

THE BOYS BOOK CLUB KIT



“Hafner’s taut and utterly delightful debut is a novel of multitudes... What a wonder of storytelling.”

—**Weike Wang, *New York Times***

A Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

I'd like to tell you about my novel, *The Boys*, which has just been released in paperback. (The paperback cover is recently updated, and has an entirely different mood from the hardcover!) It's a book about a marriage, about love and loss and connection and parenting. And a bike ride.

I know how important and memorable book group discussions can be. I've been invited to talk to a few dozen since the book was first published last summer, and the discussions are always very lively, especially when it comes to the novel's plot twist. The great thing about talking to a book group, versus a general audience, is that pretty much everyone is guaranteed to have read the book, so we can discuss the reveal freely, instead of tiptoeing around it. One of the themes of *The Boys* centers around feelings of loneliness and seeking connection in a post-pandemic world. Book clubs offer such an incredible space for sharing thoughts and feeling closer to other readers.

I'd be honored if you'd consider "adopting" *The Boys* for your book group's next selection. If you do choose it, I would be more than happy to participate, either in person or via Zoom.

I hope you enjoy the book club kit and I hope it makes hosting a little easier.

P.S. you'll need to tell me how the peach cobbler turns out if you make it!

All the very best,

Katie Hafner



Barb's Famous Chocolate Chip Cookie Recipe

When Barb shows up in the first scene of *The Boys*, chocolate chip cookies—with walnuts—in hand, Ethan is furious at first. But once she leaves, he digs in. He eats one, then another. And then another.

Ingredients

- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter, softened
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- ¾ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract
- 2 large eggs, at room temperature
- 12 oz of semisweet chocolate chips. It's a nice move to upgrade the chips. I love both Ghirardelli and Guittard – as does Barb.
- 1 cup walnuts (fewer or more, depending on your love of walnuts. Pecans are also a nice touch, though just as allergenic).

Directions

Makes approximately 36 cookies.

- Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper, or use those great silicone baking sheets.
- Whisk the flour, salt, and baking soda in a medium bowl until completely combined. Beat the butter, oil, granulated sugar and brown sugar in the bowl of a stand mixer with the paddle attachment (or a large bowl if using a hand mixer) on medium-high speed until creamy, about 5 minutes. Beat in 1 teaspoon water and the vanilla until smooth. Reduce the speed to low and beat in the eggs one at a time until incorporated. Add the dry ingredients and fold in gently until just combined. Fold in the chocolate chips and nuts.
- Drop heaping tablespoons of the dough onto the prepared baking sheets about 2 inches apart. Bake the cookies until they are a deep golden brown, rotating the pans halfway through, 12 to 15 minutes. Let the cookies cool on the baking sheets for 10 minutes. Transfer them to a wire rack to cool completely. Repeat with any remaining dough.



Bunny's Peach Cobbler

The secret here is frozen mealy peaches. Every infuriatingly mealy peach you buy can go straight into the freezer, then used for your cobbler. They don't all have to be mealy, of course, but you'll be pleasantly surprised with the cobbler that results from the ones you do use.

Ingredients

For the peach filling

- 5 pounds fresh sliced peaches, about 14 medium peaches
- 1 ½ cups granulated sugar
- 1/3 cup all purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- Pinch of nutmeg or cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- A splash of Cointreau, if you've got some

For the cobbler topping

- 2 ½ cups all purpose flour
- 1 - 1-½ cups granulated sugar (depending on how sweet you want it to be)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 cup buttermilk (or add 1 tsp vinegar or lemon juice to ½ c. whole milk. Stir and let stand for 5 mins)
- 1 egg
- ½ cup cold butter, cut into small chunks 2 tablespoons sugar, granulated or raw

Directions

- Slice the peaches. Many people take the skin off, but I prefer to leave it on.
- Top the peaches with the sugar.
- Sprinkle the flour, cinnamon, nutmeg or cardamom, and salt on the peaches. Gently stir the mixture together. Set aside.
- In a large bowl, add the flour, sugar, salt, and baking powder. Whisk it together.
- In a small bowl, whisk together the egg and buttermilk. Pour it into the bowl with the flour, then chop a stick of the cold butter into 1/2 inch pieces and use a pastry cutter, two knives, or even your hands, to cut it into the flour.
- Sprinkle 2 or 3 TB sugar over the top. Demerara sugar will give it extra crunch.

About the baking:

- A lot of people are die-hard pour-the-filling-over-the-topping people. But I like my cobbler crisper than that, so I put the peach filling in the baking dish first (use a 9 x 13 glass baking dish) and then spread the topping around evenly on top. I know this makes it a little more like a crisp and a little less like a cobbler, but there you have it. Plus, it's the way Bunny would make it.
- Bake at 350 for 45-55 minutes. If the top browns too quickly, put foil over it. At the end, if you'd like it to crisp it up nicely, turn on the broiler and broil for 1-3 minutes, keeping a careful eye on it. Wait 15 minutes to let the juices set up before serving. Top with vanilla bean ice cream and serve.
- P.S. If you have any tweaks or comments about Bunny's peach cobbler recipe, please let me know! I'm katieh@gmail.com



Miss Flo's Ultimate Jukebox Playlist

Thriller—Michael Jackson

The Twist—Chubby Checker

Tuxedo Junction—Glenn Miller

Back in the U.S.S.R.—the Beatles

Can't Help Falling in Love—Elvis

Respect—Aretha Franklin

A Felicidade—Tom Jobim

All Through the Night—Ella Fitzgerald
singing Cole Porter

Bolero—Pink Martini does Maurice Ravel

'Deed I Do—Blossom Dearie

Is You or Is You Ain't (My Baby)—Louis
Jordan

Via Con Me—Paolo Conte

Tears in Heaven—Eric Clapton

String Quartet Op. 132 in A Minor—
Beethoven

Summertime—Chris Connor sings
Gershwin



Listen on Spotify at [spoti.fi/44RLakM](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/44RLakM)



Snapshots from Italy



Fun fact: Katie took a bike trip around Italy as part of her research for the book. Do any of these locations feel familiar to you?



Discussion Questions

1. Katie Hafner said in an interview that one of her goals in writing *The Boys* was to create a novel in which all the characters are, at their core, good people. Why might an author set a goal like this one—and what do you think of such a goal for a novel? Do you believe she succeeded? Can you think of other novels in which all the characters, despite their flaws or missteps, are people who consistently try to do the right thing?
2. Ethan describes himself as socially awkward and taciturn, with his quiet introversion a stark contrast to Barb's outgoing nature. Their pairing in *The Boys* might be seen as a case of "opposites attract." Does this adage ring true to you? Was their relationship convincing to you, or could you see the end in sight? Are you more drawn to people with whom you share qualities or those who are radically different?
3. One of Ethan's professional talents lies in reverse engineering. As he describes it, "It's like being given a slice of cake, then being told to unbake it and produce the recipe and list the raw ingredients." How might the narrative structure of *The Boys* serve as an example of reverse engineering? How would you understand this story differently if it had been told in a conventional, chronological way—beginning with Ethan meeting Barb? What can doing things in reverse reveal that a linear approach might not?
4. When you first recognized the surprising twist of the novel, what was your reaction? Did you see it coming, or was it completely unexpected? Did it deepen the themes of the novel for you, and if so, in what ways? Did you feel Hafner's narrative decision was a feat of storytelling or did you feel annoyed that she withheld crucial information? Can you think of other books or films that contain a twist or surprise that made you reevaluate the entire work?
5. From automated phone calls to the social isolation of the pandemic and even to Ethan's self-imposed solitude, emotional distance and disconnect permeate *The Boys*. In her research, Barb makes the "clear distinction between social isolation and loneliness," claiming that "it's possible to be socially isolated without feeling lonely." Discuss the themes of loneliness and solitude in the book.
6. Midway through the Italy bike trip, Gus, Izzy's boyfriend, asks her, "What do you think makes Ethan tick?" Izzy struggles to give a complete answer but says she is taken by "something so pure about him and his love for the boys." Do you agree with her assessment? How would you answer Gus's question? When in the novel did you feel you understood Ethan the best? And conversely, at which points did his thoughts or actions seem incomprehensible?



7. Given the isolation so many felt during Covid, do you consider this novel a pandemic novel or one simply set during a pandemic? To what extent do you think the pandemic is a trigger for the breakdown of Ethan and Barb's relationship? Would their conflict have occurred regardless of the pandemic? How might things have played out differently in other circumstances? One result of the pandemic is the intensification of Ethan's peculiarities and personality tics, for example, his reclusiveness and his fears of the outside world. Which of your behaviors were magnified during the pandemic? How might your habits have changed for better or for worse?

8. Ethan finds an unlikely kinship with Signora Fiore, the elderly Italian woman distributing cloth people around her deserted village to replace those who have left or passed away. Like Ethan, Signora Fiore "imbue[s] non-people with people-like traits," projecting her own world onto what is no longer there. What are the similarities and differences between the cloth people and Tommy and Sam? Signora Fiore's ritual of placing the cloth people around the village appears to be a way for her to grieve and memorialize her community. Where would you draw the line between an unreality that is cathartic and one that is delusional?

9. When we return to Ethan's perspective, we learn that he is somewhat aware that the boys began as a shared fiction between him and Barb. He says: "Barb had made it all seem so harmless. And it was. Or should have been. Before long, I was all in. I was the one who conferred personalities on the boys, and most of all, a keen need for protection." Yet Ethan also says that he cannot fully remember the moment when he met them, recalling only the "haziest outlines." How aware do you think Ethan is that the boys are not real?

10. Through Barb, we learn that Tommy and Sam originate from a photograph taken by Dorothy Lange during the Great Depression and that their reality is far removed from the backstories given to them. Why is this revelation significant? What do you know about this period in history, and do you want to know more about the real lives of these boys? How would you feel if your own image was repurposed in this way?

11. The novel closes with Ethan reconciling with Barb, returning to Miss Flo's, the jukebox, and the early rituals of their relationship, though there is still a lot of work to do to heal the breach between them. Do you feel optimistic about their future together? What has changed and what needs to happen next to repair their marriage?

