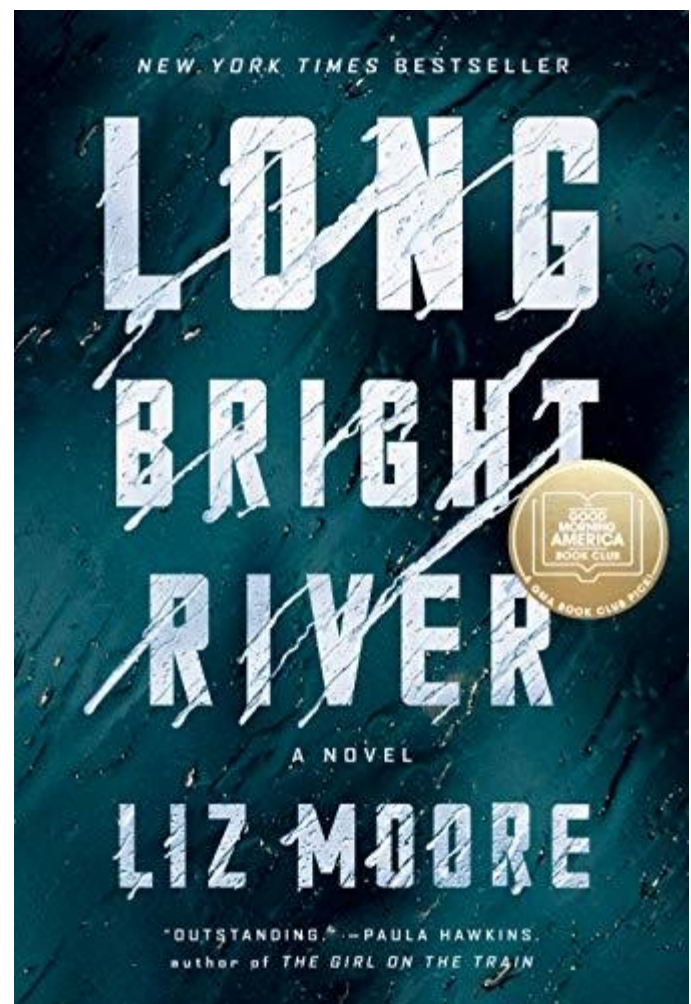*This book irritated me until the moment I couldn't stop reading it.*
—Tom Hoyer

From Maribeth Fischer

Eleven writers weighed in on *Long Bright River* and unlike our last online discussion, where there was much agreement, the group seemed split on this one: half liked Mickey; the main character: half thought the book would have been better if she were more likeable. Half of us felt the ending was too open-ended; the other half felt the ending was true to life. Where we did seem to mostly agree was on the structure of the book, which for me, as a writer, was helpful to consider. So often, we are all about our story and yet what a great reminder that HOW a story is told can make the difference between readers wanting to turn the page or not.

Like many of you, I miss discussing books face-to-face, but I also appreciate reading these printed answers. Taken collectively, they give me much to mull over in regards to the book and as with the last online discussion, I come away with new insights that will make me a better reader—and writer (I hope). So again, thank you to those who gave their time and thought to coming up with questions and answering them. **If you have suggestions for how we can do this differently or better, I'd love to know your ideas.**

Question 1: How did Moore do with the portrayal of addiction (perhaps not just in Kasey but in families, neighborhoods, etc.)? What did she get right and what did she get wrong? Did the list of names at the start (first page) and the end of the book (pg. 465) add anything for you? Thanks to **Mary Jo Balistreri** for help with this question

Karen Schneiderman

I have had no experience with addiction within my close family or friends and therefore found the depictions of addiction compelling and informative, and of course, sad and terrible. In one of my writing classes, my classmates were surprised that I had no knowledge of Al-Anon. Moore painted a very vivid picture of Kensington for me. The book gave me a greater understanding of the "long river" of addiction, pain, and misery that can run from a parent to subsequent generations.

Maribeth Fischer

Let me begin by saying that I am not a fan of addiction narratives. They all seem predictable (the addict finds recovery or doesn't) and either way there's always that cringe-worthy scene where the addict makes an ass of him/herself in the moment before hitting bottom (the drunk stumbling on stage in *A Star is Born*). For that reason, I was 100% NOT interested in reading this book.

I also don't know much about addiction beyond the fact that I understand how statistically and staggeringly low the rates of recovery are.

That said, I thought Moore did a terrific job of showing the reality of addiction in that for many families, there is no "saving" the addict. Often, the family has no choice but to give up, either because the addict dies of the addiction or because the family reaches a breaking point. This, of course, is the back story with Mickey and Kasey, and it rang true. Moore also illustrated how addiction affects the whole family: not only Gee's rage at what drugs did to her daughter (Mickey and Casey's mother) but also the way addiction begets lies and secrecy. There was so much lying in Mickey's family, to her, to each other.

What also rang true: the generational effect of addiction. Kasey's mom was addicted, Kasey was born addicted, and there is that unanswerable question of what will happen to Thomas.

Also true: the way everyone knows and accepts the plague of addiction: the shopkeepers, the cops, even the family members. For them, there's no real drama. Addiction is routine, repetitive and boring. I liked that the urgency in the book wasn't about Kasey's drug addiction but about the fact that she was missing (and women like her were being murdered).

The setting rang absolutely true. I loved how Moore established the city of Kensington as a character, showing the loss of industry that led to cycles of poverty, ill health, and hopelessness, which made drugs an appealing escape.

What didn't ring true? Oddly, Kasey's sobriety. It felt too easy. All these years of never being able to kick the habit and suddenly she does? And yes, she has motivation; she doesn't want to lose another child, but I felt so suspicious.

The list of names did nothing for me. It was a sort of beautiful literary memorializing touch and it didn't hurt the book to have the lists, but I wish there was a way to have made that list matter somehow.

Carolyn Walter

I thought the author did a very credible job in portraying the addiction process (including continual relapses) within male and female addicts, especially regarding pregnancies and newborns. Her portrayal of addictions within neighborhoods like Kensington seemed very credible. The only place I thought she overreached was in Gee's character. My knowledge of grandparent caregivers has led me to believe that grandmothers tend to be angry at daughters and sons-in-law, but are able to be compassionate with their grandchildren. Gee was not very compassionate toward the girls and wanted to separate them.

Question 2: Many readers struggled with the main character of Mickey. One reader called her "rigid," and referred to her refusal to cuddle with her son; another felt her too willing to take risks (that seemed unrealistic). Another called her distant—look at how withholding she is in the first scene. In addition, we can all see that she has no real friends, is estranged from her family, has no relationship (and apparently never has beyond the awful choice of Simon). She doesn't seem to have any allies on the police force, despite working with the department for years (aside from Truman, to whom she hasn't been a good friend). Are Mickey's love for her sister (whom she hasn't spoken to in five years) and her son enough to offset all the flaws? Would the book have been better if Mickey had been a more likeable/knowable character? Why or Why not.

Victor Letonoff

I will say Mickey is a hard person to like, though as a cop, I know many female cops like Mickey. One in particular comes to mind. Believe me, she's tough (and has to be to work in a male-dominated world). She has very few friends. She is plagued by complicated family problems. Because of my experience, Mickey is very believable to

me but to those who have not encountered someone like her, especially in law enforcement, she would be a hard character to understand.

Phil Fretz

Mickey seemed one dimensional in each of several aspects of her life. In her career on the force, she was not credible taking the frequent risks she did, and acting naively again and again. In her relationships with her sister and grandmother, Mickey was often very remote. She would have been more likable to have taken in stride the life she was given and tried harder not to ignore her father. Thomas had relatives Mickey kept from him as he struggled to find any companions in Mickey's family or elsewhere.

Zita Dresner

I did not find Mickey particularly unlikeable and/or unknowable. Given her childhood and upbringing—her abandonment by her mother and her father; her grandmother's coldness, cruelty, and rejection; and then Simon's treatment of her and her sister's descent into drugs—it seems realistic to me that she would be rigid, suspicious of people, and unable to form close relationships. She acted in some ways that one could certainly dislike and criticize, but I felt a great deal of sympathy for her because I thought the author made us understand why her past affected those negative behaviors.

Sandy Donnelly

I feel Moore portrayed Mickey perfectly throughout the book. Her personality is consistent with that of a stifled, over responsible oldest child, striving for the protection for her younger siblings that she never received. She bears the scars of rejection, lack of trust and betrayal by her elders. She carries those scars throughout her life.

Karen Schneiderman

I definitely think the book would have benefited if Mickey had been more likable. The book was so long and took so long to reveal the perpetrator, that by that time, I was fairly bored with Mickey's passive naivety. In *Writers & Lovers*, which we read for the last RBWG book club, Casey struggled with all kinds of problems, but her ambition, work ethic, friendships, positive relationships, made her a more interesting, more likable protagonist. Despite being a cop, Mickey is a fairly weak character. She is gullible, easily swayed from pursuing her dreams of college, unfriended, unable to put her own feelings of inadequacy aside to offer compassion to Truman, removed from all the O'Briens and having any sense of family for Thomas, unfeeling to Kacey when she comes to the house and looks at Thomas, and most importantly, unrealistically naive about Simon's egregious taking advantage of her sister.

It held my attention as a page-turner, as it did for my husband, but after finishing it, we both said we wouldn't recommend it to a friend. Maybe it was the "likeability" factor that made us feel that way.

Gail Comorat

I wouldn't call Mickey rigid but rather cautious. As I learned her story, I could understand why she was slow to trust. Gee, who should have been someone who protected her and Kasey, left them to fend for themselves when they were very young; Mickey had to learn early how to read situations and make good decisions. There were few demonstrations of love from Gee.

I'd say that Mickey's personality isn't one I'd call warm, but I could see her compassion in the way she pointed out to her partner the women on the street. I saw it in the way she spoke of the dead girl: *Fresh one? calls one of them. I nod, slowly. I don't like the way they—we—talk about the dead sometimes.* And:*She'll be light, at least, says Jackson, which feels like a hit to my stomach (pg. 18).*

In the opening pages, Mickey provides us with observations about herself: *Am I weak? Probably in some ways: stubborn, maybe, obstinate, mulish, reluctant to accept help even when it would serve me to. Physically afraid, too: not the first officer to throw herself in front of a bullet for a friend... Poor: yes. Weak: yes. Stupid: no. I'm not stupid (pg. 8).*

One of my favorite observations from Mickey comes late in the book: *But it was the children I was watching, not the gun. I was watching them and making a record of all of their small actions and exchanges, all their mannerisms, so that I might steal them and uses them myself (pg. 330)* (The most gifted child I ever taught once told me about how he'd stand at the fence and watch the other kids play at recess and wonder how they knew how to play like that).

She gives details about her new partner and a concise description of the dead girl. Mickey is an observer, a reporter, someone who's learned to rein in her emotions.

Yes, she's a loner. Yes, she puts herself in danger (but only to find her sister). Mickey has trust issues (but gradually learns to ask for help when needed from Truman, Mrs. Mahon, and Lauren). She's distanced herself from family (but desires a family). None of these aspects made me dislike her. I was compelled to keep reading about her, to learn more about what made her who she was. For me, Moore gave the readers plenty of reason to root for Mickey. She remained true to herself, but I could see her growth as the story moved forward.

Carolyn Walter

I really enjoyed the complex character of Mickey. I thought she was an introvert who relied on Kasey to connect with others. She was able to display warmth toward Thomas on many occasions and shared that her mother's love for her enabled her to

physically care for and soothe Thomas. While Mickey enjoyed a few years of love from her mother, her sister did not. I have always believed from my knowledge of human behavior, that it is better to have loved and lost than not to have been loved. Mickey's love for Kasey is displayed throughout the book. Mickey was the only "mother" that Kasey ever had: her grandmother was unable to provide such love for Casey. I think it might be difficult for female police to have friends on the mostly male police force. However, I agree, that Mickey had difficulty developing friendships. I enjoyed this character so I do not think the author needed to make her more likeable and knowable.

Question 3: Endings are tricky—how much do we resolve in a story or book? How much do we leave open-ended? Numerous readers of Long Bright River felt the ending of this book failed. And yes, there is a lot left unresolved—or perhaps not satisfactorily resolved—at the novel's end: Mickey withholds feelings from people and herself. By the end had she dealt with this? Has she changed in any material way? (Do we need her to) Also, Thomas is Kacey's biological son; have the two sisters dealt with this in any meaningful way? Is the bed scene where Kacey looks longingly at Thomas enough? How will they deal with this going forward? Finally, Simon, who is also Thomas's father, is kind of demoted from the narrative after the McDonalds scene. Discuss any **one** of these issues and argue for why it felt "resolved enough" for you as a reader or if you felt it wasn't developed, what might you have done differently? If Liz Moore were in a workshop with us, what advice would you offer? (Of course you might have your own unresolved issue to discuss). Thanks to **Renay Regardie** and **Phil Fretz** for her help with this question

Victor Letonoff

I thought the ending was weak. So many were unresolved. Of course everyone wants to see the sister get sober but there was nothing in the story that pointed to that actually happening. And if she did, Thomas would have to be resolved. That would have to be another book in itself. Maybe it will be, but for me the ending left me wanting more.

Renay Regardie

I am in the group that feels that the ending of the book failed. No, I don't think that everything needs to be tidied up but I think some issues needed to be dealt with, or at least shown that the characters were working on them. At close to 500 pages, Moore's readers deserved more. I am not sure if Mickey has grown or not. She still seems stuck, unwilling to give much of herself, to me. Her bitterness to Gee remains (if she goes to college, she'll stuff it in Gee's face, no understanding of what Gee

sacrificed in raising the two girls). At the end of the book Mickey, her father and Mrs. Mahon (the only person Mickey ever opened up to) are blissfully in the hospital visiting Kacey and the baby. Nothing is said of the other family members who have supported Kacey (and not Mickey), nothing is said of how Kacey and Mickey have or have not reconciled, that Thomas probably will never know who his birth mother is. I think Liz Moore needed to deal with some aspect of these unresolved conflicts— maybe even acknowledging that they are still points that may impact the sister's future relationship. I felt that the author in the closing scene tried to paint some kind of nice, bonding portrait that seems unrealistic to me. So much of the first half of the book focuses on Simon, yet he is dropped unceremoniously from the story. I might say the same about Connor (Dock), the drug dealer who is the father of Kacey's second child. Is he in the picture at all? Kacey has said he is not all bad, despite the fact that he pimped her, gave her drugs, and beat her up. Is he coming back as Daddy?

Just too much of nice at the end, when I think there is still much turmoil to come.

Phil Fretz

The ending was too cute vis-a-vis the sisters' reconciliation and Kacey's transformation. The sudden happy conclusion left a lot out about Mickey's family, her dad and Thomas. Kasey's abrupt evolution to motherhood was too uncomplicated. The new baby's chances? It just seemed that the speed of a confluence of positive events was unreal.

Zita Dresner

The entire issue of Thomas is unresolved at the end:

Will he remain with Mickey or be reclaimed by Kasey or told that Kasey is his mother, and move in with her and her father? Will Mickey and Kasey move in together and raise the children together? Of course, in some ways, one could argue that the lack of a definitive resolution is a failing the novel. On the other hand, the open-endedness may be more realistic. I have known situations in which women with drug addiction and children have successfully turned their lives around and in which they haven't, and their children have suffered horribly from being abandoned and reclaimed and abandoned over again. Kasey could be one of the former or the latter, so I think the author is saying that at this point in the story, in Kasey's life, the future is unclear. The author could have forced a happy ending or a tragic ending to resolve the situation, but she leaves it open because either resolution is possible.

Sandy Donnelly

I think Moore intentionally gave the reader just a glimpse of resolution leaving the door open for a sequel that will resolve some issues and questions.

I'd definitely like to see with these characters again as they adjust to their new relationships.

Question 4: Instead of using flashbacks in a more typical manner (the character is in scene and flashes back to a memory) Moore used the THEN and NOW structure. In the NOW sections we are moving forward in present time as Mickey tries to find her sister. In the THEN sections, we get the chronological story of the past (gradually learning the story of Mickey, Kasey, Gee and Simon). Did this structure work for you and did it help or hinder the "page turning" aspect of this book? Thanks to **Judy Catterton** for help with this question.

Joan Hartogs

The structure of the book worked very well for me as a reader. While I felt this story was anything but uplifting my interest was more intensified than it would ordinarily be for a story like this one. Also thought the author did a great job of character portrayals.

Renay Regardie

The structure absolutely worked for me. It is one of the strengths of the book. Bit by bit, we uncover all this backstory, generally in a chronological order so that THEN becomes closer to NOW. It made the pace of this overly long book move ahead at a good speed. Also I liked that many of the sections were short, or divided into snippets, which also contributed to making it an easy page turner. THEN and NOW helped the "page turning" aspect of the book greatly.

Gail Comorat

I really liked how this structure worked from the very first THEN section which opened with: *The first time I found my sister dead, she was sixteen.* It came on the heels of the opening NOW section that was pretty cut and dry. Moore kept the early THEN and NOW sections short, and I felt like the story unfolded in a way that encouraged me to keep reading, both to learn about the search for Kasey and to also learn what had taken place in the past. This wasn't the kind of mystery where I could always predict what was going to be revealed. Moore's writing was smart and she unspooled secrets slowly; she kept the tension tight. It was not until page 341 that we began to get the real secrets about Kasey, Simon, Mickey, and Thomas.

This manner of slow revelation worked for me because it seemed true to Mickey. It wouldn't have seemed right to me to have her suddenly remember a past incident in the middle of searching for her sister. In the NOW sections, action was key. Things moved fast and having her leap to a memory would have stopped the action. Most of the THEN sections provided a break in the action, but they also illuminated some information that I needed to know about what had gone down in Mickey and Kasey's past. It felt like the way Mickey would puzzle out the facts as she knew them: slowly and methodically, not rushing to conclusions. In the THEN sections, she wasn't in a rush to reveal her real relationship to Thomas. She held back facts as she did in the NOW sections.

Maribeth Fischer

I loved the structure of the THEN and NOW and feel it contributed to what kept me turning the pages. The tension of the present story (NOW) would be interrupted with a THEN section and oddly, the predictability of this is what worked. Often when flashbacks are inserted into scenes, I feel frustrated or annoyed to be taken out of the present and I'm in a hurry to get back. The flashbacks often feel random, prompted by something in the present, and although they are supposed to shed light on the present, they are still interruptions.

But with this structure (a short NOW chapter followed by a short THEN chapter), I almost felt reassured. I knew we would get back to the present shortly and I knew the flashback wouldn't change the present scene. It was almost like reading two narratives braided together. And I liked knowing that each THEN chapter would move me forward chronologically toward the present NOW.

The poet Donald Hall wrote a memoir years ago that did something similar. It was called *The Best Day, The Worst Day*, and it chronicled the story of his marriage to poet Jane Kenyon. The Worst Day was the NOW, where she was dying of cancer. But every other chapter was a BEST DAY that chronicled the story of their meeting and falling in love. I remember loving that structure too—each strand of the narrative wholly its own, though ultimately, as with the case in *Long Bright River*, the strands merge. I wouldn't have enjoyed the book as much without this structure.

Jo Balistreri

The THEN and NOW structure irritated me at first and then in thinking about it, it occurred to me this is life. We move forward, we look to the past, we stall. This structure also, perhaps mimics, how families learn how addiction shapes not just one person in a family, but everyone differently. It is complicated like life is. We learn things slowly over time. *One step forward, two step back* is a cliché but also true. I thought the author captured this well.

In the beginning, I liked the past better than the present so that made me turn the page. After a while I turned the page because I was becoming more and more aware of how the past affected this family and I enjoyed putting the pieces together—"the jigsaw of addiction."