Questions for Book-group Discussion

1. Hope tells Jordan that everyone lies sometimes. She feels that lies can protect people's feelings. Do you feel this is true? Are some lies kind, or justifiable? And if so, where does one draw the line?

2. Aaron believes in "signs" sent to him by his late father, and toward the end, Olivia feels that her late husband, Harold, has sent her a sign. At the same time, Olivia resists the idea that "everything happens for a reason." Does believing in signs imply a belief in fate?

3. How was Dylan's identity shaped by not knowing her father?

4. Hope tells Jordan she's never felt like she was "enough" for the people in her life. What do you think she means by this? Have you ever felt this way?

5. When Carly meets Hope in the park for the second time, she admits she got pregnant to protect what was hers (Aaron). Compare this with how Hope has lied to protect Aaron, Dylan, and herself.

6. Olivia believes terminally ill individuals have a right to choose when they die to avoid unnecessary suffering. Dylan disagrees. What do you think? What issues are raised with either position?

7. Discuss how everyone's feelings about Elvis evolve throughout the novel, and why Olivia might still hold on to her vision of Elvis as a savior, despite the imperfections in his life.

8. Aaron suggests that we never know what some of our bad decisions cost us. Can you think of an example from real life that illustrates this?

9. Wade tells Dylan that our parents don't need to define us. Discuss how each of the main characters has been affected by their parents' approval or disapproval, and how they reacted to it.

10. Aaron tries to do the right thing, but also feels that, on occasion, the ends can justify the means. Do you agree? Why or why not?

11. Hope believes that you can love someone truly and deeply regardless of whether they deserve it. Do you think we love people for their imperfections or in spite of them?

An Interview with the Author

What was the inspiration for Graceland*?*

I was an almost pathologically shy child, and like the character of Hope, I longed to be someone more outgoing, ebullient someone like my older sister, who regaled my parents with funny stories at the dinner table. I wanted to write a novel that centered on this deep need to please others, often at the expense of our true selves. So *Graceland* became, at heart, a story about identity the tug between who we truly are and who we want to be, or (perhaps more often) who we feel others want us to be. All the main characters grapple with this issue on their road trip to Memphis.

How did Graceland become the destination?

I saw a lot of comic possibilities in the character of Olivia, a washed-up actress who's obsessed with Elvis and determined to visit his home one last time before she dies. At the same time, I loved Graceland as a metaphor. All the main characters stumble toward self-understanding and self-acceptance during their journey. Without realizing it, they are searching for grace.

Olivia Grant is a former soap-opera actress. How did you gain insight into that world?

I occasionally act as an extra on movies and TV shows filmed in the Boston area, so that gave me some familiarity with Olivia's world. I've never worked on a soap opera, but I watched a lot of them growing up. My grandmother lived with us, and on school breaks, I joined her for the whole line-up: *As the World Turns, Days of Our Lives, Another World.*

From the first page, when you write that Olivia never played a scene without using light and shadow to her advantage, it's clear light and

darkness will be symbolic in the story. How does that tie into the identity theme?

Olivia loves bright light and warm sunshine, whereas Hope is more comfortable in the shadows. You'll notice that most of Hope's scenes take place at night, or in dark places   subways, dimly lit parks, a jail cell. An extrovert by nature, Olivia has compensated for the difficulties in her early life by seeking fame. She longs to be seen, to be adored by as many people as possible. In contrast, Hope hides in the shadows. She will do anything, even lie, to turn attention away from her. I think that's why we can sympathize with Hope, even when she makes mistakes. She doesn't lie for power or prestige, she simply doesn't want to be seen.

And what about Dylan, the sixteen-year-old activist with flaming pink hair?

Dylan is struggling to figure out who she is, so symbolically she flits between light and shadow. With her hot-pink hair and gray camouflage clothing, she embodies aspects of both her grandmother and her mother. I've always been fascinated by how certain traits are passed down within families, or sometimes skip a generation. Dylan is more like Olivia than like her mother, and the way they bond (to the exclusion of Hope) was a key jumping-off place for the novel.

How did you come up with the character of George, who cross-dresses as Jordan?

I've had friends and acquaintances with this identity, and I didn't see them represented in the novels I read. I've noticed more transgender characters in fiction recently, but no one who identifies as a cross-dresser, and it felt important to me that they be seen. As Hope's best friend, Jordan also presents a nice balance to the struggles faced by the three main characters. Having endured conflict with family and friends who didn't accept her, Jordan has embraced her truth and is able to help Hope recognize her own issues.

Dylan is an LGBTQ activist, but her sexuality isn't a focus in the novel.

I like to think that we can include LGBTQ characters in novels without the story being about their sexual preference. Dylan's sexuality, which she admits she's still exploring, is one aspect of who she is, but it wasn't the focus of the novel. Dylan's struggle is trying to understand how her personality has been shaped by her parents and whether that needs to define her.

Do you see Carly as the villain in the novel?

Yes and no. Carly is more complicated than she seems at first. In my experience, people who do bad things rarely see themselves as bad people. Carly believes her charitable work makes up for the fact that she is often "direct," and "honest," or "real." (Which is how I find many mean people view their actions.) She justifies her meanness as protecting what's hers. And Carly is not entirely wrong. Hope has done things, like sleeping with Aaron, that have hurt her. The difference, I feel, is that Hope can recognize and admit her mistakes whereas Carly continues to justify her actions and blame others.

You live north of Boston. What kind of research did you have to do in order to create this road trip to Memphis?

Naturally, several visits to Memphis, including a complete road trip, were crucial. I wrangled my way into a senator's Memphis office, the police facility at 201 Poplar, and a locked auditorium at the University of Memphis. And picture my friend and I women of a certain age calling out a car window to a group of U of M students, "Can you point us to the frats?" I also spent a fair amount of time touring Graceland, watching the Peabody ducks, and drinking Memphis Blues martinis. Somebody had to.

Are you an Elvis fan?

When I started writing *Graceland*, I didn't have strong feelings about Elvis. One of the first things I did, though, was read the two-volume biography by Peter Guralnick, and that made me appreciate Elvis's groundbreaking contributions to the music of the time. And he did have those amazing, smoking eyes.

At the end of the novel   without giving too much away   you've left it a little ambiguous whether certain characters will reconcile. In a comic novel, why not give readers a more definitive happily-ever-after?

I like happy endings, but what I like even more are hopeful endings. I resisted the urge to tie things up too quickly or neatly. The issues that the characters are dealing with are not going to be solved all at once, but I like the idea that they're moving toward something. It's a personal philosophy. We live in extraordinarily difficult times right now, and that's how I choose to live   to move forward with hope.