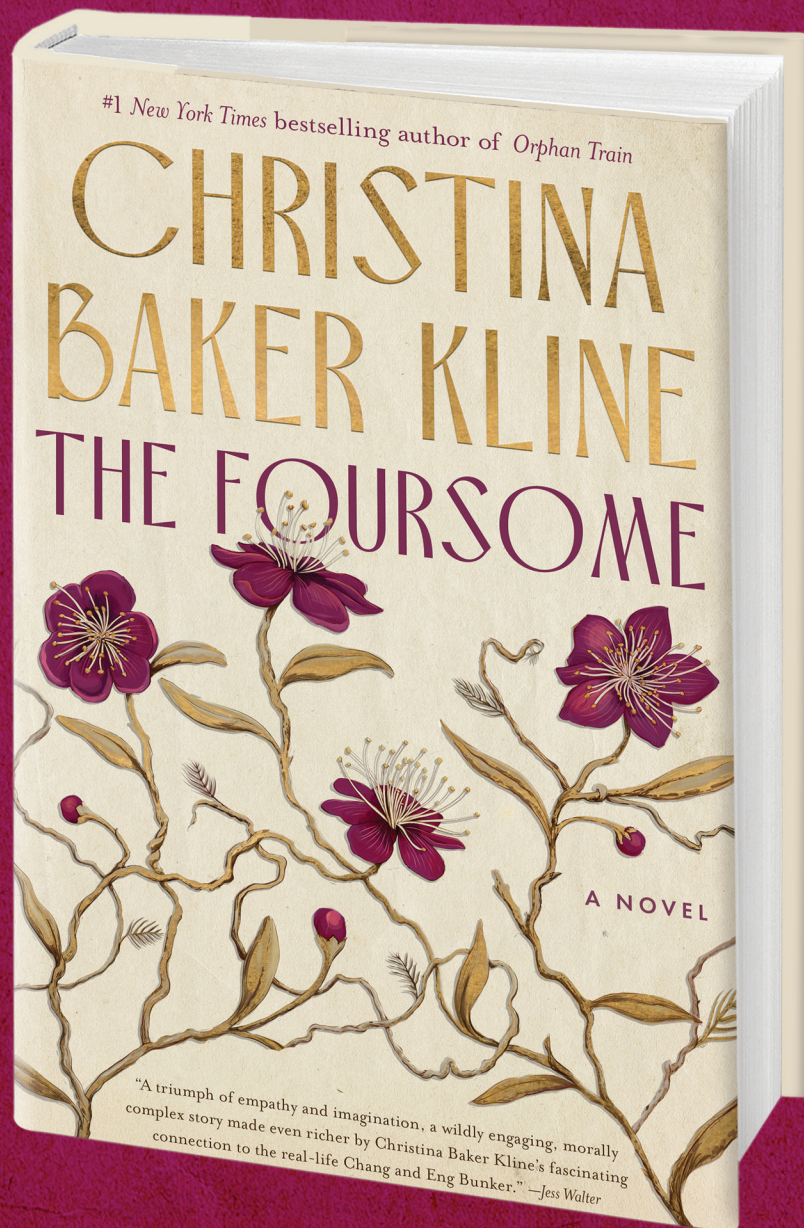


OFFICIAL BOOK CLUB AND DISCUSSION GUIDE



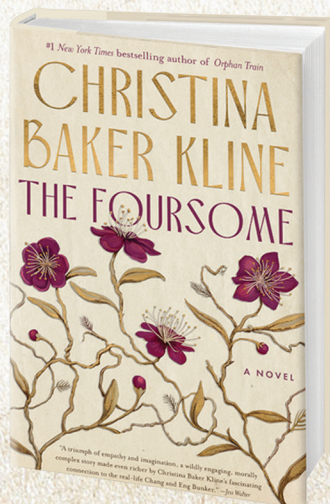
ABOUT THE BOOK:

From #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Christina Baker Kline comes a boldly original reimagining of the astonishing true story of two sisters in nineteenth-century North Carolina — Kline’s own distant relatives — who married world-famous conjoined twins from Siam.

When Eng and Chang Bunker arrive in Wilkes County in 1839, they’re not just a curiosity—they’re a sensation. Everyone is eager to learn whether the salacious rumors about them are true. Within months, the twins have opened a general store, bought land, and begun building a plantation. Now, word has it, they’re looking for wives—and in a place that thrives on gossip and legacy, their ambitions set the community on edge.

Sarah and Adelaide Yates, daughters of a once-prominent local family brought low by scandal, are drawn into their orbit. Bold, beautiful Adelaide sees in the twins’ fame a chance to reclaim her future. Sarah, quiet and observant, isn’t so sure. When the twins’ lives become entangled with theirs, they must navigate loyalty, longing, and identity in a world where everything—including race, class, and gender—is rigidly defined.

Spanning five decades and unfolding against the backdrop of a fractured nation hurtling toward war, *The Foursome* is both intimate and epic: a story of love and constraint, identity and reinvention. With piercing insight and emotional precision, Kline brings to life a forgotten chapter of American history and the complex, boundary-defying marriages at its center.



Dear Reader,

Every family harbors its secrets, its strange-but-true tales. In mine, one extraordinary piece of lore endures: that we are linked, through marriage, to Chang and Eng Bunker, the world-famous conjoined twins from Siam. In 1843, my distant cousins Sarah “Sallie” and Adelaide “Addie” Yates married the Bunker brothers in North Carolina. Together, the two couples raised twenty-one children and forged one of the most unconventional domestic arrangements in American history.

For years I hesitated to take on their story. It was thorny and complex, raising questions of identity, exploitation, race, and culture. My cousin – a librarian at Duke and our family genealogist – came to me after a Bunker family reunion and said what I’d been avoiding: “These women are our ancestors. If you don’t tell their story, who will?”

Once I began to dig, the questions multiplied. Why would two conventional young women from a prominent Southern family choose to marry conjoined brothers who were the objects of relentless public speculation? What were their lives really like behind closed doors? And why, I discovered, was one sister buried not with her husband, his brother, and her sister in the family cemetery, but alone on their former farm, beneath a hard-to-find stone among people the family had enslaved?

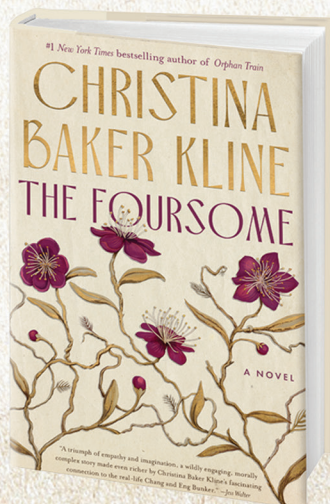
In Sarah’s separation, I glimpsed a woman stepping out of the collective frame. This detail unlocked her voice for me, and with it a story of desire and constraint, complicity and rebellion, set against the backdrop of a nation hurtling toward war.

The Foursome grew from a desire to honor these remarkable lives while grappling with the moral complexities of their time – and ours. It is a work of imagination grounded in research, shaped by the questions we ask of the past and how we choose to carry history forward.

I invite you into the world of Sarah and Adelaide, Chang and Eng – four people whose boundary-defying choices made a family unlike any other, in a place and time that demanded conformity above all else.

Christina Baker Kline

Christina Baker Kline



READING GROUP GUIDE

THE FOURSOME

BY CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE

1. *The Foursome* is told through Sarah's perspective. How does seeing events through her eyes shape your understanding of the other central characters, her sister Adelaide, her husband Eng, and his brother Chang? Were there moments when you felt the limits of Sarah's point of view, or times when what she couldn't or wouldn't see told you more than what she observed directly?
2. The novel explores the idea of complicity — the ways people participate in systems of harm through silence, willful ignorance, or simply the ordinary routines of daily life. Which moments in the novel struck you as the most powerful depictions of complicity, and how does Kline dramatize something as invisible as choosing not to see?
3. The title *The Foursome* frames these four people as a unit, yet the bonds between them are hardly equal. How do the different pairings within the foursome — the twins, the sisters, the two marriages — pull against each other? Which relationship did you find most compelling, and why?
4. Sallie and Addie are bound together in ways most sisters never are. How does the novel calibrate the love and resentment between them? Did your sympathies shift between the two sisters over the course of the book?
5. Historical fiction always faces the question of how to render the past without making characters sound either artificially modern or inaccessibly archaic. How did you experience the novel's language and dialogue? Were there moments where the historical setting felt especially vivid or especially distant?
6. The Bunker twins have been written about for nearly two hundred years. What does a novel — as opposed to a biography or documentary — allow us to understand about these historical figures that other forms might not? What can fiction access that fact alone cannot?
7. The novel takes on slavery from the perspective of a white protagonist who is embedded in and benefits from the institution. How does that narrative choice shape the way the book depicts enslaved people and the realities of their lives? What are the risks and possibilities of that approach?
8. Many of the most charged moments in the novel involve what is not said aloud: the silences between characters, the things left unspoken at dinner tables and in shared bedrooms. Can you point to a scene where silence carried as much weight as dialogue? What did that restraint reveal?

9. The novel depicts an extraordinarily unusual domestic arrangement — two married couples sharing a life because their husbands are physically inseparable. Have you ever been in a situation where the structure of your living arrangement or family shaped your relationships in ways you didn't expect? How did reading about the foursome's daily life challenge your assumptions about what a household or marriage can look like?
10. Sarah undergoes a slow moral awakening over the course of the novel as she comes to see things she had been taught not to see. Have you ever experienced a similar shift, where something you had accepted as normal gradually revealed itself to be something else entirely? What prompted that change in you?
11. The Bunker twins were one of the most famous spectacles of nineteenth-century America — people who were defined in the public eye by their physical difference. How does the novel complicate or challenge the idea of spectacle? Has there been a time in your life when you felt reduced to a single defining characteristic, or when you caught yourself doing that to someone else?
12. The book raises questions about the difference between choosing a life and making the best of the one you're given. Do you think Sarah chose her life with Chang, or did she make the best of a constrained set of options? Where do you draw the line between agency and accommodation in your own life?
13. One of the novel's recurring tensions is between the desire to belong to a community and the cost of conforming to its expectations. The foursome's life in North Carolina is defined by both acceptance and otherness. When have you felt that tension between fitting in and being fully yourself?
14. The novel is set in a period when the institution of slavery was woven into the fabric of everyday life for white Southerners. Reading about that ordinariness — the way brutality coexisted with domestic routine — what surprised you most? Did it change the way you think about how people in any era normalize what future generations may find unconscionable?
15. If your book club could step into the world of *The Foursome* and spend an evening with any one of the central characters, who would you most want to talk to, and what would you ask? What questions does the novel leave unanswered that you most wish you could resolve?

THE FOURSOME FAQs

- 1. Is *The Foursome* based on a true story?** Yes. The novel was inspired by the real lives of Chang and Eng Bunker – conjoined twins from Siam (now Thailand) – and their wives, two sisters from rural North Carolina. The couples had twenty-one children. While their story is drawn from history, the inner lives of the women are fictionalized.
- 2. What role does your own family history play in the book?** Sarah and Adelaide are my distant cousins; I grew up hearing about them and our family connection to the world-famous “Siamese Twins.” Though I was also raised in England and Maine, I am Southern through and through – my mother is from North Carolina, my father from Georgia. I drew on a deep sense of this Southern legacy, with all its complexities and contradictions. Writing this book was like uncovering a hidden branch of my family tree.
- 3. Why did you write this as a novel and not as a biography?** While there are many accounts of Chang and Eng’s public lives, little is known about what their wives thought, felt, or endured. Fiction gave me the freedom to imagine these hidden emotional landscapes – the private negotiations, the moments of intimacy and estrangement, the complexity beneath the surface of their shared lives. A novel isn’t bound by chronology or documentation; it can explore questions about love, identity, and power that history alone can’t answer. It offers access to the interior lives of characters the historical record leaves silent.
- 4. Is *The Foursome* historically accurate?** In writing this novel, I remained as close to the historical record as possible, drawing from biographies, academic studies, census records, oral histories, and site visits to North Carolina. Because the lives of the Bunker wives were so sparsely documented, I took creative liberties to imagine their voices, emotions, and perspectives within the known historical context.
- 5. What kind of research did you do for the book?** In addition to reading widely – biographies, letters, census and war records, novels, academic books and articles, accounts of Southern life and the Civil War – I visited Wilkes and Surry Counties, the Siamese Twins Museum in Mount Airy, and the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. I spoke with descendants of the Bunker family, who generously shared stories, insights, and perspectives. (For a complete list of sources, including the books, articles, and archives that informed my research, visit my website, www.christinabakerkline.com.)
- 6. Why didn’t you center Chang and Eng’s perspectives?** Much of my writing focuses on stories told through the eyes of those whom history tends to marginalize or forget. The Bunker twins’ lives have been extensively documented, but their wives are virtually absent from the historical record. Yet the brothers’ biographies contain moments that raise haunting questions about the women’s experiences. For years, the twins lived forty miles apart, switching households every three days. What did that mean for the two women raising large families, often without a partner present? I wanted to imagine the emotional reality behind those facts – the inner lives that history overlooked.

THE FOURSOME FAQs

- 7. Why did you focus on Sarah's point of view?** I initially intended to alternate between the sisters' perspectives, but when I learned that Sarah was buried apart from her husband and sister – on family land, in a neglected grave – it struck me as a quiet act of defiance. That detail became a narrative key: I began to imagine a woman who steps out of the collective frame, who slowly begins to question the world around her and her place within it.
- 8. How did your understanding of your characters change as you wrote?** At first, I saw Sallie and Addie primarily as historical figures: two cloistered Southern women whose lives happened to intersect with a strange and famous story. But as I wrote, they became real to me: flawed, layered, contradictory. I came to understand how they made the choices they did, and how much strength it took to live within – and eventually, in Sallie's case, push against – the confines of their world. Sallie's emotional life became the novel's center of gravity.
- 9. What surprised you most in the process of writing this novel?** I expected the challenge would be imagining the strangeness of the arrangement – but what surprised me was how quickly the emotional territory felt familiar. Strip away the extraordinary circumstances and what remains are the fundamental tensions of family life: sibling rivalry, marital disappointment, the clash between duty and desire. The deeper I went, the more I understood that this was a story about universal human experiences, lived under the most unusual conditions imaginable.
- 10. What questions guided you as you wrote the novel?** I kept asking: How did these women make sense of their extraordinary situation, day by day? What did it mean to be married to men who could never be alone? How did they build intimacy when privacy was impossible? And how did they navigate the constant push and pull between love and resentment, duty and desire? Just as urgently, I wanted to understand how they lived within the moral framework of their time – shaped by social hierarchies, complicit in systems they may or may not have questioned. I was interested in the quiet reckonings, moments of awareness that may have flickered and faded. Or taken root.
- 11. What can fiction reveal about historical figures that traditional history cannot?** Fiction has a unique ability to illuminate what history leaves out. It reaches into the quiet spaces between facts and imagines emotional and psychological truths that are absent from ledgers and records. In writing *The Foursome*, I wasn't only interested in what happened; I wanted to understand what it felt like to live it. Fiction offers a bridge between the documented and the deeply personal.
- 12. What does the novel's title, *The Foursome*, signify?** The title reflects the extraordinary domestic arrangement at the heart of the story: two sisters married to conjoined twins, sharing a home and raising children together. But it also captures the emotional complexity of their situation – the way four distinct people must navigate love, desire, and identity within the confines of a shared life that offers no privacy, no escape.
- 13. Why did you portray Sallie's moral awakening so gradually?** I wanted Sallie's transformation to feel emotionally and historically plausible. She's a woman shaped by her time and circumstance who has never been encouraged to question the world she lives in. Real moral awakenings rarely happen overnight; they're usually painful, uneven, and incomplete. I was interested in those moments when a person begins to see what they've been taught to ignore, and then must decide what to do with that knowledge.

THE FOURSOME FAQs

- 14. How did you navigate writing about slavery, especially from the perspective of a white woman whose family owned enslaved people?** I approached it with care, humility, and a deep sense of responsibility. One of the central challenges of this novel was confronting the pervasive, often unseen ways white complicity sustained the institution of slavery. Sarah and Adelaide lived within a system built on human bondage; their comfort and security were made possible by the suffering of others. I wanted to examine not only overt cruelty, but the more insidious forms of oppression: silence, rationalization, willful ignorance. Sallie's evolving relationship with Grace lies at the moral heart of this novel.
- 15. Did the real-life Bunker brothers father children with enslaved women?** There is no definitive proof, but several biographers of Chang and Eng have noted the possibility, and some family stories – along with recent claims by individuals who believe they may be descended from the brothers – suggest it may have occurred. In the novel, I chose to explore that possibility through Eng's character, not to sensationalize, but to acknowledge the brutal power dynamics of slavery and the complexity of historical silence. History shows us that such relationships, typically coercive and unrecorded, were not uncommon in the antebellum South. To ignore that possibility would've been its own kind of erasure.
- 16. Are the characters of Grace and Aunt Joan based on real people?** Grace, the enslaved woman central to the novel, is part of the historical record. In real life, she was older than Sarah; I made them the same age to deepen their evolving relationship. Aunt Joan is entirely fictional, though grounded in period-specific types of women who lived on the margins of conventional society.
- 17. How did you approach writing about intimacy in such an unconventional marriage?** With restraint and empathy, focusing on emotional nuance rather than explicit detail. The challenge was to imagine intimacy – not just sexual, but emotional and domestic – within a marriage that defied conventional boundaries. I was interested in how privacy, desire, and tenderness might emerge and endure in an arrangement shaped by constant proximity and a lack of solitude.
- 18. Why did you choose to use contractions in the novel's language? Isn't that historically inaccurate?** Contractions were common in 19th-century speech and informal writing. While published prose of the period tended to be more formal, I chose a narrative voice that reflects how people actually spoke. My aim was to preserve emotional immediacy and intimacy between characters while staying rooted in the rhythms and texture of the time.
- 19. Why didn't you use dialect to represent enslaved or working-class characters?** That was a deliberate choice. Rather than risk caricature, I wanted to convey character, tone, and social status through rhythm, syntax, and word choice. Dialect on the page often reveals more about the writer's assumptions than the character's reality. My goal was to honor the full humanity and individuality of every voice in the novel without reducing anyone to a linguistic stereotype.
- 20. What do you hope readers take away from *The Foursome*?** Above all, I hope readers feel the weight of these characters' choices – the daily negotiations between love and duty, the moments when they chose to speak rather than stay silent, to resist rather than comply. History isn't fixed; it's shaped by ordinary people making difficult decisions in complicated moments. I hope the novel invites reflection on the legacies we carry – those we inherit, and those we shape for ourselves.

PRAISE FOR *THE FOURSOME*

“Mesmerizing...A gripping story about identity, relationships, prejudice, and more.”

— *REAL SIMPLE*

“A daring and deeply empathetic tale.”

— *THE MILLIONS*

“Emotionally moving, hard to put down ... Written with compassion and sensitivity, [*The Foursome*] gives readers a behind-the-scenes look at the once perceived scandalous lives of the two Yates-Bunker families.”

— *LIBRARY JOURNAL* (STARRED REVIEW)

“A riveting and insightful story.”

— *KIRKUS* (STARRED REVIEW)

“Avoiding sensationalism and hewing closely to the historical record, Kline subtly and often poetically documents the small, daily choices that shape these lives. It’s remarkable.”

— *PUBLISHERS WEEKLY* (STARRED REVIEW)

“Christina Baker Kline has the heart, the wisdom, and the courage to tell the story of these twins and their wives not as some weird relic plucked from America’s cabinet of curiosities, but as a great love story: human, awkward, puzzling, complex, battered by time and circumstance, and yet, somehow, enduring.”

— AUTHOR ALICE MCDERMOTT

“Christina Baker Kline is a masterful storyteller with an extraordinary subject in *The Foursome*. Chang and Eng can literally never be apart, which means that their wives—Addie and her sister Sarah—are also held in an impossible proximity to each other. What a wonderful study of intimacy of all kinds, of love and tolerance, of growing together and growing apart. In short, of what it is to be human.”

— AUTHOR ANN NAPOLITANO

“*The Foursome* explores the complexities of marriage, sisterhood, and raising children at a time and place where conformity was the norm and change was just beginning to stir. Kline weaves a beautiful tapestry of love, doubt, identity, and resilience in a world that left little room for differences. I really loved this book.”

— SADEQA JOHNSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *KEEPER OF LOST CHILDREN*

“*The Foursome* is a triumph of empathy and imagination, a wildly engaging, morally complex story made even richer by Christina Baker Kline’s fascinating connection to the real-life Chang and Eng Bunker.”

— AUTHOR JESS WALTER

“*The Foursome* is a breathtaking dive into identity, history and romantic love set against the backdrop of a country in turmoil. Chang and Eng Bunker are conjoined twins who marry Addie and Sallie and build their lives in pre-Civil War North Carolina. Emotional, often raw, the story of two families buffeted by physical impediments and societal constraints is told over decades that bring massive changes that upend their world. This novel is an unforgettable page turner replete with the author’s immersive style. *The Foursome* stands as the jewel in the crown of Christina Baker Kline’s dazzling career.”

— AUTHOR ADRIANA TRIGIANI,

“Christina Baker Kline has taken the story of the famous 19th century conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, and their wives the Yates sisters, and transformed this often sensationalized slice of history into a deeply felt, meticulously observed exploration of the mystery of marriage and family that portrays the ways in which good-hearted people can both reflect the prejudices of their era and question them in a community beset by a brutal civil war. I have loved all Kline’s books; this beautiful, thought-provoking novel is her best yet. A rare and courageous marvel.”

— AUTHOR ALICE ELLIOTT DARK



CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE

is the author of ten novels, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Orphan Train*, *The Exiles*, and *A Piece of the World*. Her novels have received the New England Society Book Award for Fiction, the Maine Literary Award, and several bookseller awards, among other prizes. Born in England, she was raised in the American South and Maine. She lives in New York City and in Southwest Harbor, Maine.

