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About the Book

Seven months pregnant and far from home, Becky Jack walks into the office of a Hollywood producer to sell her first screenplay and, much to her shock, meets silver screen heartthrob (and the object of her celebrity affection) Felix Callahan. They spend an awkward and unexpected day together and, though his cursing and drinking contradict her strict Mormon values, Felix and Becky somehow form an unshakable friendship.

Through the next decade, Felix and Becky experience tests of their bond they could never have anticipated. The everyday challenges of raising four unique children and running her household are exacerbated when Becky’s community expresses increasing curiosity and doubt about her handsome, dashing best friend. When her sweet, supportive husband Mike expresses discomfort with Felix’s role in Becky’s life, Becky protects her marriage and ends her friendship. But as the years go by, both Mike and Felix’s gorgeous French wife Celeste realize that the strange love their spouses have for each other is utterly platonic. Felix and Becky see each other through the good times, like co-starring in a romantic comedy written by Becky and even walking the red carpet together, and the bad, when Celeste leaves Felix for another man and then, worst of all, Mike loses his battle with cancer. After Mike’s death, Becky finds herself restarting her life as a widow, and eventually wondering if, after everything, she can find a new way to love Felix, ’til death do they part.

Discussion Questions

1. Shannon Hale says that the character of Becky is not drawn from her own life, but Becky and the narrator seem to share the same perspective and sense of humor. How much of the author do you think comes through in Becky’s character?

2. What do you think accounts for the immediate bond between Felix and Becky? Is it their similar sense of humor? Is it possible to have platonic love at first sight? How does this compare to Becky and Mike’s first meeting?

3. Becky often reflects on the dowdiness of her own appearance: her clothes, hair, weight, jewelry, etc. How do you picture Becky? Do you think she sees herself the way other people see her?
4. When Becky meets Hollywood producer Annette, she tells Becky they can “just deal woman to woman.” (p. 3) What do you make of the relationships between women in the novel? Do Becky and Celeste develop a real friendship? While filming Blind Love Becky detects the “tiniest arctic breeze” from Celeste, but for the most part Celeste is very sweet to Becky. Is there genuine affection between them?

5. On her website, Shannon Hale confesses she thought of several actors as she formed Felix’s character. Is there a celebrity you think he resembles?

6. Becky says that her husband Mike is “big as life” and consistently describes him as her perfect mate. How do they keep their marriage so strong? What are some of the challenges they face, and how do they overcome them?

7. What role does religion play in Becky and Felix’s relationship? Does Felix respect Becky’s Mormonism? Does Becky ever stop hoping to convince Felix to believe in God?

8. Becky constantly checks in with herself about her feelings for Felix, making sure that his presence in her life does not jeopardize her marriage, but she does feel comfortable harboring harmless crushes on her favorite fictional characters like “Gilbert Blythe, Mr. Rochester, Harry Hamlin as Perseus.” (p. 47) Who are the fictional characters you’ve fallen in love with? Do you believe having a crush on a fictional character or actor is always “harmless”?

9. Becky often describes her own emotions using food, like when she says that Mike’s sweetness “made her feel all warm and gooey, as if her heart were hot brownies.” (p. 25) What are some other examples of this, and what do you think it reveals about Becky?

10. What do you make of Becky’s list on page 118? Do you think it’s possible to draw one firm line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior? Where on this list would you draw the line?

11. Usually being in Felix’s world as his dear friend makes Becky feel special, but on occasion (such as at her church potluck or the New York City nightclub) being in his world makes her feel insecure, ashamed, or neglected. What happens on these occasions? Why does Becky still want Felix as a part of her life? Are there times when Felix feels insecure while in Becky’s world? Why or why not?

12. After co-starring in a movie and attending numerous press events together, Felix and Becky eventually find themselves the subject of a torrid gossip television program. Were you surprised when this happened? Did Becky succeed in
“avoiding the very appearance of evil”? Did reading this part of the story change the way you feel about tabloids and the paparazzi?

13. Were you surprised by Celeste’s betrayal of Felix? Why or why not? Do you think her desire all along was to have a child? Did this justify her behavior for Becky? What about for you?

14. Many characters throughout the novel express their disapproval of Felix and Becky’s friendship, saying at various moments that men cannot be friends with women unless they are attracted to them or that adult men and women cannot maintain strictly platonic friendships. Which characters feel most strongly about these questions, and which do you agree with? Can men and women be just friends?

15. Being a mother is the most important part of Becky’s identity. What kind of a mother is she? How does she relate to her children? How does she compare to the other kinds of mothers in this book? When Mike dies, why does Becky begin to question herself as a mother? What do you think eventually helps her regain her self-confidence?

16. If you were in Mike or Celeste’s position, would you be comfortable with your spouse having such a close friendship with a member of the opposite sex? Why or why not? Would it change things if that friend was famous, rich, attractive, etc.?

17. On the jacket, Becky is holding a homemade pie. What role does her pie-making have in the story?

18. Becky admires romantic movies and considers them important experiences for married women, so they can remember what it felt like to first fall in love. What do you think is so appealing to women about romances?

19. Becky believes there was so much coincidence in her relationship with Felix, it had to be divinely inspired. What does Felix think? Have there been unusual coincidences in your own life? How do you explain them?

20. Becky claims the romantic comedy is her favorite genre, but the book didn’t have a typical romantic comedy ending. Were you happy with the ending or left hoping for a different outcome? What do you think Becky and Felix’s relationship will be like going forward?
Shannon Hale

Shannon's mother says she was a storyteller from birth, jabbering endlessly in her carriage as the two strolled through the neighborhood; once she could form complete sentences, she made up stories, bribing her younger siblings to perform them in mini plays. When she was ten, she began writing books, mostly fantasy stories where she was the heroine, and she continued writing secretly for years while pursuing acting in stage and improv comedy. After detours studying in Mexico, the U.K., and Paraguay, Shannon earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Utah and a Masters in Creative Writing from the University of Montana. In the interim, she submitted short stories and novels to magazines and publishers, saving all her rejection letters which she has since laminated into one continuous 60-foot roll which she proudly unfurls to audiences as a testament to her dedication and determination.

Since the publication of her first book, The Goose Girl, in 2003, Shannon has become a beloved author to young readers as well as booksellers and educators. Her third novel, Princess Academy, earned her a Newbery Honor and is a The New York Times, Book Sense, and Publishers Weekly bestseller. Shannon has also written two books for adults, Austenland and The Actor and the Housewife. Shannon lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her husband, Dean, their children, and their pet, a small plastic pig.
www.shannonhale.com

Wrestling with the housewife; or, why not bake some muffins?

Without a doubt, I've never taken such huge risks when writing a book as I have with this one. As much joy as there was in the writing process, there was also the stark cold terror of standing on a cliff's edge in high wind and knowing I could fall any moment. The first risk was that this book didn't fit comfortably into any genre (I talked about that on my blog). The riskiest risk was making the main character religious (rare in mainstream novels, I'm sure you've noticed). It's always risky to portray a character in any religion because religion can cause passionate feelings in people and be divisive. But on top of that, I gave her my own religion. She is an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or a Mormon. Doubly risky! So why do it?

Since I grew up as a Mormon, I've often wanted to use my knowledge of that unique culture in a story. At this point, I've written seven young adult books--fantasies set in worlds I created. austenland, my first book for adults, was also my first book in a contemporary, realistic setting, but certain plot points made it difficult and unnecessary to give the main character any religion. I wasn't sure I'd ever incorporate my knowledge of this religion into a book when I had a dream that set this story rolling.

When I first began to accept this burgeoning story as the impetus for a new novel, I knew what most drew me to it was the idea of two absolutely opposite people finding friendship. Making Becky Mormon--and not just any Mormon, but a Utah-born conservative Mormon--seemed so delightfully opposite Felix I had to do it. There was a lot of pleasure in writing a character whose background was similar to my own. I too was born in Utah (in Salt Lake City, which tends to be a tiny bit more liberal and diverse than Becky's Layton), and I am active in the LDS church today. I had plenty of fodder to draw on.

But it was intimidating too. The story wasn't about religion, and I didn't want that aspect of it to overwhelm the book. Besides, spirituality is such an intimate aspect of my life, I was afraid I couldn't be objective writing about something so close to me. One choice I made to balance that was to give the narrator a strong personality, one different from Becky, the main character. The narrator has differing opinions. Though not a character in the traditional sense, I had a strong image of the narrator and let her opine and get involved and view the situation from a different place. The narrator was not religious, did not share many of Becky's beliefs, and immersing myself in that tone helped me stay a step back.

Another way to distance myself was to make sure Becky was different from me. If I tried to write my own self, I was afraid I'd lose the story. I'd be too close to it to see what was important or even true.
Another risky aspect of writing a religious main character is it can seem as if the main character is representative of an entire religion. This is an intimidating idea. I never wanted to make Becky a poster girl for Mormonism. What a disaster such a goal would bring about! But I anticipated that other LDS readers could be sensitive to a book about a fellow church member. I wanted to be extremely sensitive. I never wanted to take for granted that my experiences and views of the LDS church were the only valid ones. So I had several different LDS friends of different backgrounds read the manuscript and give me feedback.

Yikes. They all disagreed. All of them. Not one of my early LDS readers viewed Becky or the other LDS characters the same way. Some said, "She's so liberal--she's unrealistic and she'll give people a negative impression of this church." Others said, "She's so conservative--she's unrealistic and she'll give people a negative impression of this church." I kid you not.

This makes me wonder--are conservative Mormon characters not allowed a voice in literature? What about liberal Mormon characters? Who is the ideal Mormon? Who is the ideal of any religion or any group of people? What exactly is a realistic character?

It wasn't just my early LDS readers who didn't agree. I had several other readers as well from different faiths or no faiths. What some people liked, others didn't, what worked for some completely didn't for others. No two voices chimed in unison. For example, my editor's very favorite scene in the book was another reader's very least favorite scene. I took all the criticism seriously and did my best to address their concerns. But at the same time, I had to sift through it, work hard to make the story the one I wanted to tell, the one my internal reader loved. How could I write any story that would jive with my readers and not offend anyone's sensibilities? Hearing so many contradictory reactions made me realize how many different ways people can read the same book. And I despaired of anticipating all the various ways my potentials readers might take the story.

So, months before my deadline, I was faced with the reality that my story just might anger or turn off everyone in some way. I am not a fan of controversy. I don't like to make people upset. There were two points when I had to stop and ask myself if I should publish this book at all. I was so afraid of what might come after--even if 90% of the readers loved it and appreciated what I was trying to do with this story, even if only 10% of the readers hated it and wanted me on a scaffold with a scarlet letter on my chest--that would be too much! I didn't know if I could face that.

So I took some time and meditated on the issue and really thought and talked it through with my husband. I'd never had that experience before, never considered pulling the plug on a book so late in the process. It was kind of scary. But ultimately I decided that I had to see this through. I loved this story, loved the characters, and I yearned to share it, as we
tend to do in any creative art. I came to a place where I felt very good about it, excited even, and I decided I was strong enough to face whatever would come. Most importantly, I knew I could stand by this story.

Still, I was petrified. At least, I was when I wasn't at work. Whenever I was immersed in the story, I didn't find it hard to turn off the shouting voices and just let the story and the characters lead me. Thankfully, or I never could have written this book.

This book is about Becky Jack. I hope it will be read that way. I hope no reader assumes the book is trying to represent the ideal of Mormonism or any religion or religious person.

In interviews, I'm often asked, "What do you hope readers take from your books?" I have a hard time answering that question, because I never write toward a purpose or moral. I just hope that a reader takes whatever she needs from my story. And while that's still true for this book, I do have a tiny hope: I hope that readers want to talk about it. I have a lovely dream of groups of readers, women especially, sitting around and talking, heatedly sometimes, questioning the actions of the characters, debating some of the questions raised, what the characters did or didn't do, and the way I chose to tell the story. I hope there are lots of questions, debates, and listening too. And I hope that activity is fun.

Based on the early feedback, I know not everything in this book will be acceptable with everyone who reads it. But I also know that I worked very hard on it for two and a half years. I spent thousands of hours ruminating over it, let alone writing it. I was constantly jotting down ideas or lines after a shower, in the car, in the middle of the night, while playing with my kids. I did many drafts. And what I mean to say is, this was a true labor of love, which I took very seriously, eventually coming to a draft that I feel great about.

Still there will be ideas and portrayals and events that some people won't like. That is completely understandable and absolutely every reader's right. I really, really wish I could please everyone. I hope each reader can take what he or she needs from this story. I hope this story is a positive experience. I hope it makes you laugh and maybe cry a little too, sigh and question, and just enjoy the process of reading words on a page and allowing them to create a full-blooded story in your mind. For better or for worse, I had to tell this story.

And if you hate it, I have a really good idea--instead of sending me hate mail, why not bake some muffins instead? Mmm, just think about that...muffins...

Can married people of opposite genders be friends?

This is a question I've thought a lot about as I wrote this novel. I personally have never
had a close male friend since getting married, so it's not a personal issue. I have male friends--other writers, book people, spouses of friends, friends from high school. We email, we have lunch or dinner (in groups usually), we chat on the phone. But no one close enough to consider a confidant or best friend. My motivation for writing this story was simply my interest in the clash of two different people who find a common friendship.

One thing I've loved is whenever I mention to people the premise of this novel, opinions fly. At least a dozen times during the writing period, I was privy to passionate conversation where a group of women debated this question. How would they feel if their husbands had a close woman friend? What would happen if they had a close male friend? Where are the lines?

Some believe that it's absolutely not possible and is way too risky. Some believe that it's completely okay and in fact have successfully kept both spouse and friend for years. And there are a thousand opinions in-between. My hope and delight in this book is that it might spark similar conversations everywhere. In no way do I intend for this novel to answer that question definitively--this is the story of just one friendship and cannot explore every scenario. Ultimately, I think that question can only be answered by each couple in their own situation.

One conclusion I've come to personally is that infidelity is not just about sex, but about betrayal. The definition of betrayal will vary with each relationship. For example, a man may feel no problem having lunch alone with a female co-worker. But in my opinion, if his wife is uncomfortable with it, then it's a betrayal, and if his wife is fine with it, then it's not. Problems can arise when both husband and wife are not in agreement with what's okay. Even more trouble ensues when people outside the relationship judge the couple's choices by their own set of rules.

People who have experience with such a friendship outlined the following red flags, warning that such actions can lead to emotional and/or sexual affairs:

- Complaining about your spouse to your opposite-gender friend
- Confiding secrets to your friend that you keep from your spouse
- Going on trips with your friend without your spouse
- Going out with or being alone with your friend when alcohol is involved
- Having a secret email account for the purpose of emailing the friend without the spouse's knowledge
- Lying to your spouse about speaking with or meeting up with your friend
- Fantasizing about the friend