

A young girl in a light blue floral dress is holding a red flower. She is standing in a field of red flowers, possibly tulips, with green grass and foliage. The background is bright and slightly blurred.

Little Mercies

BOOK CLUB KIT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE*

Heather Gudenkauf

Discover additional material from Heather Gudenkauf inside this kit to help make your book club a success!

AN INTRODUCTION TO *LITTLE MERCIES*

Dear Reader,

I've been a devoted fan of Heather Gudenkauf since long before I was her editor—drawn to her emotional authenticity and the refreshing sincerity of her voice. So it gives me great pleasure to share with you her latest novel, *Little Mercies*, an arresting, ripped-from-the-headlines drama about a social worker who unexpectedly finds herself at the mercy of the system she works for, and a young girl who is searching for a new life. Beloved by readers and reviewers, Heather is best known for her compelling characters, powerful story lines and edge-of-your-seat pacing, and with *Little Mercies*, she demonstrates that she's at the height of her craft. It is a thought-provoking tale of motherhood and justice, and a searing portrait of a woman searching for redemption after an innocent mistake threatens to shatter her life forever.

I hope you'll add *Little Mercies* to your list of must-reads, and that you'll enjoy Heather's novels as much as I do!

Sincerely,



Erika Imranyi
Senior Editor

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Like many parents, Ellen struggles to balance her personal and professional lives. Discuss how you manage that precarious balance between home and work.
2. Ellen's former client Jade steps in to save Avery's life and now Ellen is seen as an unfit mother. Talk about this reversal of roles. How do you think this changed Ellen's view of the parents she works with and how they must think of Ellen? Does this change your opinion of parents who might have experience in the child welfare system?
3. Discuss the ways parenthood and adult-child relationships are portrayed in the novel. Think about Jenny's relationships with her father, mother, Maudene and her father's friend-girls and about Ellen's relationship with her own children and the children she works with as a social worker.
4. Ellen's distractions have catastrophic effects on her daughter's health, her family and her professional life as a social worker. Talk about a time you may have had a close call in your life. How did you feel? How did the experience change you?
5. Ellen is charged with a felony and potentially faces a prison sentence. Do you think she should have to serve time behind bars? Why or why not?
6. What scenes or developments in the novel affected you most?
7. Adam quickly forgives Ellen for leaving Avery in the hot car. How would you react in a similar situation? Does Ellen deserve forgiveness? Do you think she will be able to forgive herself?
8. Maudene places herself in a precarious situation by taking a wayward Jenny into her home. Discuss the possible implications of this decision. What would you have done if faced with a similar situation?
9. How do Ellen and Jenny change over the course of the novel? Which character changes the most, which the least?
10. How did your opinion of Jenny's mother change over the course of the novel?
11. In Jenny's young life she has already faced so many obstacles: poverty, abuse, struggles with school, a runaway mother and an unpredictable father. What do you think will become of Jenny?
12. What does the title *Little Mercies* mean to you?

IN CONVERSATION WITH HEATHER GUDENKAUF

***Little Mercies* is an emotionally charged, ripped-from-the-headlines drama about a woman who makes an honest mistake that has life-altering consequences. What was your inspiration for this story and the characters?**

When I was a young mother I was always hypervigilant about trying to protect my children. We baby-proofed our home in every way possible. I would cut grapes and apples into tiny choke-proof pieces. Each night I peeked in their cribs to make sure they were still breathing and I always kept a watchful eye on them while they played. Over the years, like most mothers, I relaxed a bit, realizing that no matter the safeguards put into place, I couldn't always prevent the scrapes, bruises and heartbreaks that accompany childhood.

But then I heard a news story about a well-meaning and, by all accounts, a loving and responsible mother who accidentally left her infant in a hot car, and tragically, the child died. This and similar stories sent me reeling. These harrowing accounts of mothers and fathers who love their children and are constantly trying to balance work and home in order to care for their families and manage all that life tosses at them forced me to ask myself, Could this happen to me? To someone I love? From these inner conversations, *Little Mercies* emerged.

In addition to your career as a writer, you spent many years working in the education system. Why did you choose to focus this novel on a social worker, and how did your experience as an educator inform and influence the story?

Just like so many women, Ellen is a loving mother and conscientious in her professional life as a social worker. We all know someone like Ellen, in fact, many of us could be Ellen. I wanted to explore how a regular woman, trying to navigate life in the midst of a harried, unrelenting schedule, faces an unthinkable tragedy.

As an educator I've had the opportunity to get to know social workers, school counselors, teachers and other educators who work tirelessly to protect children and help families learn and grow stronger. Oftentimes, we forget that those who spend their lives serving and helping others can also make mistakes, at times with shattering results. Also, during my years as a teacher, I have met or learned about many children who share the same vulnerability, courage and feistiness as Jenny.



Little Mercies

***Little Mercies* is told in alternating perspectives between Ellen and Jenny. Why did you structure the novel this way, versus focusing on a single perspective, and what do you hope each character will offer?**

Little Mercies is my fourth novel and like the previous three I chose to tell this story in multiple perspectives. I think that by offering alternate points of view, I give readers the chance to experience one very difficult situation through the eyes of a guilt-ridden mother and an innocent but determined child.

My hope is that readers recognize Ellen's good intentions and the sincere love she has for her own family and the families with which she works, despite her terrible mistake. She reminds us of our own frailties and the importance of having a supportive network of friends and family. Through Jenny's eyes we see a worldview filled with hope despite her challenging home life and many disappointments. We have so much to learn from the perseverance and resilience of children.

What was your toughest challenge, your greatest pleasure and your biggest surprise as you were writing *Little Mercies*?

I'd have to say that delving into the emotional devastation that Ellen experienced in the novel was the most challenging part for me. As a mother, it's crushing to see your child suffer.

My greatest pleasures while writing *Little Mercies* were the people I met and the wonderful conversations that ensued. I tend to be a bit shy and reserved, so seeking out experts to help inform my writing doesn't always come easily to me but is always rewarding. During the course of writing *Little Mercies* I met a dedicated social worker who shared the joys and challenges of serving families. In order to learn more about the medical profession and legal system I visited with doctors, a paramedic, an attorney and a chief of police. I even got the chance to tour a police station and walk through the steps of the booking process.

As it is with all my novels, the biggest surprises come from the characters and the directions they end up taking me, and Jenny and Ellen from *Little Mercies* did not disappoint.



Little Mercies

What is the significance of the title *Little Mercies*, both in the story and in the message you want to send to readers?

I think there are many times when we find ourselves hoping for the big miracles in life such as a cure to a horrible illness or picking the winning lottery numbers, but I truly believe it's the small kindnesses—the little mercies—that really get us through the difficult times. In the novel, for Ellen, the little mercies come from her family and friends who help her navigate an incredibly difficult time. For Jenny, it's the compassion of strangers that she meets along her journey and who come to her aid. My hope is that readers find ways to pass little mercies on to complete strangers as well as to their loved ones. It can be as simple as a smile and a cheerful hello; it can be a shoulder to cry on or the gift of time. The possibilities are endless.

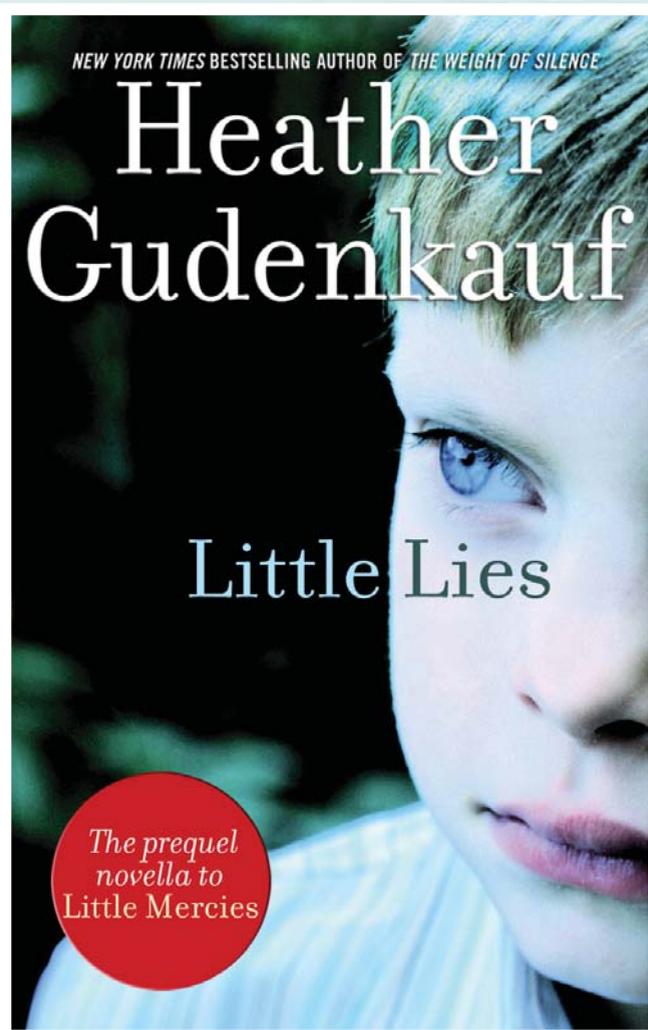
Can you describe your writing process? Do you outline first or dive right in? Do you write scenes consecutively or jump around? Do you have a schedule or a routine? A lucky charm?

I always begin a writing project by treating myself to a beautiful journal and spend the first month or so composing life histories for each of the characters. I describe their physical characteristics, their fears and hopes. I dream up their fictional pasts and futures even if the details don't find their way onto the pages of the book. Then I begin writing the novel in longhand. This way I'm able to write nearly anywhere and minimize distractions. Later I transfer what I've written to a computer and continue to add to the story. Sometimes the story unfolds chronologically and at times I leap to an event near the end of the book only to return to an earlier scene. The characters tend to guide the direction I go. When I've finished writing the first draft I will print off a copy and begin making revisions. I also give out a copy of the manuscript to some family members and a few friends for their input.

As for a writing routine or schedule, I write whenever and wherever I can. As I am the mother of three teenagers, my uninterrupted writing time is rare, but for me, my family always comes first. I steal those quiet writing moments whenever I can.

I don't have a lucky charm per se, but if someone were to peek in on me as I was writing, I'd likely have a Diet Coke and some chocolate nearby.

If you enjoyed reading *Little Mercies*,
don't miss the riveting prequel novella *Little Lies*,
from *New York Times* bestselling author Heather Gudenkauf!

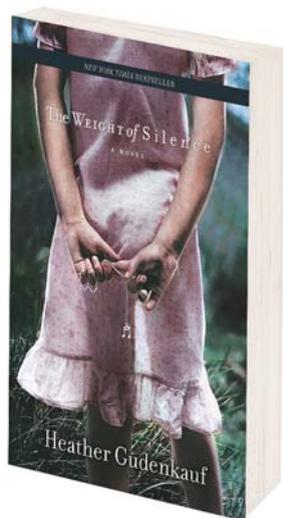


Even the smallest lie can have
far-reaching consequences.

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THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE

Two little girls go missing in the night. Only questions remain—and the answers are trapped in the silence of unspoken family secrets.



THESE THINGS HIDDEN

Allison Glenn couldn't hide what happened, and she went to prison for it. Now she's free. But secrets have a way of keeping you locked up.



ONE BREATH AWAY

In the midst of a sudden snowstorm, a stranger enters an elementary school classroom. Inside, he holds the children hostage. Outside, the town of Broken Branch races to uncover who...and why.



Heather Gudenkauf

is the critically acclaimed and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Weight of Silence*, *These Things Hidden* and *One Breath Away*. She lives in Iowa with her family.

www.HeatherGudenkauf.com





PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF HEATHER GUDENKAUF

“Thrilling and emotionally tender....will appeal to fans of Lisa Scottoline and Jodi Picoult.”

—*Booklist* on *LITTLE MERCIES*

“This novel is full of hope...recommend to those looking for a quick read with lots to discuss; ideal for book groups.”

—*Library Journal* on *LITTLE MERCIES*

“A tense and profoundly emotional story...an explosive tale of suspense and, ultimately, the healing power of love.”

—Susan Wiggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
on *THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE*

“Beautifully written, compassionately told and relentlessly suspenseful.”

—Diane Chamberlain, *New York Times* bestselling author
on *THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE*

“A tale so chillingly real, it could have come from the latest headlines.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review on *THESE HIDDEN THINGS*

“Gudenkauf has captured heart-wrenching emotion and spilled it out on the pages of her moving novel.... A remarkable story.”

—*Fresh Fiction* on *THESE HIDDEN THINGS*

“An electrifying ride.... I dare you to forget it.”

—Elizabeth Flock, *New York Times* bestselling author
on *ONE BREATH AWAY*

“I have burns on my fingers from turning the pages too fast.”

—Lesley Kagen, *New York Times* bestselling author
on *ONE BREATH AWAY*