

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Rebecca Makkai is the Chicago-based author of the novels *The Great Believers*, *The Hundred-Year House*, and *The Borrower*, as well as the short story collection *Music for Wartime*. *The Great Believers* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and received the ALA Carnegie Medal and the LA Times Book Prize, among other honors. Makkai is on the MFA faculties of Sierra Nevada College and Northwestern University, and she is Artistic Director of StoryStudio Chicago.

- [Author's website](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Yale's group of friends is very close. In a sense, they are his "chosen family." How is this explored in the book? How does each character relate to their family, biological and chosen? Do you have a "chosen family," and if so, what brings you all together?
2. How has the culture changed regarding LGBTQ+ voices and stories since the 1980s?
3. Chicago is such a powerful presence in this novel that it is almost a character in itself. Have you ever been to or lived in a place that exerted a strong influence on you?
4. Nora, the elderly woman donating the 1920s pieces, seems completely removed from the rest of Yale's life, yet her story contains elements that can be compared and contrasted with Yale's. What similarities between his and her life are there? How has her past affected the present?
5. Fiona has suffered many losses in her life. How do you think that affected her as a mother? What are the ways in which trauma and loss are passed down through generations?
6. Do you empathize more with Fiona or Claire?

7. Do you see any parallels between the state of healthcare during the 1980s and now?
8. On page 353, Asher asks Yale, “Does it really ever go anywhere? . . . Love. Does it vanish?” Yale replies, “I mean, we never want it to. But it does, doesn’t it?” What would you say to them?
9. Is the creation of artwork always a collaborative effort? How do you feel about the relationship between artist and muse?
10. What has been your knowledge of—or experience with, if any—AIDS or those affected by the disease? Has reading this novel changed any ideas you have previously had about the subject?
11. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it? Is anything left unresolved or ambiguous? How do you picture the characters’ lives after the end of the story?
12. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?
13. Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/553185/the-great-believers-by-rebecca-makkai/9780735223530/readers-guide/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

/ Starred Review */* In Makkai’s (Music for Wartime, 2015) ambitious third novel, it’s 1985, and Yale has just lost his friend Nico to AIDS: not the first friend he’s lost, not nearly the last he’ll lose to the terrifying, still-mysterious disease. Soon after, Nico’s younger sister and Yale’s friend, Fiona, connects Yale to her nonagenarian great -aunt, who studied art in Paris in the 1910s and now wants to donate her personal collection of never-before-seen work by now-famous artists to the Northwestern University art gallery, where Yale works in development. This potentially career-making discovery arrives along with a crushing reveal in Yale’s personal life. Another thread throughout the novel begins in 2015 as Fiona flies to Paris, where she has reason to believe her long-estranged adult daughter now lives. With its broad time span and bedrock of ferocious, loving friendships, this might remind readers of Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* (2015), though it is, overall, far brighter than that novel. As her intimately portrayed characters wrestle with painful pasts and fight to love one another and find joy in the present in spite of what is to come, Makkai carefully reconstructs 1980s Chicago, WWI-era and present-day Paris, and scenes of the early days of the AIDS epidemic. A tribute to the enduring forces of love and art, over everything. -- Bostrom, Annie (Reviewed 5/15/2018) (Booklist, vol 114, number 18, p22).

Publisher’s Weekly

/ Starred Review */* Spanning 30 years and two continents, the latest from Makkai (Music for Wartime) is a striking, emotional journey through the 1980s AIDS crisis and its residual effects on the contemporary lives of survivors. In

1985 Chicago, 30-something Yale Tishman, a development director at a fledgling Northwestern University art gallery, works tirelessly to acquire a set of 1920s paintings that would put his workplace on the map. He watches his close-knit circle of friends die from AIDS, and once he learns that his longtime partner, Charlie, has tested positive after having an affair, Yale goes into a tailspin, worried he may also test positive for the virus. Meanwhile, in 2015, Fiona Marcus, the sister of one of Yale's closest friends and mother hen of the 1980s group, travels to Paris in an attempt to reconnect with her adult daughter, Claire, who vanished into a cult years earlier. Staying with famed photographer Richard Campo, another member of the old Chicago gang, while searching, Fiona revisits her past and is forced to face memories long compartmentalized. As the two narratives intertwine, Makkai creates a powerful, unforgettable meditation, not on death, but rather on the power and gift of life. This novel will undoubtedly touch the hearts and minds of readers. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/30/2018) (Publishers Weekly, vol 265, issue 18, p).

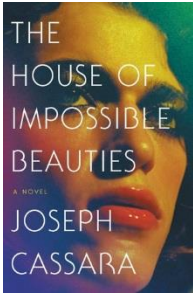
Library Journal

In mid-1980s Chicago, Yale Tishman's career in the art world is on an upswing just as the AIDS epidemic begins to decimate his circle of friends and acquaintances. Friend Nico is one of the first to be taken, and his funeral brings together Yale, partner Charlie, photographer Richard, aspiring actor Julian, Nico's sister, Fiona, and various other friends and acquaintances. Skip to 2015, and Fiona is staying with Richard in Paris, seeking to reconnect with her daughter, Claire, from whom she's been estranged since Claire's entry into a fundamentalist cult. The narrative moves deftly between Chicago and Paris, with Yale and Fiona's stories intertwining around connections made and lost. At turns heartbreaking and hopeful, the novel brings the first years of the AIDS epidemic into very immediate view, in a manner that will seem nostalgic to some and revelatory to others. VERDICT Makkai's sweeping fourth novel (after *Music for Wartime*) shows the compassion of chosen families and the tension and distance that can exist in our birth ones. This should strike a chord with the Gen Xers who came of age, and then aged, in these tumultuous years. [See Prepub Alert, 12/11/17.] --Jennifer B. Stidham (Reviewed 05/15/2018) (Library Journal, vol 143, issue 9, p52).

Kirkus Reviews

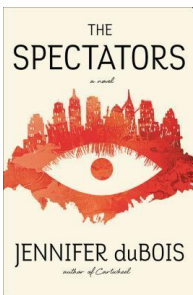
/* Starred Review */Another ambitious change of pace for the versatile and accomplished Makkai (*The Hundred-Year House*, 2014, etc.), whose characters wrangle with the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic at its height and in its aftermath. In the first of two intertwined storylines, Yale and his live-in lover, Charlie, attend an unofficial wake for a dead friend, Nico, held simultaneously with his funeral service because his Cuban-American family has made it clear they don't want any gay people there. It's 1985, and Makkai stingingly re-creates the atmosphere of fear, prejudice, and sanctimonious finger-pointing surrounding the mortally afflicted gay community, even in a big city like Chicago. Nico's younger sister, Fiona, has rejected their family and attached herself to his friends, with emotional consequences that become apparent in the second storyline, set 30 years later in Paris. As is often the case with paired stories, one of them initially seems more compelling, in this case Makkai's vivid chronicle of Yale's close-knit circle, of his fraught relationship with the obsessively jealous Charlie, and his pursuit of a potentially career-making donation for the university art gallery where he works in development. Fiona's opaque feelings of guilt and regret as she searches for her estranged daughter, Claire, aren't as engaging at first, but the 2015 narrative slowly unfolds to connect with the ordeals of Yale and his friends until we see that Fiona too is a traumatized survivor of the epidemic, bereft of her brother and so many other people she loved, to her lasting damage. As Makkai acknowledges in an author's note, when a heterosexual woman writes a novel about AIDS, some may feel she has crossed "the line between allyship and appropriation." On the contrary, her rich portraits of an array of big personalities and her affecting depiction of random, horrific death faced with varying degrees of gallantry make this tender, keening novel an impressive act of imaginative empathy. As compulsively readable as it is thoughtful and moving: an unbeatable fictional combination. (Kirkus Reviews, April 1, 2018).

READALIKES



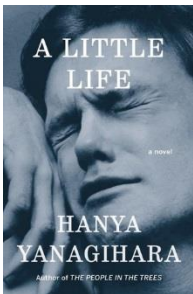
***The House of Impossible Beauties* by Joseph Cassara**

Follows a cast of gay and transgender kids navigating the Harlem ball scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Told in a voice that brims with wit, rage, tenderness, and fierce yearning, *The House of Impossible Beauties* is a tragic story of love, family, and the dynamism of the human spirit.



***The Spectators* by Jennifer DuBois**

A controversial talk-show host who has made his living by exposing bizarre societal secrets on live television finds his own past brought into question when the young perpetrators of a mass shooting declare themselves his devoted fans.



***A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara**

Moving to New York to pursue creative ambitions, four former classmates share decades marked by love, loss, addiction and haunting elements from a brutal childhood.