

Did You Ever Have a Family

By Bill Clegg

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • LONGLISTED FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD, MAN BOOKER PRIZE, PEN/ROBERT W. BINGHAM PRIZE, AND ANDREW CARNEGIE MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE • AN ALA NOTABLE BOOK • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY Amazon • Library Journal • Booklist • NPR • Kirkus Reviews • Guardian • St. Louis Post-Dispatch • Google Play • Kobo • Literary Hub • Powell's • Indie Next List

Hailed as "masterly" by *The New York Times Book Review*, "a brilliantly constructed debut set in the aftermath of catastrophic loss" (2015 Man Booker Prize Judges).

The stunning debut novel from bestselling author Bill Clegg is a magnificently powerful story about a circle of people who find solace in the least likely of places as they cope with a horrific tragedy.

On the eve of her daughter's wedding, June Reid's life is completely devastated when a shocking disaster takes the lives of her daughter, her daughter's fiancé, her ex-husband, and her boyfriend, Luke—her entire family, all gone in a moment. And June is the only survivor.

Alone and directionless, June drives across the country, away from her small Connecticut town. In her wake, a community emerges, weaving a beautiful and surprising web of connections through shared heartbreak.

From the couple running a motel on the Pacific Ocean where June eventually settles into a quiet half-life, to the wedding's caterer whose bill has been forgotten, to Luke's mother, the shattered outcast of the town—everyone touched by the tragedy is changed as truths about their near and far histories finally come to light.

Elegant and heartrending, and one of the most accomplished fiction debuts of the year, Did You Ever Have a Family is an absorbing, unforgettable tale that reveals humanity at its best through forgiveness and hope. At its core is a celebration of family—the ones we are born with and the ones we create.

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Did You Ever Have a Family By Bill Clegg Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #251331 in Books
- Published on: 2015-09-01
- Released on: 2015-09-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.37" h x 1.00" w x 5.63" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 304 pages

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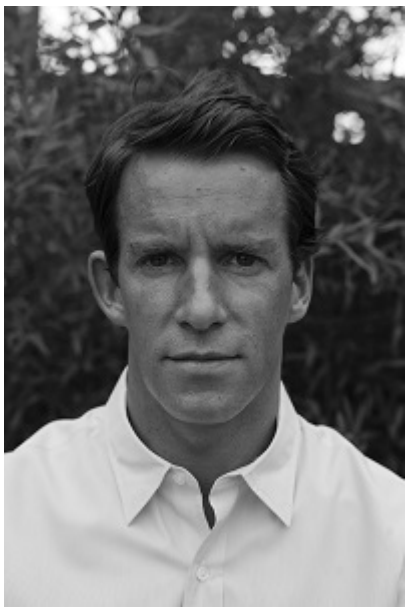
Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

An Amazon Best Book of September 2015: Bill Clegg's fiction debut looks at the aftereffects of a tragedy, skillfully employing alternating chapters told by a handful of characters. The night before her daughter's wedding, June Reid loses her daughter, her daughter's fiancé, her ex-husband, and her boyfriend in a house fire. It is a nearly unimaginable event, one that sends June running cross-country from her small community in Connecticut to settle in the even smaller community of Moclips, Washington. Sadness trails June, but so does a web of support that forms between members of the community she left behind, as well as the one that she has settled in. What really happened that night in Connecticut? Eventually, we find out. More importantly, we find out the meaning of the title. It is both a lament and a celebration.--*Chris Schluep*

Guest Interview Jenny Offill in conversation with Bill Clegg





1. The novel is paced almost like a thriller, with the pieces of the mystery coming slowly into place. Does plot come first for you when you begin a book or are you more likely to start from an image or a voice?
In this case it started with the first three lines of the second chapter: *She will* go. For a long time the only thing I knew about the book was that a woman named June was driving away from a small town, heavy with grief and guilt and unable to stay a minute longer. Everything after those words was an unraveling of that mystery—*Who is she? What is driving her away? What happened? What is the source of her grief? What do the people in the town have to say about her?*

2. You worked on the novel for many years. Do you remember how the first spark of it came to you?
The initial impulse came from wanting to write about where I'm from. I grew up in a small town two hours from Manhattan and there was a regular gust of moneyed weekend and summer residents that created both a great opportunity to imagine outside of one's life into other possibilities, but it also caused a fair bit of resentment and tension. I wanted to write about the particular experience of such a town, and so the early writing centered on that.

3. I'm so impressed by the way you carry off many different yet distinct points of view throughout your novel. It really comes together wonderfully in the end. Did you have any models for this kind of expansive narrative? Did you start out to tell the story in that manner or was it something that evolved over time?
Though I didn't consciously follow any model, Jean Stein's *Edie* no doubt had a strong influence as well as David Huddle's novel *The Story of a Million Years*. Both books get to the heart of their stories by circling them with other voices and perspectives.

4. In many ways, *Did You Ever Have a Family* seems like an extended meditation on grief and forgiveness. Were your previous memoirs regarding addiction and recovery a springboard into these themes?
Surely, they are, though not deliberately. In my recovery I have experienced how powerful and surprising being forgiven can be. I caused a lot of wreckage before I got sober, so if certain people were going to remain in my life I knew that I would need their forgiveness. But what I didn't expect or count on was that in being forgiven, I would learn how to forgive the people I believed had failed or harmed me. The most powerful example of this in my life is with my father. Decades-long resentments and hurt fell away when I could finally see him as a man who did his best and fell short, and him falling short was not the full measure of his character but only a piece in a longer and more complicated story. Letting all that go and allowing

myself a relationship with him in his last ten years was a miracle given how estranged we'd been, and it is one of the things recovery gave me. In the novel there are a lot of people holding on to anger and guilt and they are lonely, which is something I identify with. Part of what I'm exploring in the book is how forgiveness—granting as well as receiving—can be a beginning to an end of that isolation.

5. What book or poem first made you want to be a writer?
Reading Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* was probably the first time where it occurred to me that someone actually came up with an idea and wrote it. And I believe it's the first time I thought, *Damn, I wish I'd thought of that.*

6. What novels have you read more than once?
I read your novel *Dept. of Speculation* twice! I read it when it first came out and then, when we decided to talk a few weeks ago, I picked it up again and could not put it down. Crikey, is it good. As nimble and witty as the writing is and as streaking as it is with literary and historical references and anecdotes, it also has this spellbinding effect that only the truth of something can produce. And the truth you are conveying is about marriage and how people happen in them. Reading your novel is a kind of thrill ride but it was also a great relief. But mainly I go back to the same small pile. Besides W. S. Merwin's *The Vixen, The Carrier of Ladders,* and *The Lice* (which are poetry collections, not novels), I go back to *Jude the Obscure* and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's A Scots *Quair* every now and again. *Jude the Obscure* because it's such an audacious story and I find something surprising each time, and Gibbon's trilogy because I read it during a time that shaped me—an optimistic and curious stretch in my junior year in college—and if I feel stuck or limited its peculiar music has the effect of making things seem more possible. I also have reread a lot of Deborah Eisenberg's short stories. *Under the 82nd Airborne* is one of the best collections of short stories ever. I remember reading it in my twenties in New York and being excited that she lived in Manhattan and was, somewhere in the city, alive and thinking. Before that I mostly read books by long-dead authors so the idea that I could sit next to her on the subway or a restaurant was mind-blowing. I did sit next to her at a play not long ago and I couldn't stop staring.

7. Has anything surprised you about the process of publication from the writer's side, and if so, what?
I didn't count on finding the conversation about something I'd written to be so much, um, fun. With the memoirs, the engagement with readers has been meaningful and, given the main subject matters of addiction and recovery, pretty heavy. But with the novel the exchanges so far have had a giddy pleasure on the level of gossiping about people you went to high school with. It still shocks me that anyone would know and have an opinion about the characters in *Did You Ever Have a Family*. They existed for so long as just a daydream that to have them named and commented on is startling, but in the best way. Talking about them is a kind of reunion.

Review
PRAISE FOR *DID YOU EVER HAVE A FAMILY*

"Masterly…The vignettes provide deft reprieves, a mosaic of a community and its connection to the tragedy. And connection—the way people and their lives fuse—is this novel's main concern." (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"A brilliantly constructed debut set in the aftermath of catastrophic loss." (2015 Man Booker Prize Judges (Longlist Finalist))

"An attempt to map how the unbearable is borne, elegantly written and bravely imagined." (*Kirkus Reviews, starred review*)

“A propulsive but tightly crafted narrative… reveal[s] the fine-grained sorrows of the human condition, rendered in polished, quietly captivating prose. As the stories emerge, so do their connections—and the idea of connection itself…. Readers may come to this debut novel because of agent/memoirist Clegg’s reputation, but they’ll stay for the stellar language and storytelling. Highly recommended.” (*Library Journal, starred review*)

“In this sorrowful and deeply probing debut novel, literary agent and memoirist Clegg (*Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*) delivers a story of loss and its grueling aftermath . . . it's Clegg's deft handling of all the parsed details—missed opportunities, harbored regrets, and unspoken good intentions—that make the journey toward redemption and forgiveness so memorable.” (*Publishers Weekly, starred review*)

"Clegg is both delicately lyrical and emotionally direct in this masterful novel, which strives to show how people make bearable what is unbearable, offering consolation in small but meaningful gestures. Both ineffably sad and deeply inspiring, this mesmerizing novel makes for a powerful debut." (*Booklist, starred review*)

"I marveled my way through *Did You Ever Have a Family*, at not just the masterful writing and storytelling, but at the emotional authenticities of every persuasion. It's a wondrous thing when a writer gets things this right, this absorbing, and this beautiful. Bravo, Bill Clegg, and thank you." (Bestselling author Elinor Lipman)

"Full of small-town secrets and whispers, Bill Clegg has woven a richly textured tale of loss and healing. This is a deeply optimistic book about the power of human sympathy to pull us from the wreckage of our fate." (Man Booker Prize-winning novelist Anne Enright)

"The force, range, and scope of Bill Clegg’s *Did You Ever Have a Family* will grab you with its opening lines, and won’t let go until its final one. I can’t recall another novel that so effortlessly weds a nuanced, lyrical voice to an unflinching vision of just how badly things can go for people. I read it deep into the night, all the way through, telling myself it was getting late, I could finish the book in the morning. I finished it that night, however, slept a few hours, and then, in the morning, started reading it again." (Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Cunningham)

"Like the question it poses, *Did You Ever Have a Family* is brutally direct yet it's got an enormous symbolic power. You hold in your hands a great book of kindness—every restrained, exquisite sentence comes loaded for bear. It's been a lot of years since a novel has so moved me. Number Bill Clegg among that endangered species: major American writer." (National Book Critics Circle Award–winning author Darin Strauss)

“One of the year's most hotly anticipated books.” (*Shelf Awareness*)

"The sharp writing and haunting characters had me glued.” (*Glamour, "Five Things I’m Loving"*)

“[An] unexpectedly tender fiction debut.” (*Vogue*)

“Bill Clegg’s *Did You Ever Have a Family* limns the far reaches of grief.” (*Vanity Fair*)

“[An] incisive first novel." (*Harper’s Bazaar*)

"Clegg is a gimlet-eyed observer and is masterly at deftly sucking in the reader as he fashions an emotional tsunami into a profound, mesmerizing description." (*The Sunday Times (UK)*)

“Clegg has produced a moving, clever novel that subtly dissects the relationships between mothers and their children, lovers, neighbors and strangers. *Did You Ever Have a Family* is an unpretentious work about how a life can be salvaged from the ashes. Bill Clegg is an author to watch.” (*The Times (UK)*)

"A quiet novel of devastating power. Clegg has drawn a tale of prodigious tenderness and lyricism.... that reveals the depths of the human heart. [*Did You Ever Have a Family*] is a wonderful and deeply moving novel, which compels us to look directly into the dark night of our deepest fears and then quietly, step by tiny step, guides us towards the first pink smudges of the dawn." (*The Guardian (UK)*)

“A quiet, measured and engrossing piece…. a poignant portrait of fractured family lives. Clegg’s prose conveys the numbed grieving state of mind, its quietness fitting its subject of deep clear-eyed sadness…. It approaches grief gently and, in the end, its gentleness is its triumph.” (*The Daily Telegraph (UK)*)

“This first novel arrives with a shout…Clegg covers the full spectrum of human emotion in this beautifully nuanced story." (*BBC, “Ten Books to Read in September”*)

“In trying to tell the faceted story of a single moment as seen by a hundred different eyes, Clegg has attempted something daring. And the wonder of it is how often his experiment succeeds...” (*NPR*)

“In measured prose, Clegg unspools the stories of June and the other survivors as they face unimaginable horror and take their first halting steps toward hope and community."
(*People*)

One of Nineteen Awesome New Books You Need to Read This Fall (2015) (*Buzzfeed*)

"*Did You Ever Have a Family* is the first full-length foray into fiction for Bill Clegg... but it reads like the quietly assured work of a veteran novelist.... it’s rare to find a book that renders unimaginable loss in such an eloquent, elegant voice." (*Entertainment Weekly, A- review*)

“Illuminate[s] how grief, guilt, regrets and the deep need for human connection are woven into the very flammable fabric of humanity…. Clegg's emotionally direct, polished novel is at once heartrending and heartening. It's a gift to be able to write about such dark stuff without succumbing to utter bleakness, and to infuse even scorching sadness with a ray of hopefulness.” (*Los Angeles Times*)

“How do you continue if all at once, everyone you love has been wiped away? With crosscutting perspectives and a voluminous cast of characters, Clegg constructs a layered narrative with some dexterous plot twists.” (*Boston Globe*)

"This isn’t your typical mystery, it’s something better: a real-life thriller in which resolution takes the form of acceptance. While [Clegg] never suggests anything as simplistic as closure for these tormented souls, he manages to find ways for them to move forward from this tragedy, making it seem a little less random than it did at the beginning, and that in and of itself is a kind of mercy." (*San Francisco Gate*)

"[*Did You Ever Have a*] *Family* is a quiet and beautifully written novel that will keep readers turning the pages…. There is no resignation here. Rather, Clegg seems to say, it is the courage to intervene in another’s life that defines the notion of family.”

(*Star Tribune*)

“Heartbreaking but quietly optimistic, *Did You Ever Have a Family* is a rumination on horrific loss, healing, forgiveness, and the families we choose for ourselves.” (*Buzzfeed, “19 Awesome New Books You Need To Read This Fall” (2015)*)

“[*Did You Ever Have A*] *Family* melds several grieving voices into a detailed mosaic of a town split between locals and weekenders, a mystery in which the stakes really matter, and a recovery story more original than Clegg’s own.” (*Vulture, “7 Books You Need to Read This September” (2015)*)

About the Author
Bill Clegg is a literary agent in New York and the author of the bestselling memoirs *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man* and *Ninety Days*. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Lapham’s Quarterly*, *New York* magazine, *The Guardian*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Peter Hudson:

Book is to be different for each and every grade. Book for children until adult are different content. To be sure that book is very important usually. The book Did You Ever Have a Family seemed to be making you to know about other information and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The book Did You Ever Have a Family is not only giving you more new information but also for being your friend when you really feel bored. You can spend your current spend time to read your publication. Try to make relationship together with the book Did You Ever Have a Family. You never feel lose out for everything should you read some books.

Deloris Wagner:

As people who live in the particular modest era should be upgrade about what going on or details even knowledge to make them keep up with the era that is always change and advance. Some of you maybe will probably update themselves by reading books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to you is you don't know what kind you should start with. This Did You Ever Have a Family is our recommendation to cause you to keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

Paul Green:

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Donna Cauley:

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