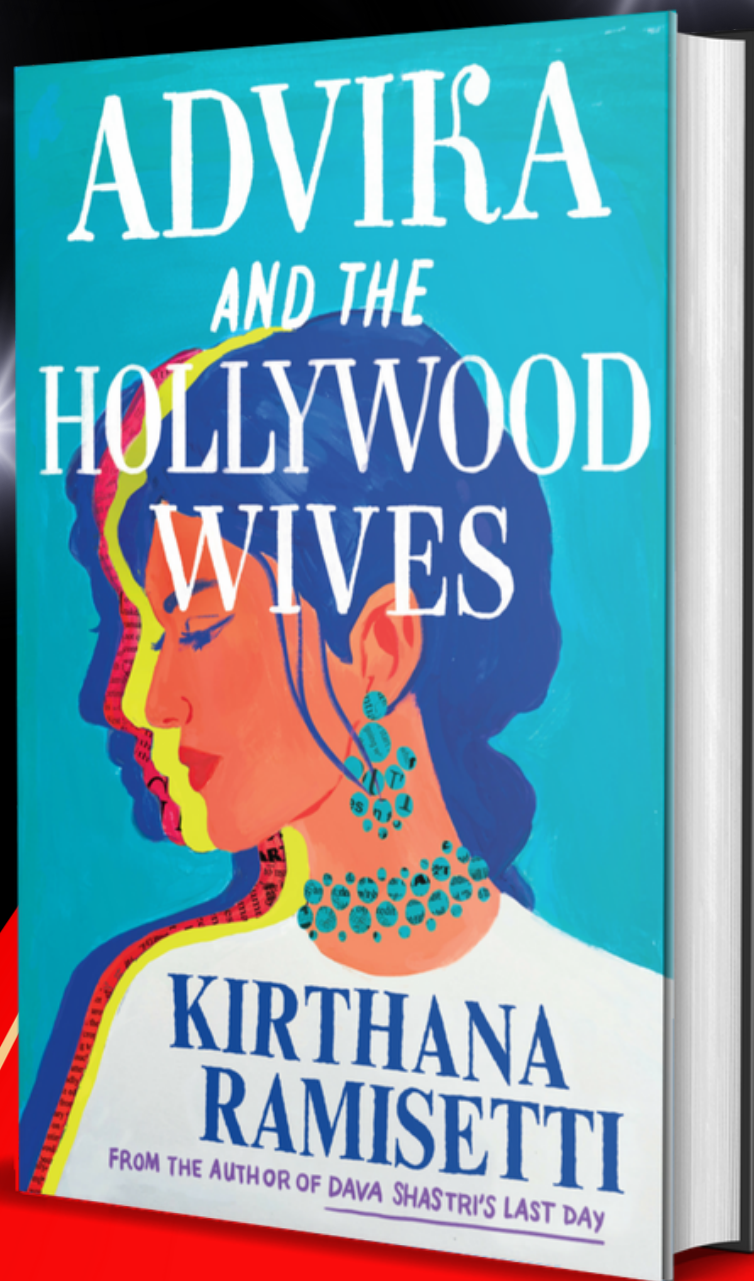


BOOK CLUB KIT





Discussion Questions

- In the first scene of the first chapter, Advika can't take her eyes off an Academy Award, marveling that something can be both magnificent and mundane at the same time. Do you feel similarly about an object in your possession, perhaps something that has sentimental value to you? If so, what is it and why?
- Advika tells Julian that one of her favorite movies is the 2002 soccer film *Bend It Like Beckham*, starring Parminder Nagra, Keira Knightley, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers, and how much it meant to her to see someone who looked like her represented as a protagonist on the big screen. Why do you feel it's important for people of all ages to see themselves represented in popular media?
- Loss is a predominant theme of the novel. Advika has a tremendously difficult time moving on from her sister's death, and she has a strained relationship with her parents because of the way, in her eyes, they "fled" from their grief after Anu passed. Do you believe there is a right or wrong way to grieve? How, in your own life, have you processed and coped with these kinds of feelings?
- How did you feel about Advika's reaction to the nickname Julian gave her? As you were reading, did you feel like Advika was her true self when he used the endearment—or was it a role he was trying to assign her to play? Did the nickname set off any red flags for you as you were reading?
- Julian, in the early days of his relationship with Advika, frequently dismisses her questions about his past relationships. Do you believe it's important to focus more on the future than on the past? Or do you believe looking to the past is the best way to anticipate the future? Explain.
- How do Advika's thoughts on losing her sense of self tie into both Advika's and Evie's feelings about their careers?
- There are a number of pop culture references peppered throughout the text. Did any of your favorite films or classic actors make the list? If so, which one(s)?



Discussion Questions

- Who do you think inspired the characters of Julian's first three wives? Why?
- As Advika researches the former Mrs. Zeldings, she learns how Julian used his power to stymie the careers of his wives, resulting in the diminishment of their work and legacies. Did this make you think about real-life instances of women in Hollywood and other industries who have been overshadowed or forgotten?
- Julian's safe is a shrine to his second wife, as well as a hiding place for a number of surprising objects. If you were the owner of that safe, what would you keep safe—or concealed?
- In the latter half of the novel, Advika apologizes to Olive for being so wrapped up in her own life that their friendship became one-sided. Have you ever experienced a similar conflict with someone close to you? What steps did you take to resolve the issue?
- Advika's family struggles to understand her burning desire to pursue a creative career rather than a "practical" profession. If you were Advika's parent, which way would you lean in the debate? Do you think it's more important in life to pursue passion or stability? Why?
- What similarities can be drawn between all four of Julian's wives, and how did they set themselves apart from one another—and from Julian?
- What did you think of the end of the novel? Did the epilogue surprise you? Why or why not?

More For Your Book Club!

Advika's Favorite Rom Coms



Follow
the Author!



@kirthanaramisetti



@popscriblings

Kirthana's Writing Playlist

[Click Here To Listen on Spotify](#)

- "Cornflake Girl"
Tori Amos
- "Paper Bag" **Fiona Apple**
- "I Want You to Love Me"
Fiona Apple
- "Cloudbusting"
Kate Bush
- "Bite the Hand"
boygenius
- "this is me trying"
Taylor Swift
- "Petal" **Raveena Aurora**
- "Halloween"
Phoebe Bridgers
- "On+Off"
Maggie Rogers
- "Unstoppable"
Lianne La Havas
- "Release the Stars"
Rufus Wainwright
- "Farewell" **Guster**

The Protagonist Cocktail

Recipe from the 90th Governors Ball

Ingredients:

- 1 1/2 ounces Tequila Don Julio Blanco
- 1/2 ounce Pimm's The Original No. 1 Cup Liqueur
- 3/4 ounce Fresh Lemon Juice
- 1/4 ounce Simple Syrup
- 2 ounces Tonic Water
- Sliced Cucumber and Borage Flowers for Garnish

Preparation:

1. Combine Don Julio Blanco, Pimm's, lemon juice, and simple syrup in a cocktail shaker with ice. Gently shake and roll in tonic water.
2. Pour over fresh ice in a Collins glass.
3. Garnish: Wrap thin cucumber slice around inside of glass and top with borage flowers.

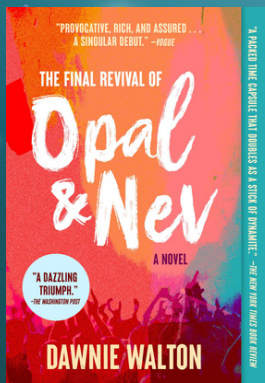


Book Recommendations for the Hollywood Wives!



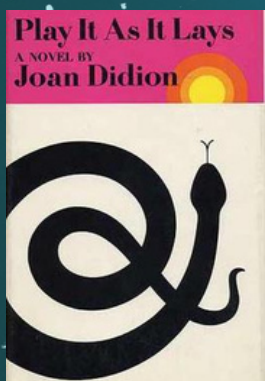
Advika: *Scandals of Classic Hollywood* by Anne Helen Petersen

As a movie buff, Advika is well versed in the classic films of yesteryear. But she might not understand how much the stars of these films were impacted by fame and gossip, sometimes with tragic consequences. It's a delicious and insightful cultural history of Hollywood's past century that still has reverberations today.



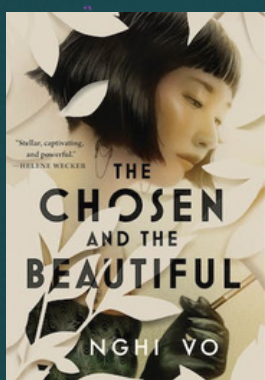
Nova: *The Final Revival of Opal and Nev* by Dawnie Walton

Nova was a musician trying to forge her own path in the cookie-cutter record industry. So she would have appreciated this novel, an oral history of the rise and fall and comeback of an unlikely duo that created indelible music together, and the different paths their careers took once they went solo.



Evie: *Play It as It Lays* by Joan Didion

Set in 1960s Hollywood, Maria is a troubled actress married to a film director, and her breakdown is chronicled in an unconventional narrative style that aligns the reader closely with Maria's pain. Not only would Evie have found much to identify with in this iconic novel, she also would have sought to rewrite her own ending after reading this one.



Victoria: *The Chosen and the Beautiful* by Nghi Vo

Jordan Baker is front and center in this glittering, magical retelling of *The Great Gatsby*, which sees Jordan reimagined as a Vietnamese woman navigating wealth and class in 1920s high society. As a Hollywood wife, Victoria would see herself in Jordan's story, with both trying to keep true to themselves in a setting that is as glamorous as it is hostile to perceived outsiders.

Reality TV Watchlist



- **Real Housewives of New York City, Seasons 9 and 10**
- **Vanderpump Rules, Season 2**
- **Real Housewives of Atlanta, Season 9**
- **Real Housewives of Miami, Season 4**
- **Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, Seasons 5 and 11**
- **Summer House, Season 5**
- **Real Housewives of Potomac, Season 3**

Author's Note

Advika and the Hollywood Wives was born out of many varied ideas, including two self-imposed directives. When I think about the process of drafting this novel, I think of myself as a magpie: collecting little bits from all corners of my life and the internet and books and podcasts and television—from Destiny's Child to *Columbo*, from *Bend It Like Beckham* to *Behind the Music*—and blending them all into a narrative that I can only hope is as compelling to read as it was to write.




Photo Credit: Sub/Urban Photography

The beginnings of *Advika* overlap with concluding work on my debut novel, *Dava Shastri's Last Day*. My first novel had checked off a lot of boxes for me in terms of letting me explore my interests in legacy, family, and music. (I tend to think of it as “me in book form.”) By the time the manuscript for *Dava* was delivered and accepted in December 2020, I was eager to get started on another project. As I began to muse about what this new novel would be about, I knew two things for sure: one, the protagonist would be an Indian-American woman, and two, it would feature elements of pop culture. (All my fiction will always include these two components in some way.)

But I didn't want to write *Dava Part II*. This, for me, meant explicitly *not* writing a family saga, because both my debut novel and two other trunked manuscripts on my hard drive had all focused on parents and their children.

So the inspiration for *Advika* came from a failed short story, a reality show, and my own life.




Here's a fun fact: Despite earning an MFA in creative writing close to twenty years ago, *Dava* is my first published work of fiction. Before I became a published author, the work I was proudest of was not my two trunked novels, but a short story that aimed to tell the entire history of a band exclusively through what had been written or documented about it: album liner notes, song lyrics, interviews, oral histories, etc. As much as I loved this story, the literary world did not, and it was rejected many, many times.

But I loved the process of working on this story because it was so different from anything else I had ever written. And I wanted to challenge myself and do something similar in my second novel...whatever it would turn out to be.

Three days before the end of 2020, I spent the evening watching a series that gave me a lot of comfort during the pandemic: *Real Housewives*. In this case, I binge-watched several episodes of an old season of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. And I found myself fascinated by a dynamic playing out onscreen between a married couple, in which the husband seemed mostly indifferent, and occasionally hostile, to his wife. Since this particular season had aired years earlier, I already knew that the pair had divorced not long after filming. The husband had then married a much younger woman—making her his fifth wife.

Why would you think he would be any different with you versus his other wives? I wondered about Mrs. Number Five. *Especially when you can actually tune in to watch how he treated the wife that preceded you.*

It was the light bulb moment that provided the premise of this novel. I decided that I would explore why a twentysomething woman would choose to wed someone many decades older than her. In a nod to the series that inspired my idea, the husband would be a film producer, and his wives would each be famous in distinctive ways: a movie star, a pop star, and yes, a reality star.




The novel came alive when I had the following idea about how the couple met, which I put in the pitch to my editor: “She was holding a cocktail shaker; he was holding an Oscar.”

This spoke so much to the power imbalance embedded in the relationship between these two people who are opposite in so many ways—age, background, income, and stature—as well as to why my protagonist, Advika Srinivasan, would be so entranced by Julian Zelding that she would throw caution to the wind and marry him.

Here’s the thing about writing a novel like this with an Indian-American woman at the center: it’s hard to write about a whirlwind May-December romance when the “May” has a family who would never be able to disinterestedly stand by as the courtship happened, let alone a wedding. It’s rare for Desi families to not be involved in each other’s lives and choices. And when I say family, I don’t just mean blood relations. I mean everyone in your family’s social circle.

In order for Advika to be vulnerable enough to want to marry a man she barely knows who is also four decades older than her, I basically had to find a way to shake the foundations of her family with a major tragedy. This actually dovetailed quite perfectly with my self-imposed rule to not write another family saga, but instead spotlight something that had been of vital importance to me in my adolescence: the singular connection I had found within a circle of family friends I had grown up with and remain close to today.

I wanted my novel to be a tribute to this group of tight-knit friendships that felt like family. My siblings and I are very close to our cousins, but we lived far away from them and saw them infrequently. Our family friends became our de facto cousins, people we grew up with and spent holidays with, evolving from gawky teenagers to twentysomethings to oldersomethings with



gray hair and kids of our own. It's the kind of friendship in which we will dissolve into laughter just by being in the same room together, and we know we could call in an emergency at all hours for any reason.

As a young person then, and as a South Asian woman always, there are so many ways in which a sense of belonging eluded me. But being within this group of friends is by far the safest and most understood I have ever felt, and I did not realize how formative and special they were to me until we no longer lived in the same state. I wanted to honor that experience by having Advika's friends be her support system as she copes with tragedy, familial estrangement—and a Hollywood marriage.

By setting the novel in the dark, glittery world of Tinseltown, I could resuscitate the experimental aspect of my short story by having Advika research her predecessors by consuming all that had been documented about the women in the public sphere. The former Mrs. Zeldings' lives would be defined by an amalgamation of interview sound bites, career resumes, biographies, liner notes, and YouTube clips, presenting a portrait of each woman, alluring but incomplete.

To have Advika go down rabbit holes to solve the mystery of her husband through a combination of online research, IRL conversations, and even amateur safecracking gave me the unexpected pleasure of writing a detective novel of sorts, as Advika seeks to reveal Julian Zelding's true character. And at the same time, it gave me the chance to explore a topic that has always nettled me: women who have disappeared from center stage or were never given the chance to shine to begin with. The women who had their lives and careers damaged by the capricious, irresponsible actions of men. In many ways, this novel is pure wish fulfillment, but never more so than in the idea of giving women the opportunity to cosmically team up to help take down the man who wronged them, winning back control over their own narratives in the process.



Not too long ago, during a difficult day, I came across *The First Wives Club* and sank into it midway through. When the film reached its exultant ending, with Bette Midler, Diane Keaton, and Goldie Hawn defiantly singing Lesley Gore's "You Don't Own Me," the performance not only cheered me up, but really moved me too.

In that moment I realized that "You Don't Own Me" would be a fitting theme song for this novel, but really for all of us, as personal and bodily autonomy continues to be threatened to an alarming degree. In writing Advika's story, I could have never imagined how much her relationship with Julian and what he wanted from her would have echoes in current events. And how she manages to push back against his control, with the help of her friends and her "weird sisterhood" with the other wives, buoyed me as I wrote it and still buoys me now.

I hope this book does the same for you and serves as a reminder that we need each other in order to resist all the forces that aim to subjugate us, suppress our rights, and claim our joy.

Kirthana Ramiseti

June 1, 2022