

PRETTY BABY Discussion Questions

*Please Note: Book Club Discussion Questions do contain spoilers.
Please wait to review the questions until after you've finished reading the novel.*

1. Both Heidi's and Willow's actions are fueled by their experiences with deep personal tragedy. Did you find them to be sympathetic characters? Are their offenses justified? Do you think they should be held responsible?
2. Who do you think is most to blame for Willow's abuse in her foster home: Joseph, the caseworker Amber Adler, or someone else? If you were in Willow's shoes, would you have tried to do something differently to remedy the situation?
3. Who is the hero in Pretty Baby, and who is the victim? Does this change throughout the novel?
4. What do you think of Chris's character? Is he a good husband? How does he contribute to the events that unfold in the novel? What could he have done to prevent Heidi's downfall?
5. Are Willow's feelings for Matthew genuine, or a result of having no one else in her life to trust? Do you foresee a time in their lives when Willow and Matthew will reunite, or would Willow be better off making a fresh start?
6. Are Zoe's dramatics typical of a preteen girl, or is she herself a character on the brink of becoming unhinged? Does her own behavior contribute to Heidi's undoing? Why or why not?
7. Heidi goes above and beyond to help Willow, a complete stranger. What would you have done in such a situation? How much are you willing to sacrifice to help someone you don't know? How far is too far?
8. What do you think is the significance of the title Pretty Baby?



BIOGRAPHY

Mary Kubica is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of four novels, including *The Good Girl*, *Pretty Baby*, *Don't You Cry* and *Every Last Lie*. A former high school history teacher, Mary holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in History and American Literature. She lives outside of Chicago with her husband and two children, where she enjoys photography, gardening and caring for the animals at a local shelter. Her first novel *The Good Girl* was an Indie

Next pick in August of 2014, received a Strand Critics Nomination for Best First Novel and was a nominee in the Goodreads Choice Awards in Debut Goodreads Author and in Mystery & Thriller for 2014. Mary has been described as “a writer of vice-like control,” (*Chicago Tribune*) and her novels have been praised as “hypnotic” (*People*) and “thrilling and illuminating” (*Los Angeles Times*).

She is currently working on her next novel.

Photo by Sarah Jastre

About the Author

Full text biography:

Mary Kubica

Nationality: American

Occupation : Novelist

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Personal Information:

Married; children: one son, one daughter. **Education:** Miami University, Oxford, OH, B.A. **Addresses:** Home: Chicago, IL. **E-mail:** mary.kubica@yahoo.com.

Career Information:

Educator. Warren Township High School, Gurnee, IL, teacher.

Writings:

- *The Good Girl*, Harlequin (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada), 2014.

Sidelights:

Historian Mary Kubica earned a bachelor's degree in history and American literature from Miami University in Ohio. She has taught history at Warren Township High School in Gurnee, Illinois. Living in Chicago with her husband and two children, she enjoys photography, gardening, writing, and caring for animals at her local shelter.

In 2014 Kubica wrote the psychological thriller *The Good Girl*, about a kidnapping that goes terribly wrong. Mia Dennett is the black-sheep daughter of the prominent and wealthy Chicago family led by the cold and irascible Judge James Dennett. Mia is an inner-city art teacher who goes out to meet her occasional boyfriend at a local bar, but instead hooks up with Colin Thatcher, a charming and smooth stranger. Little does she know that Thatcher is a nefarious man for hire who has been stalking her for days learning her routine. Expecting a one-night stand, Mia is instead kidnapped and abducted to a secluded cabin in rural Minnesota, with a ransom demanded from her wealthy family.

Surprisingly, Thatcher has a change of heart, does not collect a ransom, and lets Mia go. However, the ordeal has left Mia with temporary amnesia that blocks out part of her abduction. Sympathetic mother Eve helps her daughter recover, try to regain her memories, and lose the confusion that now grips her. Chicago police detective Gabe Hoffman is on the case to track down Thatcher and learn who his bosses who ordered the kidnapping were. During his investigation, Hoffman is surprised to discover that Judge Dennett is not interested in pursuing the case, leaving Hoffman and Eve perplexed.

Kubica wrote the book from the present-tense points of view of main characters Mia, Eve, Hoffman, and Thatcher, who offer bits of the story in chapters labeled "Before" and "After" in reference to the kidnapping. In a review in *Booklist*, Rebecca Vnuk found the alternative distribution of point of view among the four characters puzzling; nevertheless, she said "Kubica's debut thriller builds suspense steadily and will have readers guessing what's really going on." Also finding that the present-tense chapters from each character give the story an odd stiffness, a critic in *Kirkus Reviews*

yet commented that Kubica "makes the characters engaging and moves the story along at a good clip." More positively, appreciating the novel's structure and deep Midwestern roots, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor praised Kubica for a powerful debut and giving Mia heart, "which makes it all the more devastating when the author breaks it."

Writing *The Good Girl* was a secret labor of love for Kubica, who told no one but her husband that she was writing the book during the years she cared for her young children. Since she did not intend to publish the book right away, she had no deadline pressures and could write the book at her own pace. "There was no outline," she remarked in an interview with Donald Liebenson for the *Chicago Tribune Online*; "I had the starting point and a couple of details, and that was that. I was actually a decent chunk of the way through ... before I figured out how it was going to end." She explained to Pam Lambert at *Publishers Weekly Online*: "I felt really, really connected to these characters, and, as I look back on it now, I feel like it was my characters who told their stories to me."

On *Jacksonville.com*, Richard Klinzman argued that while many readers "may compare this story to 'Gone Girl,' ... that would be a mistake and unfair," as Kubica offers a fresh new style. Finding the story engaging and wanting to angrily talk back to unlikable characters, Kate Appleton, writing online at *Novelicious*, commented: "This was a surprisingly intense and emotional thriller from a debut novelist where you find yourself supporting the most unlikely of characters."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 1, 2014, Rebecca Vnuk, review of *The Good Girl*, p. 33.
- *BookPage*, August, 2014, Sheila M. Trask, "A Daughter's Captor," author interview.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, June 15, 2014, review of *The Good Girl*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 5, 2014, review of *The Good Girl*, p. 41.

ONLINE

- *All about Romance*, <http://www.likesbooks.com/> (August 8, 2014), Dabney Grinnan, "AAR's Maggie Interviews Mary Kubica, Author of *The Good Girl*."
- *BookPage Online*, <http://bookpage.com/> (July 29, 2014), Sheila M. Trask, review of *The Good Girl*.
- *Chicago Tribune Online*, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/> (November 1, 2014), Donald Liebenson, "Mary Kubica Makes 'Good.'"
- *Jacksonville.com*, <http://jacksonville.com/> (September 7, 2014), Richard Klinzman, review of *The Good Girl*.
- *Mary Kubica Home Page*, <http://www.marykubica.com> (November 1, 2014).
- *Novelicious*, <http://www.novelicious.com/> (July 17, 2014), Kate Appleton, review of *The Good Girl*.
- *Publishers Weekly Online*, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/> (May 30, 2014), Pam Lambert, "Stealth Writer: PW Talks with Mary Kubica."*

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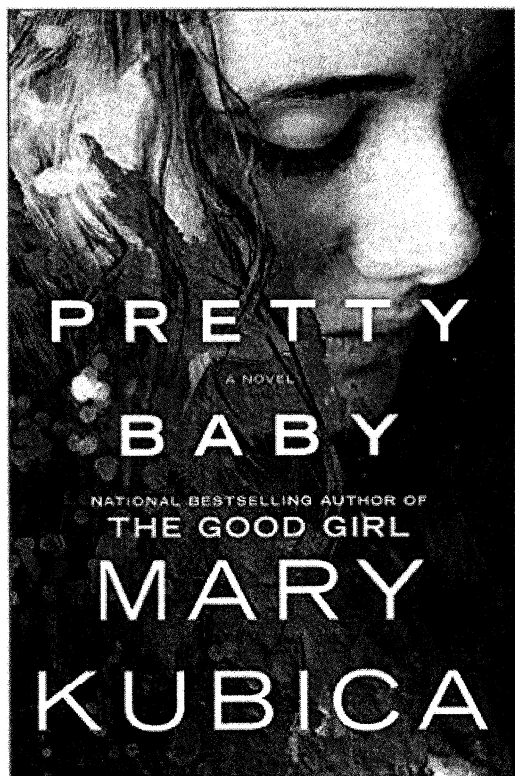
THE BLOG

Pretty Baby: An Interview With Mary Kubica

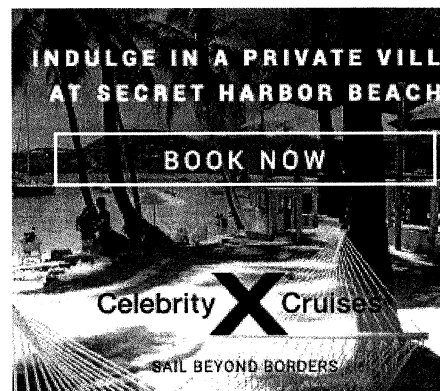
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Like 73

Brandi Megan Granett
Author

Mary Kubica, author of [The Good Girl](#) and the newly released [Pretty Baby](#), takes readers through suspenseful twists and turns after a chance meeting between two women on a train platform. Fans of Gillian Flynn's [Gone Girl](#) will appreciate this interesting take on the thin line that separates sanity and darker impulses. We talked about her inspiration for *Pretty Baby*, being surprised as a writer, and what it means to be a villain.



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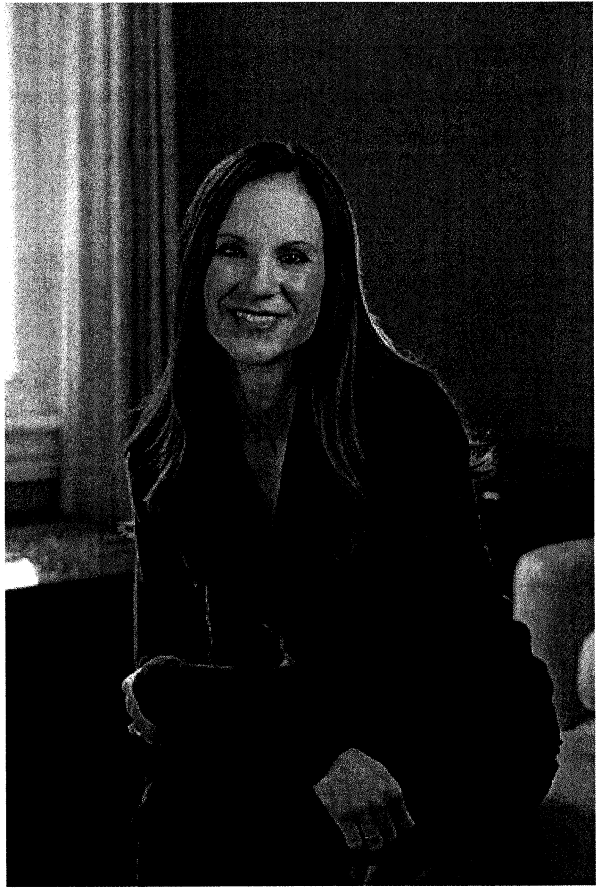
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Podcast

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Pretty Baby begins innocently with a chance meeting of two women in a train station. Tell us about how you found Heidi and Willow.

Truthfully, I believe Willow is the one who found me. I was struggling to come up with a new and compelling storyline for my second novel and starting to get a bit frustrated. I quickly dismissed each idea I came up with for their implausibility or lack of uniqueness when I was struck by an image of a young, homeless girl with a baby waiting beside the Chicago 'L'. I had no idea who she was at the time or what her story would be - or how it was that she sprang suddenly into my mind - but I knew she was at the core of my next book. I immediately started writing the opening scenes of the novel, where Heidi encounters Willow for the first time, and at that point the story was off and running.



Your book masterfully moves through twists and turns. I don't want to give away of them away, but I do want to know more about your writing process. Do you outline or plan? Do your characters ever surprise you with twists you didn't see coming?

I don't outline or plan, but prefer to develop my characters and let them take control of the writing process. When I begin each novel I have only a vague idea of where I'm headed, and take it one day or one chapter at a time. I find that overthinking the storyline takes away from the natural flow of events and makes the narrative feel deliberate or forced. My characters surprise me all the

they make along the way. I often have little or no idea how my stories will end until I write the final scenes.

Pretty Baby dives deep into moral ambiguity. How would you define a hero? What about a villain? Can a character be both?

Yes, a character can be both a villain and a hero, and I think my first two novels are proof of this. A hero to me is someone who shows courage and makes difficult decisions for the sake of others; a villain is the antithesis of this, someone who intentionally inflicts harm on others, whether physically or emotionally. Moral ambiguity is certainly at the heart of *Pretty Baby*, as good characters make questionable decisions, or they make immoral decisions for moral reasons or vice versa. The line between good and bad blurs in this book, as issues of charity and abuse, adultery and mental illness emerge. At the heart of moral ambiguity are also those complex characters who do things the reader may not expect them to do, making us question whether or not a character is who we presumed them to be.

This novel alternates between several different points of view. How did you decide which characters could tell this story? What do the multiple voices add to the narrative?

Although I knew *Pretty Baby* would center on the story of Willow and her baby, my first instinct was to tell the tale from only Heidi and her husband Chris's perspectives. I started writing the novel this way, and then partway through decided Willow needed a chance to tell her own side of the story, and boy does she have quite a story to tell, one which certainly couldn't be held back. As an author, I love writing with multiple perspectives, as I feel they offer the reader a well-rounded view of the characters and a sneak peek at each of their innermost thoughts. It also provides readers with a chance to see the story from all angles rather than just one.

Your first book, *The Good Girl*, enjoyed great success. What changed about your writing process between *The Good Girl* and *Pretty Baby*? What's next for you?

In all honesty, not much changed between *The Good Girl* and *Pretty Baby*. I'm a firm believer in If it ain't broke, don't fix it, and so truly held firm to this when writing *Pretty Baby*. I did learn quite a bit about myself and my writing strengths and weaknesses in working with an agent and an editor, and was able to apply this knowledge to *Pretty Baby*, but as for my day to day process, not much changed.

I am currently finishing up my third novel, *Don't You Cry*, which simultaneously tracks the disappearance of a young Chicago woman and the appearance of a mysterious woman on the eastern shores of Lake Michigan in a small harbor town. *Don't You Cry* will release in the summer of 2016 from MIRA Books.

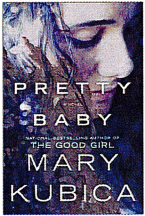


BOOK REVIEWS

'Baby' Is A Pretty Feat Of Misdirection

July 30, 2015 · 7:03 AM ET

BETHANNE PATRICK



Pretty Baby

by Mary Kubica

Hardcover, 380
pages

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A novelist friend once told me she loves the TV series *American Crime* because it focuses on "the other people affected, the ones you never hear about, when a crime happens." You might think creators of fiction, like my friend, would be the first to consider "the other people affected," but finding a suspense novel that upends both the linearity and the nature of what

constitutes "crime" occurs less than I might like.

Fortunately, Mary Kubica's second novel, *Pretty Baby*, plays both with the timeline and with the notion of who is most harmed. Heidi Wood, a social worker, lives in downtown Chicago with her husband, Chris, and their bright but newly sullen 12-year-old daughter, Zoe. While commuting, Heidi notices a disheveled teenage girl toting a filthy, miserable baby. After seeing the pair more than once, Heidi approaches the girl — who gives her name as Willow Greer — and invites her to a local diner for a meal, ostensibly to discover whether the girl needs to go to a shelter.

We learn a lot about Heidi, Chris and Zoe in the first half of *Pretty Baby*, especially after Heidi invites Willow and baby Ruby to move in to their apartment. Chris travels a lot on business, but although a colleague is eager to get him into bed, he adores his wife and daughter — even when the latter tests her parents' nerves by shutting her mother and father out of her thoughts and room.

It's the perfect setup: Willow, seedy, suspicious and even scary (is that blood on her

undershirt?), is going to worm her way into this family and destroy them. Will she steal all their valuables? Have an affair with Chris, who struggles to reconnect with Heidi after a serious health scare? Ruin Zoe's life and reputation? Heidi is so preoccupied with getting the sick baby well (it takes awhile for a doctor to diagnose a urinary tract infection, brought on by Ruby's dirty diaper) that she fails to consider most of the possible complications.

Kubica patiently constructs a tableau offering glimpses of Willow's before and after stories: She landed in a foster home with a dangerously abusive father figure — and, at some point, wound up in juvenile detention being questioned about murders (yes, plural). When and where did Willow give birth to Ruby? Who is Ruby's father? What does Willow want from the Wood family? When and how did she get taken to detention?

Most readers will get caught up in these questions as they watch Heidi try to take over all responsibility for Ruby's care. And when Chris engages a private detective to find out more about Willow, the story teeters on the edge of a climax in which one family's kindness is repaid with evil.

But Kubica has delicately misdirected our attention. I normally dislike endings that unspool quickly, seeing them as the result of fatigue or even laziness on the author's part, yet for *Pretty Baby*, the stage has been set while we were looking up toward the balcony. The fast-paced final chapters show us how easily we all ignore hidden infections in favor of surface wounds, and why "the ones you never hear about" may carry the deepest secrets.

Bethanne Patrick is a freelance writer and critic who tweets @TheBookMaven.

Read an excerpt of *Pretty Baby*

Mary Kubica follows up 'Good Girl' with 'Pretty Baby'

By Donald Liebenson

The Chicago Tribune, September 18, 2015



What a difference a year makes. In 2014, Mary Kubica, Plainfield mother of two, was a first-time author making the rounds of local bookstores and libraries to introduce herself to readers as her twisty and twisted debut novel, "The Good Girl" was gathering buzz and earning favorable comparisons to the works of Gillian Flynn. On Sept. 22, Kubica will appear at the Park Ridge Public Library as a certified New York Times bestselling author with a new novel, "Pretty Baby" that is earning equally rapturous reviews.

"It's been really exciting," said Kubica, a former teacher. "When 'The Good Girl' came out nobody knew who I was; they had maybe heard of the book but hadn't

read it. (Now) when I go to events for 'Pretty Baby,' it seems a good portion of the audience has read 'The Good Girl.'"

"Pretty Baby" is a multi-perspectived thriller that unfolds through the alternating voices of Heidi, a compassionate Chicago social worker, Chris, her loving, but overworked and oft-absent husband, and Willow, a homeless teenage mother, whom Heidi ultimately invites to move with her baby into her home. Let's leave it at that, except to say that as with "The Good Girl," it's an increasingly harrowing suspense novel that builds to a "now you know the rest of the story" climax.

"After I sold 'The Good Girl,' I was offered a two-book deal. I had no idea what I was going to write," Kubica said. "They were so excited about 'The Good Girl.' I thought the second book had a lot to live up to."

A vision of Willow and her baby came to her. "I had no idea who she was or what the story was going to be, but that was my starting point," she said. "I hopped on my laptop and started working. I wrote right away what became the opening scenes in which Heidi encounters Willow for the first time and at that point I was off and running."

As is Kubica's writing career. She has completed her third suspense novel ("Don't You Cry") to be published next summer, and is about to "dive into" her fourth.

"The Good Girl" has been optioned for the screen by Anonymous Content, producers of TV series and feature films such as "True Detective," "The End of the Tour" and the upcoming [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) western, "The Revenant." Presently, it is being discussed as a television mini-series. Kubica will have creative input into the production, but will not write the screenplay. Her choice. "I have no idea how that side of the business works," she said. "It's better left in the hands of professionals."

In her book-related travels, Kubica has had the opportunity to interact with favorite authors. She met Alice Hoffman at the Tucson Festival of Books. "That was huge," Kubica said. "I've been a fan of hers as long as I can remember."

And now, Kubica has her own growing fan base. "Everyday, it seems, someone is posting a comment about either of the books (on Twitter or Facebook)," she said. "They are so supportive. It makes my day. I've had a number of groups invite me to Skype with their book club. That's a really fun thing I've also gotten to do."

Success, years in the making (it took her four years to write 'The Good Girl' and several more to find an agent and then a publisher), has not spoiled Kubica. "Everything is pretty much the same other than from time to time I get on an airplane to go talk to readers," she laughed. "I'm able to keep my routines. I take my children — second and fourth graders — to school and use that big chunk of the day to write so by the time I pick them up, I can just focus on them. I have the best of both worlds."



Mary Kubica