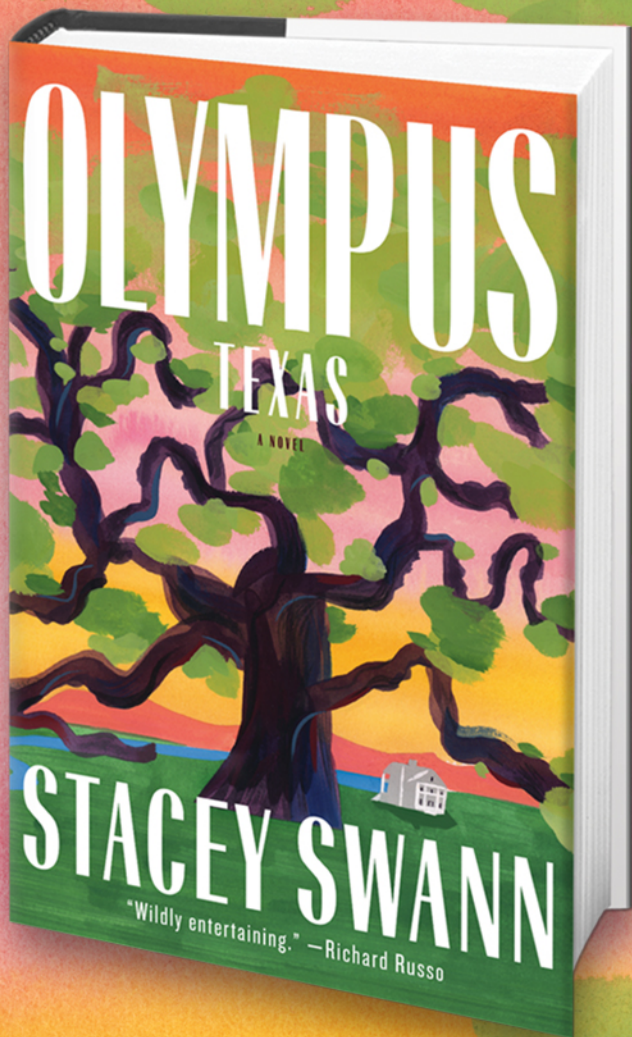


BOOK CLUB KIT



Dear Reader,

I first started writing *Olympus, Texas* almost fifteen years ago. So, while the Briscoes aren't based on my own family (thankfully!), I've spent so much time with them that they actually really do feel like family to me. Thank you so much for choosing my novel for your book club. I hope you enjoy hanging out with them as much as I did.

I've always loved writing stories that use some sort of scaffolding—an outside structure or an extended metaphor that makes writing feel like the best kind of puzzle, makes it feel like play. In this book, my fun was in trying to transform Greek gods and goddesses into regular mortals living in modern-day Texas. If you dig mythology, then I hope you enjoy working out the puzzle on your end. But if mythology is not your thing, don't worry! I always intended the novel to work just as well for readers who had no idea that Artie was supposed to be Artemis, that Ryan was Orion. This is because, in the end, the main reason why I love both reading and writing fiction is not about puzzles or metaphors: it's the magic of seeing through another person's eyes, of experiencing a world that is different from your own but that also, somehow, makes you feel less alone when you return to your own world.

There are so many amazing novels out there. I'm grateful that you've chosen to give your time to mine. I hope the book delivers to you that same magic that I've always gotten from the books I love.

Best, Stacey

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the novel, June and Peter's children all have different reactions to the small-town nature of the place where they grew up: Thea and Arlo feel more at home elsewhere, while March and Artie prefer it to any other place. Which character do you most relate to on this topic? How do you feel about your own hometown?
2. The novel has multiple points of view, letting us inside the heads of most of the family members. How did this choice impact your engagement with the book? Did you have a favorite point of view, a person you most enjoyed experiencing the novel with?
3. Each of the main characters (aside from Cole!) have a counterpart in classical mythology, a god or goddess they resemble. Did you think about these counterparts as you read? What did that add to your reading experience?
4. The Briscoes are a blended family, with complex relationships between the siblings and half-siblings, as well as between Peter and June and the children. Did these relationships feel authentic to you? Did they remind you of any of your own family relationships?
5. Though the book is filled with ways the Briscoe family has failed one another, it also explores their attempts to forgive one another. Which of these paths to forgiveness seem the most promising among the characters? What components do you think are necessary for true forgiveness?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

6. After March comes home and promptly gets himself in trouble again, he decides to truly try to change so he can stay in Olympus. By the end of the novel, do you think March has succeeded? Are you hopeful for his future within the family?
7. What other books, movies, or TV shows did *Olympus, Texas* remind you of?
8. At several points in the book, June is critical of both her own and Peter's parenting skills. How do you feel about June as a mother? About Peter as a father? Is there any good mixed in with the failings?
9. Arlo is one of the most contentious characters in the book. How do you feel about Arlo? Does he expect too much from Artie? By the end of the book, do you think he has earned a chance at her forgiveness?
10. Hap is shocked when he finds out why Vera felt so betrayed by him that she decided to destroy their marriage. Do you agree with Vera, that Hap's view of her behavior was a huge betrayal, something that could make their marriage untenable?
11. Two marriages are at the heart of the book: June and Peter's, as well as Hap and Vera's. What do you see in the futures of each of these marriages?

Q&A WITH STACEY SWANN

(Taken from a Q&A with *BookPeople*
and one with *Harper's Bazaar*)

Do you have a favorite real-life town/city/region of Texas? Why?

There are so many beautiful places in Texas, and Central Texas does now definitely feel like home. Still, the landscape of my childhood—which is also the landscape of fictional Olympus—always hits me the hardest. Our house was less than an hour outside Houston, right on the Brazos. I could go to sleep listening to the sound of the river.

I love the way the chapters are laid out by day, with the origin stories sprinkled throughout. Was this your original idea of how to tell the Briscoe story, past and present combined?

For a long time in the first draft, there was a lot less structure. I wasn't sure how much time was passing between scenes, and I had very little backstory. At some point, I realized I could compress the plot into a single week to give the novel more of a clock. It was only then that I realized my scenes that were flashbacks could be taken out of their chapters and serve as origin stories for the surrounding present-day plot.



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Do you see any of your family members in the Briscoe family? Was there a particular member of the Briscoe family that was harder for you to write?

Luckily, the Briscoes are purely fictional and bear no resemblance to my actual family! The hardest character to tackle was Vera, without a doubt. For a long while, she didn't have much of a personality besides being very beautiful and very mean. It was only after I began to think about just how much of a burden beauty can sometimes be for women, and the dangers that beauty can generate, that she began to feel more three-dimensional.

The cover beautifully captures a Texas sunset falling on a house. Was this based on a real picture set in Texas?

The concept came from Doubleday art director Emily Mahon and my editor, Lee Boudreaux, and they hired the brilliant illustrator Ping Zhu. While I sent them photos of the area and they had the novel's descriptions to work with, the striking cover is thanks to their vision and work!

There was a strong exploration of anger in your book—do you have an all-time-favorite angry character in literature?

What a great question! I think it has to be Iago in *Othello*. He's brimming with so much mysterious rage that he wants to burn down the lives of everyone around him. And yet he can contain the rage so well he fools everyone around him. He's the man they trust the most. It's a staggeringly effective anger. A close second would be Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I think my love of writing big argument scenes can be traced to falling in love with that Edward Albee play in high school.

What is your favorite book set in Texas?

Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By*. Even though I read and loved *Lonesome Dove* first, there's something in *Horseman, Pass By* that feels *exactly* like Texas to me.

When did you begin writing *Olympus, Texas*?

Way back in the summer of 2006, my friend and fellow writer Christine Grimes organized an informal monthlong competition: whoever wrote the most words of a brand-new novel would take top prize. I didn't come close to winning (our friend Scott finished an entire book!), but I did wind up with seventy messy pages. This was the seed of *Olympus, Texas*, though probably only a page or two of the original actually made it into the final version. Over the next twelve years (in which I spent as much time avoiding the novel as I did working on it), I wrote and rewrote and rewrote some more. After the book sold to Doubleday, I worked for another year and a half on revisions with my brilliant editor, Lee Boudreaux. It was quite a long journey, but I don't regret the time spent. I needed that long to get to the best version I could write.

What was the inspiration for it and how did you go about developing the plot and characters?

I still can remember the exact moment I had my first glimmer of the idea. It was a month or so before the informal competition, and I was driving in Austin. I had the sudden thought that Texas's tendency to buy into its own myths, its own sense of being larger than life ("everything's bigger in Texas"), would make an excellent fit with Greek mythology. Though the book started there, early on I got the great advice to not feel too tied to the original myths—that I should let the characters go in new directions. That allowed me to add in characters who were completely invented and who opened up the plot in interesting ways.

What themes or issues does it address?

At its core, I think the novel is really a book about family—the ways we push one another's buttons, the way we love and resent one another in equal measure, the ways we hurt one another, but, equally important, the ways we help one another. Coming out of Greek myth, it's probably no surprise that there's a lot of infidelity in the book. By the time I reached the end of the first draft, I realized that, even more than infidelity, I was exploring the possibilities and parameters of forgiveness, especially when it's the person we trust most that has betrayed us.

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How does the book incorporate classical mythology and why did you want to reference it?

Although a few of the plot events do mirror specific Greek myths, for the most part I used the gods and goddesses themselves as starting points for very mortal, very flawed characters. Using scaffolding in fiction—adaptations, large-scale metaphors—had already been one of my biggest joys in writing. So the thought of getting to play with all those gods and some of their myths, but also moving them to Texas and staying within the constraints of realism, made me excited to get to work. Also, I've had a love of Greek mythology ever since the fifth grade, thanks to a big class project on the Twelve Labors of Hercules.

The book centers on the evolution of various fractured relationships—why was this something you wanted to explore?

There's something innately interesting to me about the tensions within large immediate families, those people who we both love the most and are most frustrated by. They're also the people we often can never completely get away from—either because of our ties to them or because we still have ties to other family members. It's really easy to get caught in static patterns, but I'd like to believe, if we have enough patience and empathy—both for those who have hurt us and for ourselves—we can break out of those patterns and into healthier relationships. It's also something that feels universal to me. Any long-term relationship—whether it is romantic or familial—will eventually have some sort of break, even if it is a small one, that needs mending.

“I LOVE THAT FICTION IS A MEDIUM THAT GIVES US A BREAK FROM OUR DAILY LIVES WHILE ALSO GIVING US GREATER INSIGHT INTO THAT DAILY LIFE WE ARE TRYING TO ESCAPE.”

What do you hope readers take away from your book?

My first goal as a writer is always to give readers the sense of magic and transport that novels have always given me. I love that fiction is a medium that gives us a break from our daily lives while also giving us greater insight into that daily life we are trying to escape. I also hope to show that all of us have our own histories, reasons that give context to our bad actions. It doesn't excuse those bad acts, and it doesn't mean every bad act deserves to be forgiven, but accessing some level of compassion makes life more bearable for all of us. It's not easy being human! Even the gods could see that.

When I was a kid, every year as spring turned into summer, my mom would take my sister and I out to pick the wild dewberries that grew along fence lines near our home. The act itself was a chore—we'd have to put on jeans and long-sleeved shirts, intolerable in the muggy heat, to protect against the dewberry's thorns and the chiggers. And picking even a small amount took forever. But it was worth it—nothing tasted like a fresh berry, eaten while still warm from the sun. And no dessert could top my mother's dewberry cobbler.

This is an old recipe, slightly modified from a Southern Living cookbook my mom bought in the seventies. It has the more traditional biscuit-like cobbler topping, but feel free to add a couple of tablespoons of sugar to the flour if you want extra sweetness. Dewberries are pretty much never sold in stores, but blackberries are a close substitute. Since some people think the dewberry tastes more like a raspberry, I like to use a 50/50 mix of blackberries and raspberries.

DEWBERRY COBBLER

2/3 cup sugar
2 Tbsp. cornstarch
3/4 cup water
24 oz. fresh dewberries
(around 4 cups)
1 Tbsp. butter,
cut into small cubes
1/2 tsp. cinnamon

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
1/3 cup milk
3 Tbsp. canola oil

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Mix the sugar and cornstarch in a saucepan and then stir in the water. Bring the mixture to a boil and, keeping the burner on high, stir constantly for 1 minute. The mixture will become a thick syrup. Turn off the heat and add the berries, stirring to cover them with the syrup. Pour the berry mixture into a two-quart baking dish. Dot with butter and sprinkle the cinnamon over top.

Sift together the flour, baking powder, and salt. Combine the milk and oil and add it to the dry mixture. Stir with a fork until the mixture forms a ball, but try not to overmix it. Drop the dough by spoonfuls onto the berries. Bake at 425°F for 25 to 30 minutes or until lightly browned.

Best served warm with a small scoop of vanilla ice cream!

PLAYLIST

The playlist below, available on [Spotify](#), contains songs I listened to while writing the book, as well as songs mentioned in the novel. (In my mind, Arlo's music sounds a lot like that of one of my favorite artists, Ryan Bingham.)

“Jingle and Go”.....	Ryan Bingham
“Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)”.....	Waylon Jennings
“Feelin’ Good Again”.....	Robert Earl Keen
“Lucille”.....	Kenny Rogers
“I Put a Spell on You”.....	Nina Simone
“Gin, Smoke, Lies”.....	Turnpike Troubadours
“Hallelujah”.....	Ryan Bingham
“I Hung My Head”.....	Johnny Cash
“Drunken Angel”.....	Lucinda Williams
“Here You Come Again”.....	Dolly Parton
“If Drinkin’ Don’t Kill Me (Her Memory Will)”.....	George Jones
“Keep the Wolves Away”.....	Uncle Lucius
“Six More Miles”.....	The The
“Drink ’Till We’re Gone”.....	Lucero
“Just Breathe”.....	Willie Nelson, Lukas Nelson
“Hard Times”.....	Ryan Bingham
“Texas Sun”.....	Khruangbin and Leon Bridges