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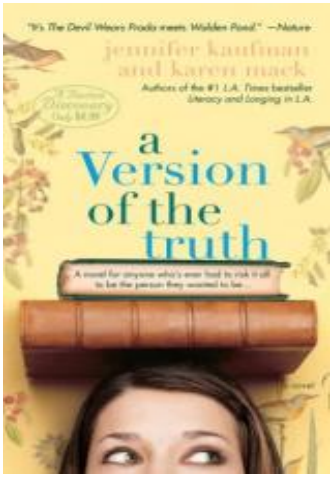
A Version of the Truth

by Jennifer Kaufman and Karen Mack



About the Book

In **Literacy and Longing in L.A.**, hailed as "the most delightful read of the year" by Liz Smith in the *New York Post*, authors Jennifer Kaufman and Karen Mack captivated readers with a brilliantly imagined first novel. Now Kaufman and Mack return, introducing a character with a unique voice you'll never forget: Cassie Shaw, an irrepressible young woman who reinvents herself --- with unexpected consequences --- in a funny, wise, and utterly original novel about friendship, love, wildlife, and other forces of nature.

In the wilds of Topanga Canyon, Cassie is right at home --- with the call of birds, the sound of wind in the trees, the harmony of a world without people. But everywhere else, life is a little harder for Cassie. Her mother believes in Big Foot. Her wisecracking pet parrot is a drama queen. And at the age of thirty, newly single and without a college degree, Cassie desperately needs a decent paycheck. Which is why, against all her principles, she lies on her resumé for an office job at an elite university --- and then finds herself employed in academia by two professors who are as rare as the birds she covets.

One of her new bosses is Professor William Conner, a sexy, handsome, cheerfully aristocratic expert in animal behavior. Soon, under Conner's charismatic tutelage, Cassie carefully begins her personal transformation while meeting the kind of people who don't flock to wildlife preserves --- from impossibly brilliant academics to adorably spoiled college boys. But her future --- and unlikely new career --- is teetering on one unbearable untruth. And Cassie's masquerade is about to come undone... in a chain of events that will transform her life --- and the lives of those around her --- forever.

A novel for late bloomers of every exotic shade and stripe, **A Version of the Truth** is pure entertainment --- at once hilarious and wry, lyrical and uplifting.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the storytelling approach used in this novel. Did you find Cassie's first person narrative effective or limiting? Do you perceive her inner voice as accounting for reality? How would the story change if it were told in third person?

2. Comment on the setting of this book. What role does the wild and beautiful nature of Topanga Canyon --- and the many free-spirited people it attracts, like Cassie's mother --- play on Cassie's character and lifestyle?

3. Discuss Cassie's decision to lie on her resumé when applying for her job. Knowing all the extenuating circumstances that could take away from this act of dishonesty (her financial need, her learning disability, etc.), do you think it was worth the risk? At one point in the novel, Cassie tells Professor Pearce that she would tell the truth if she had to do it over again. Do you believe she would? Would you, if you were in her position?

4. Compare and contrast the three men we know to be Cassie's love interests in this novel: Frank, Freddy, and Connor. In what ways is she a different person when she is with each?

5. What does it say about Cassie's character that she considers her parrot Sam one of her best friends? Why is she able to connect with animals with such greater ease than other people?

6. Cassie says she enjoys being in the woods because "you can be whoever you want --- chatty and clever and stupid and ugly and unloved and unkissed... and still feel like you belong." What do you make of this sentiment? How does this statement go along with overarching themes in this novel?

7. In what ways is Alison initially a foil for Cassie's character? Though she exudes perfection in her appearance, it seems she doesn't have much to offer below the surface. What do you make of Cassie's attempt to look and dress like her?

8. Describe Cassie's relationship with Tiff. What does she get out of this friendship?

9. After working with Professors Connor and Pearce, Cassie begins her personal transformation and is able to grasp and take pride in her natural intelligence. But all of her accomplishments still hinge on her one unbearable untruth. In your opinion, does this make any of them less genuine?

10. On the whole, it seems Cassie's reinvention of herself is beneficial --- she becomes more confident in her thinking, is able to excel in intriguing classes, and finds love. Are there any negative aspects of her new lifestyle?

11. Cassie's mother named her after the Greek goddess Cassandra, who could see the power of the future, but was cursed because no one would believe what she proclaimed. How is the root of Cassie's name significant to her character, and to the story?

12. What does the ivory billed woodpecker symbolize to Cassie in this book? Do you believe she ever really saw this elusive bird? Even she doubts herself at the very end of the novel, saying, "Somewhere, deep down inside me, a thought creeps into my head. I hear it as a whisper. I hear it as a warning. Maybe the birds were never really there at all." What do you make of the author closing the story with these words?

13. In what ways do the characters, namely Cassie and Connor, connect with the classic and popular authors that Kaufman and Mack have woven into this story, like Walden, Thoreau, Whitman, Muir, and others

14. Cassie's best friend Tiffany tells her that there is such a thing as "a version of the truth." And Connor tells her "it's not a lie if you believe it." Do you agree with either these statements?

Author Bio

Jennifer Kaufman is a former staff writer for the Los Angeles Times and a two time winner of the national Penney-Missouri Journalism Award. She is a graduate of Barnard College and the Columbia University School of Journalism.

Critical Praise

"Delightfully merging humor, philosophy and reflections on nature, this novel is a lot of fun.... winsome."

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