

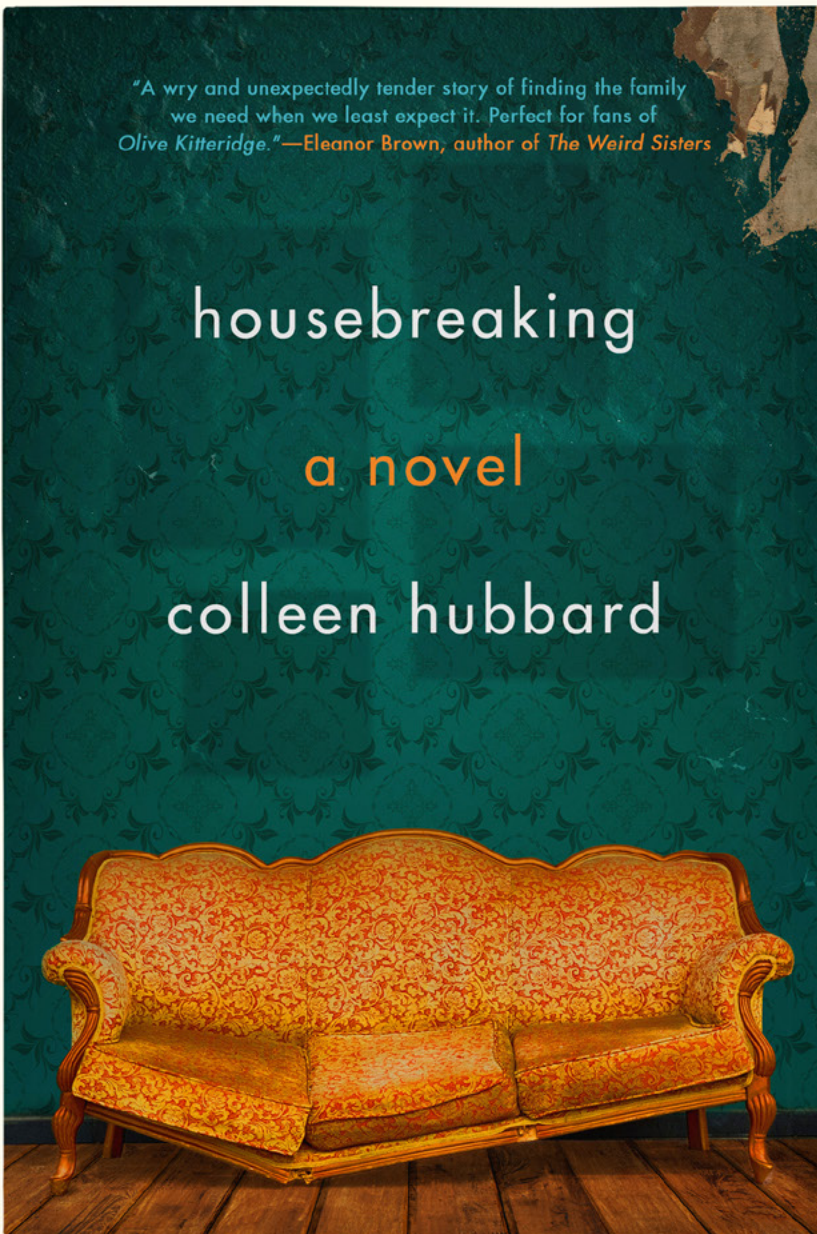
book club kit

"A wry and unexpectedly tender story of finding the family we need when we least expect it. Perfect for fans of *Olive Kitteridge*."—Eleanor Brown, author of *The Weird Sisters*

housebreaking

a novel

colleen hubbard



dear readers,

I'm so pleased to share my debut novel, *Housebreaking*, with you.

I wrote the book in a real now-or-never moment. Before starting the novel, I worked long hours at an NHS hospital in England, where I moved after marrying my British husband. The book began in fits and starts, but I really settled down to writing while I was on maternity leave with our first child. It had occurred to me that if I didn't find time then, it would never happen.

Del, our protagonist, is flinty, angry, and prone to act without thinking first. The mixture of stubbornness and impulsivity sets off the novel's events. And yet Del also has an interior strength and a sense of self that I admire.

Writing about short stories, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has said that a successful story "exists in a moral universe, not one where goodness always triumphs, because that would be false, but one with an inherent awareness of goodness."

Del knows who she considers good, regardless of whether that person is valued by the society in which they live. Likewise, she knows who is unkind, greedy, or dishonest, even when those same people are held up as paragons of their community. She lives according to her own sense of morality and fairness, even when her choices may seem unwise by conventional standards.

Faced with her choices, what would you have done? Who would you have considered your friend? And when does friendship—a community that we build ourselves—trump the ties of family?

I hope you enjoy reading about Del and her homecoming.

With best wishes,

Colleen



A conversation with Colleen Hubbard

Tell us about *Housebreaking*.

Housebreaking is contemporary literary fiction centered on a stubborn twenty-four-year-old woman who deals with a long-simmering family feud by dismantling her house and moving it, alone and by hand, across a frozen pond during a harsh New England winter. The novel will appeal to readers who like spare, stylish prose as well as eccentric and compelling characters—think Elizabeth Strout crossed with Ottessa Moshfegh.

What inspired the initial idea for your debut?

I read a Bill Bryson book about Shakespeare's life. In the book, Bryson describes Shakespeare's theatre troupe moving their entire theatre building over the frozen Thames. I thought the image—of moving a building over ice—was fascinating. I kept thinking about how it would work on a domestic scale, that is, moving a house over ice. Gradually the characters came together, starting with Del. I needed someone who was determined and willing to live on the fringes of society.

Also, I have a longtime interest in unlikely and very questionable passion projects. Several years ago, I wrote an article for a magazine about Dennis Severs, a gay American Anglophile who bought a dilapidated eighteenth-century house in Spitalfields in London and created a sort of living museum, which he inhabited for decades with no plumbing or

electricity. Until his death, Dennis felt compelled to restore and maintain something, unlike Del's need to tear something down, but it's an almost inexplicable level of compulsion all the same.

Describe Del for readers. What motivates her?

Del is a high school dropout from a working-class farming family who, several years before the book begins, fled to live in a city with her gay father and his friends. She doesn't have any friends her own age and she can't keep steady work. She is a loyal friend and has no capacity for self-pity, but she does have a deep well of anger, and her life, up to the point when the book begins, has not been easy.

She can be impulsive, and that leads to a financial precariousness that sets off the book's main drama. She has very little money, no place to live, and has never had a real sense of ambition in her life. So she hatches a plan that is extraordinary, and sticks with it because she believes that she has something to prove to herself and to others.

Del dismantling her family home is described in vivid detail throughout the novel. What kind of research did you do about what goes into unbuilding a house? Did anything surprise you?

I interviewed Brad Guy, an architect who specializes in disassembling houses and reusing their materials, and who coauthored a book called *Unbuilding*. To me, the idea of a single inexperienced person deconstructing a house seemed extremely far-fetched and just within the realm of possibility, but Brad disagreed! He actually told me that my timeline was too long! Given the simplicity of the type of house that

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I was working on (which would have been built by its original owner), it was absolutely possible for someone to unbuild it, and faster than I had originally planned.

Why did you decide to set the novel in the late 1990s?

I was younger than Del in the '90s, but old enough to have memories of that time that I thought would add useful detail to the fictional territory. As one example, I remember seeing mainstream magazine articles about people with AIDS, and always feeling that the featured stories where you were supposed to feel sympathy were about people who were “innocent”—children who got the disease from their parents, or people who got it via blood transfusions, as if there was no empathy merited for people who got AIDS from sex or drugs, which is ridiculous.

Del is super relatable and the book effectively evokes a harsh New England winter. How did your own personal background influence the characters and setting in *Housebreaking*?

I grew up in a blue-collar town in central Connecticut. My great-grandparents were immigrant Polish farmers who settled in that area and grew potatoes and shade tobacco. Growing up, I was surrounded by disused farmland that was gradually being developed into suburban homes.

My family also had a sense of financial precariousness, and there was a period of time between the fifth and sixth grades when we moved to a temporary housing shelter and relied on welfare and food stamps. In my view, my friends had a sense of stability that I lacked, and I felt both ashamed of my circumstances and jealous of theirs. My perspective as an adult is quite different: I think there were complications in their lives just like mine, but they were invisible to me, as my problems were probably invisible to them. But at that time, I felt very alone and hard done by, and tapping into that feeling made it easy for me to understand Del. She doesn't feel sorry for herself, but she is angry about the injustice of her circumstances and how she and her parents were treated by their community.

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There are a lot of complex and interesting secondary characters in the book like Tym, Eleanor, Auntie Jeanne, and Greg. Which of these characters was your favorite to write and why? Which was the most challenging?

Eleanor is inspired by a person I observed as a small child, who passed away a long time ago. Not so much her character or what she says, but her sense of style as being so outsized and not in line with her actual circumstances. This woman had a voice like Lauren Bacall and weighed about as much as a carton of cigarettes. Like some kind of 1940s screen star, she wore massive mink coats, big sunglasses, and red lipstick, and yet lived on a modest budget in an unremarkable subdivision in central Connecticut. It was fun to, in a small way, bring her back to life.

What has created this dynamic between Del and the rest of her family?

Money.

Del's relationship with Tym is beautifully rendered. Why was it important to you to write about Del's friendships with gay men?

I lived in San Francisco for ten years and many of my close friends are gay men who span in age from their thirties up through their sixties. It would be difficult to generalize a statement about those people or my friendships with them.

Tym isn't inspired by a particular person, but acts as a sort of counterpoint to the conventional lifestyle that is the aspiration of Del's uncle's family.

Tym doesn't want to get married or even have a long-term partner; he's not interested in building up his retirement savings or having a job with growth potential. He doesn't own a car, and he's not in close contact with his family. He's happy sitting in the basement of his apartment building, doing drugs and listening to records by himself because he is very suspicious of anyone's taste but his own. He is urban, and free, but rootless, as opposed to the Murrows, who are suburban and suppress components of their identities to satisfy a community dynamic, but ultimately do support each other.

Even though *Del* is fueled by anger, the book is filled with quiet acts of kindness and generosity. Talk to us about that duality.

For me, that's just what life has been. Many people, including strangers, have been extraordinarily generous to me when I needed it. I've also experienced and seen things that just feel inexplicably unjust: people being cruel or thoughtless in ways that have caused real injuries to others. So I think that's what life can be at times: sliding between marveling at how kind and bighearted people can be, while also knowing that we can all be small and mean at times.

What do you see as the themes of *Housebreaking*?

The value of community and friendship. Resilience and empathy both to ourselves and to others.

A native of New England, **Colleen Hubbard** now lives in the UK with her family. She wrote her debut novel, *Housebreaking*, while on maternity leave from her job with the NHS. She graduated from the University of East Anglia's MA program in creative writing, where she earned the Head of School Prize with a distinction.

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On Colleen's Bedside Table

Like most writers, I'm an absolutely obsessive reader. When I was a small child, I used to take out huge stacks of books from my local library . . . and pretend to lose the ones I wanted to keep. (Sorry, Russell Library of Middletown, Connecticut, which eventually did cancel my card.)

***Wind, Sand and Stars* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**

I can't think of how many times I've read this book. Easily more than ten. Short essays by the writer of *The Little Prince* and pioneering pilot Saint-Exupéry, his recounting of the early days of piloting is romantic, strange, and transporting.

***Mr. Loverman* by Bernardine Evaristo**

A clever and bighearted story of Barrington Jedidiah Walker, a seventy-four-year-old man living a double life within his British Caribbean community in London.

***A Little Hope* by Ethan Joella**

This book, set in a fictional Connecticut community, hits the perfect spot for an autumn read. A small town populated by interesting characters who grow in depth and complexity as you turn each page.

***The Woman Upstairs* by Yewande Omotoso**

Set in a suburb of Cape Town, South Africa, this is a story of two elderly women who enjoy an antagonistic relationship. But when circumstances throw them together, the women—and readers—are asked to ponder: Are we ever too old to change?

***Jane and Prudence* by Barbara Pym**

As funny and fresh as when it was published in 1953, this is a book about matchmaking gone terribly wrong. If you like Jane Austen, Barbara Pym might be a new favorite.

***Cheat Day* by Liv Stratman**

A subversive and witty tale of a woman who works in a family bakery and is driven by her appetites. Will she be able to control her weight with yet another fad diet? And when will she finally determine what she really wants in life? I loved the tiny details about the mechanics of working in a bakery—a job I had in my early twenties.

discussion questions

1. Think about Del's reaction to finding out the house she now owned was going to be torn down. Why do you think this was a tipping point for her in the novel?
2. Throughout the novel, Del thinks of her mother a lot. What do you think the deconstruction of the house represents in relation to her memory of her mother?
3. Del discusses why she stuck to tearing apart the house she inherited. Thinking about this, why do you believe she chose to keep the house in the first place?
4. With Del's memories of her parents, there seems to be a running theme of escape. Thinking about your answer to the last question, do you think that tearing the house apart offers an escape? For whom?
5. Jeanne's life is unraveling at the same time Del's house deconstruction is taking place. Why do you believe the author chose to have this happen? Do Jeanne and Del have any similarities?
6. Discuss Del's relationships within the novel. Do you think her views on family have changed by the novel's end?
7. Did the novel play out in a way you expected? What did you think was going to be the outcome of Del's housebreaking?
8. Could you relate to Del and her struggles with family? Why or why not?
9. Do you think how Del handled her problems was the best way? Would you have changed anything she did? Why or why not?
10. Discuss the ending of the novel. Do you think that Del found some new purpose after the story's events? What do you think that is?