Black and Blue
By Ann Quindlen

ABOUT THE BOOK

For eighteen years Fran Benedetto kept her secret, hid her bruises. She stayed with Bobby because she wanted her son to have a father, and because, in spite of everything, she loved him. Then one night, when she saw the look on her ten-year-old son’s face, Fran finally made a choice—and ran for both their lives.

Now she is starting over in a city far from home, far from Bobby. In this place she uses a name that isn’t hers, watches over her son, and tries to forget. For the woman who now calls herself Beth, every day is a chance to heal, to put together the pieces of her shattered self. And every day she waits for Bobby to catch up to her. Bobby always said he would never let her go, and despite the ingenuity of her escape, Fran Benedetto is certain of one thing: It is only a matter of time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

taken from annaquindlen.net

1. In Anna Quindlen’s novel Black and Blue, Fran Benedetto explains, “In the beginning I loved [Bobby] . . . pure and simple. And then after a while I loved the idea of him, the good Bobby, who came to me every once in a while and rubbed my back and kissed my fingers. And I loved our life, the long stretches of tedium and small pleasures. . . . And now all the love goes into what’s left of that life, one boy” (page 99). What brought Fran and Bobby together in the first place, and how did their relationship fall apart so dramatically?

2. Fran’s sister, Grace, alludes to the domestic violence that Fran has silently endured for years: “How could none of us have known? I called Winnie at the hospital. She said the same thing. She suspected, but she said they all told themselves that you wouldn’t put up with it” (page 161). Have you ever wondered if someone you knew was in an abusive relationship? What would you do if you suspected that a friend or family member was in this kind of trouble?
3. How does Anna Quindlen’s remarkable skill as a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist help her as a fiction writer? Discuss.

4. After moving to Lake Plata with her son, Fran realizes, "All my life I’d tried to make my boy happy, and now to keep him safe I had to make him sad. And angry, too” (page 96). How does she handle this dilemma? In Fran’s experience, is it okay to lie to your child? If you are a parent, how do you deal with these complex issues?

5. There are several deep friendships in Black and Blue: Fran and Cindy’s, Fran and Mrs. Levitt’s, and Robert and Bobby’s. What makes these relationships so special? What do you value the most in your own close friendships?

6. Secrets abound in Quindlen’s novel—from the secrets Fran and Robert share about why they fled from New York, to Cindy’s story about her twin sister’s death. What other secrets can you find in this novel? Why does the subject of secrets resonate so deeply in Black and Blue?

7. Why is Patty Bancroft so tough? Is she too tough, or are her actions and comments when dealing with “clients” like Fran justified? Is Fran being fair where she points out that both Patty and Bobby say a lot of the same things?

8. Fran says, “It took me a dozen years of house pride and seventeen years of marriage before I realized there were worse things than a cramped kitchen and grubby carpeting” (page 168). What does “home” mean to Fran, and how is this subject explored throughout the novel? What do you treasure the most about your own home, and how would you feel if you suddenly had to leave it?

9. When Fran’s mother asked Grace why she was going to Chicago for school, Grace replied, " ‘Because I want to.’ Like it was the most natural thing in the world, to do what you wanted” (page 143). Contrast this with Fran’s earlier comment, “I could tell you what Bobby liked and didn’t like . . . But I couldn’t have told you as much about myself. I was mostly reaction to Bobby’s actions, at least by the end” (page 18). How did these two sisters end up with such different senses of themselves and of what was possible?

10. In the world of Black and Blue, what constitutes a good marriage? How would Cindy Roerbacker and Mrs. Levitt answer this question? Do you agree with these characters? How might Bobby and his mother, Ann, define a good marriage?

11. Fran’s patient Jennifer, who suffers from cerebral palsy, uses the name Sexyjen in chat rooms online. Fran describes “two Bobbys, two Frans,” living in Brooklyn. And when she thinks about Cindy and Craig, she wonders “whether there were two of them, too, the daytime and the nighttime couple, like masks of comedy and tragedy”(page 87). Is it fair to say that all of us show different personalities, depending on the circumstances? Discuss.

12. According to Cindy, “if the good Lord had wanted women to have male friends he would have arranged for men and women to have something in common” (page 123). What do you think about this statement?

13. Knowing the dangers involved, why does Fran choose to stay in Lake Plata, Florida, as Beth Crenshaw, even after Robert has broken the rules and called his father, and Fran has appeared on local TV?

14. Robert’s father tells him, “There's a part of me in you. And there’s a part of you in me. And there’s a part of me in all the kids you’ll have, and their kids” (page 239). How do you think young Robert will turn out? Will the boy perpetuate his father’s violent streak when he grows up, or will his mother’s influence save him?
15. Mrs. Levitt points out that “other people’s troubles don’t take away yours. But don’t be foolish and think somebody else is having everything fine” (page 257). What does she mean by this? Is it useful to weigh yourself against other people? Fran’s father tells his daughter to “Count your blessings . . . It shames you, to count yours by the hardships of other people” (page 76). How hard is it to follow this advice?

16. Fran thought of Bobby as “Tasty but dangerous. Mike Riordan was the least dangerous guy I’d ever known, and every time I thought to myself, well, Fran, he’s just not your type, I had to remind myself that my type was the type who left marks” (page 213). What do Fran and Mike find in each other, and what eventually pulls them together as a couple?

17. Despite the serious subjects explored in Black and Blue, Quindlen describes plenty of scenes that evoke happiness. These include Fran and Bobby enjoying Robert’s First Communion, Fran and Robert making a collage of sports figures on his closet door, Fran and Mike giving each other the same jacket for Christmas, and Cindy giving birth to healthy twins after losing her own twin sister in childhood. Which moments of hope, love, and redemption stood out to you the most when you read the novel?

18. “Beth Crenshaw is the name of the me I am today,” says Fran. “Grace Ann’s mother. And Robert’s mother, too. No matter what” (page 278). How does she come to terms with the disappearance of her son? What gives her the strength to make a new life for herself and keep going?

INTERVIEW: ANNA QUINDLEN

From the October/November 1998 issue of Book magazine

A little girl flung legs akimbo in a great chair, head lost in a book: That is how Anna Quindlen, journalist, Pulitzer Prize winner, novelist, mother, will always see herself. When Quindlen was young, reading was far more than an idle activity, it was her escape hatch, her dream machine, her wormhole to a parallel universe. “In books I have traveled, not only to other worlds, but into my own. I learned who I was and who I wanted to be, what I might aspire to, and what I might dare to dream about my world and myself,” she writes in her latest work, a book-length essay titled How Reading Changed My Life, (Library of Contemporary Thought, September 1998).

It’s not as if Quindlen had much to escape from. Hers was the kind of wholesome, plain vanilla 1950s childhood that inspired Saturday Evening Post covers. “I sometimes joke that my greatest shortcoming as a writer is that I had an extremely happy childhood,” she says. The eldest of five children, Quindlen, 46, grew up close to the bosom of her large Irish-Italian family, which was rooted in a middle-class Catholic neighborhood in Kendall Park, N.J., (near Philadelphia). Her father was a management consultant, her mother “a sort of a world-class mother. She seemed to believe that on the eighth day, God created the five of us,” quips Quindlen.

After graduating from Barnard College in ’74, Quindlen started out as a reporter at the New York Post in 1974. But it was at The New York Times where her career took root and blossomed. In the time some people take to get their own bylines, Quindlen had her own column called “About New York.” By 1990, she was The Times’s Golden Girl, the only female columnist on its op-ed page, pontificating alongside legends such as William Safire and Russell Baker. In her esoteric opinion columns, Quindlen stitched together the personal and the political in elucidating and sometimes brilliant combinations. By 1992, she had won a Pulitzer Prize for her newspaper writing and had pundits speculating that Quindlen was in line for a deputy editorship.
But although Quindlen had achieved spectacular success in journalism, she wasn't working full-time at what she truly longed to do: write fiction. "I went into newspapers originally to support my fiction habit," she explains. "There's a steady paycheck in reporting, and there simply isn't one in fiction writing." As a result, she ended up leading "a triple life," caring for her three young children (she found time to marry her college sweetheart, lawyer Gerald Krovatin, during her rapid ascent at The Times) and writing fiction when she wasn't busy with her day job.

In the blur between childrearing and newspaper deadlines, Quindlen somehow managed to turn out two bestselling books of fiction, Object Lessons and One True Thing. Confident that fiction was where her future lay, Quindlen decided to quit The Times in 1995 to become a full-time novelist. Earlier this year, Quindlen's move paid off when her third book of fiction, Black and Blue -- a moving portrayal of domestic violence -- received her best reviews yet.

Earlier this year, we interviewed Quindlen, who spends her summers in northeastern Pennsylvania with her husband and her three children, Quin (15), Christopher (13) and Mary (9). Anna discussed How Reading Changed My Life:

You said that when you were young, you admired people with libraries and always dreamed of having your own. Do you have a library now?
Virtually every room of my house has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. One room, the den, has no real walls, just shelf after shelf of books. But it's never enough. I'll have to build more soon. Carpenters see me coming and smile.

Do you have any reading rituals, certain foods you eat when reading, music you listen to?
As for eating and reading, my habits have become horribly narrow and parsimonious since my metabolism has slowed to a dead halt. I'm afraid I mainly drink Diet Pepsi while I read. But my ideal reading meal is good coffee and a piece of shortbread. I listen to Stephen Sondheim's music both while reading and while writing. I also often have on what my family calls "chick music": Tori Amos, Sarah McLachlan, Liz Phair, Shania Twain, Rosanne Cash, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Alanis Morrisette, Patty Loveless. I suppose I should say I listen to classical music when I read. I love classical music. But it tends to put me to sleep.

Where's your favorite place to read?
Of course I read in bed. Every night. Every single night. I am congenitally incapable of falling asleep without having read at least a few pages. And I do have a club chair in my bedroom in the city where I read much of the time, and a wicker rocker here in the country. But I can read almost anywhere, anytime. I read on the subway, on buses, on airplanes. I frequently read in coffee houses in New York City, which used to seem romantic and bohemian before the advent of a Starbucks in every shopping mall in America. I try not to read at the dinner table, but occasionally I succumb.

Of all the books you've read, which one have you reread the most?
I would have to say I've probably reread A Christmas Carol more than any other book, simply because we read it aloud as a family on Christmas Eve and have done so for 20 years. On my own I've reread Pride and Prejudice and The Sound and the Fury more than any other books. The restraint and the irony in Pride and Prejudice are a kind of professional guidepost for me, while the virtuosity of Sound makes me consider challenging myself in new ways as a writer. Finally, I just love them both. It's like eating a good meal, reading those books.

In your book, you describe reading as an almost transgressive act. Why is that?
There is still the feeling that people who like to read all the time are somehow suspect. Whether it is that we are assumed to be antisocial, or overly intellectual, or convinced of our own superiority, there remains an undercurrent of suspicion. "Nose stuck in a book," "bookworm" -- even the common cliches are faintly pejorative.

What would you like your readers to come away with when they read your novels?
I think those of us who write fiction, and those of us who write nonfiction pieces and essays as well, are all aiming for the same thing. We want to enlarge the reader's understanding of the human condition. I would like a reader to finish Black and Blue, for instance, and feel that she had both recognized herself within its pages, and learned about selves that she had never known existed. That impulse to connect to others, to their own innermost feelings and a world heretofore unimagined outside of themselves, hasn't changed from century to century, form to form. That's the writer's impulse. People read to know they're not alone. People write for the same reason. It's like putting a message in a bottle.

With over 350,000 new books added to the Library of Congress in 1995 alone, do you think that perhaps too many books are being published now? Is it too easy to get published?
No, it's too difficult to get published, as any talented first novelist can tell you. And let's not look at that 350,000 in a vacuum. Let's consider, for example, the number of people in this country, and, perhaps more importantly, the increase in the number of literate and highly educated people.

It's also important to consider what sorts of books would never have gotten to first base say, 50 years ago. Books about sex. Books about various kinds of spiritualism. Significant numbers of books in translation that were originally published in foreign countries. Books by black writers. Books by women. The boom in books mirrors a kind of democratization of reading, not to mention publishing, that I applaud. Are there lots of silly books being published? Sure. Each year when I weed out the chaff on my bookshelves for the school Christmas fair, I'm reminded of just how many books have a shelf life somewhere between cottage cheese and milk, to paraphrase Calvin Trillin. But I think the more books, the better. For readers, for writers. For everyone.

Do you consider certain types of reading -- for educational purposes, for example -- more legitimate than others?
No. I read the back of cereal boxes. I consider all reading, of every sort, a good thing.

Are the books that constitute today's core college curricula appropriate, in your view?
Oh, I think it depends on the college. Certainly there's more awareness that the dead white guys are not the only way to go. There's more Jane Austen, more Virginia Woolf, more James Baldwin in today's curricula. And I do think it's important to have read many of the classics: The Odyssey, a fair number of Shakespeare's plays, Milton, Chaucer. But I think it's also important to have a curricula that encompasses a range of styles and subjects. That's more likely to happen today than it was, say, 25 years ago.

What do you feel about book censorship, especially when it comes to your own children? Are there books you wouldn't want them to read?
Luckily a lot of this is determined by the intellectual acumen and reading ability of the child. I mean, you don't really have to worry about an eight-year-old reading Ulysses or Tropic of Cancer. They just can't do the job.

I'm doing everything I can to see that my sons are insulated, at least for now, from what I think of as hardcore porn, mainly photographs, some written material. I police their Internet use pretty strictly. But I've actually given them some other books that people think are objectionable. I gave my elder boy Portnoy's Complaint when he was 13 mainly because I thought it would help him understand that he was not the only person in the world on
testosterone overload. (I should add that he's a pretty sophisticated reader and thinker.) Plus I think it's a helluva book. So did he. We talked about it a lot afterwards, which I think is the key. He recently read The World According to Garp, which his father recommended after Quin joined the wrestling team. I knew he'd love it, and he did, but since I think there's a powerful strain of misogyny in Irving, I spent a lot of time discussing it with him afterwards. My second son just read The Chocolate Wars as an assigned book in seventh grade, and we talked about why that has been banned so often, and what he thought about censorship.

As I said in How Reading Changed My Life, the really wonderful librarian at their school has designed a whole lesson around the notion of banned books. I just think that's much more useful than withholding reading material. Read Catcher in the Rye and then discuss why it upset adults so much. At the end, your kids have read a great book and learned a little trick of channeling the other known as empathy. I mean, it doesn't get any better than that.

Do you agree with futurists who claim that -- thanks to television and computers, among other things -- the end of books is nigh?
No, I would daresay the amount of time many of us spend at our computers was once equalled, if not surpassed, by the time spent cleaning and carving quill pens. I think so far it appears that people like the book itself. If it were only a matter of receiving information, computers might suffice. But there is something leisurely and companionable about a book that a machine cannot replace. (Laurel Touby)