

# an interview with robin

**The structure of the novel, eleven chapters dedicated to eleven summers in one girl's life, is a different way of telling the story. How did you decide to write the book this way? And why the summer season only to tell Claudia's story?**

Summer is the season of possibilities. There is light and fresh air and a midwesterner's sense of freedom. Winters in Michigan (where some of the chapters are set) can be brutal and long. Spring doesn't come until late April—sometimes May. By summer we're ready to jump out of our skin. Claudia and the other characters are all jumping out of their skin in this book. Although I wrote *Invincible Summers* long before the movie, "Boyhood," came out, I was happy to see someone else thought the idea of exploring coming-of-age in a long narrative arc was creatively intriguing.

***Invincible Summers* takes place in the 1960s and 1970s in a suburb of Detroit and Europe. Why did you choose this time period and those settings?**

Assassinations, riots, the Vietnam War formed the backdrop and soundtrack to everything going on in our country then. That period was ripe with turmoil and rage, similar to what my characters experience in their own homes. So "place" becomes a character in the book. Add in loss and the sense of uncertainty and the characters start to fight or flee. Claudia fled to Europe with only a backpack and a dream of reinventing herself.

**Although *Invincible Summers* is a novel how autobiographical is Claudia's story?**

Like Claudia, I lost my father at the age of ten. That kind of loss stops a childhood in its tracks. For children and teens, the idea of being perceived as different from your peers, (i.e., the death of a parent, a divorce, illness, financial trouble, addictions, abandonment, etc.) takes up space in their heads usually reserved for normal childhood angst. Making the baseball team, getting invited to sleepovers or the prom, seems silly by comparison when you're a child worrying about adult things already. Children of halted childhoods wear their indelible scars like scarlet letters. The color fades as time goes on, but not the mark.

**The bonds of brother and sister, mother and daughter, are central themes in the novel. How do the surviving Goodwins deal with the loss of their husband and father?**

With varying degrees of success and failure. They don't have a choice, do they? Enduring the loss of a loved one and the subsequent grief that follows is hard work—like slicing your way through a thick and dangerous jungle. It's about getting up each day in a new unstable world and putting one foot in front of the other. Each family member goes about this differently: Fiona, the mother, insists on "moving on" by marrying a man for stability. Burke treats his grief and anger with drugs and alcohol.

Claudia dreams of escape. All have narrow views of what is possible. Although forgiveness, of each other and themselves, gives the reader hope for the Goodwins.

**Miscommunication and lack of communication in the Goodwin family are evident from the first chapter. Was this an intentional theme while writing the book?**

No. While doing revisions on the manuscript I was surprised at how the subconscious worked in threading the theme through every character in large and small ways. There's a line in the book, "Silence, I realize now, the deafening clatter of all things unsaid." Claudia's father, in "Doublespeak," interprets the mother's mumbled answers to Claudia's observations and questions. After his death, the family's translator is gone.

**Transportation, by automobile, train, ferry, airplane—even jumping out of one—is important to Claudia's story. Why did you include so many modes in the book?**

You forgot hitchhiking! It was a popular way to get somewhere in the 1960s and 1970s. People look funny doing it now. *Invisible Summers* takes the reader on a journey, literally and figuratively, to the transformative moments in Claudia's life. While some of those moments/scenes take place in or around her childhood home on Vermont Street, many occur during her travels to and from places in Europe. A life can unfold from staring out a train window at the scenery or from the deck of a ferry looking at the sea. Of this, I am certain.

**How do ghosts, or the idea of ghosts, help and haunt the characters in *Invisible Summers*? Do you believe in ghosts?**

The ghost that is Claudia's father seems to haunt her—or at least, that's what she first thinks—but throughout the book he helps her to confront her fears, and he leads her to Elliot. So there's that! Big Becca has her ghost, as well, although not as fleshed out as Claudia's. Maybe her ghost is more of an imaginary friend? I do believe in ghosts. The scene where the radio comes on and plays a single song and then goes dark again actually happened to me. It was the last time I felt my father's presence, nearly thirty plus years ago. Everyone has ghosts. It's a choice whether one wants to see them or not.

**What do you hope readers take away from the book?**

I hope the reader feels empathy for one or more of the characters and enjoys the journey Claudia takes them on. As Louise Gluck writes in *Nostos*, "We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory."