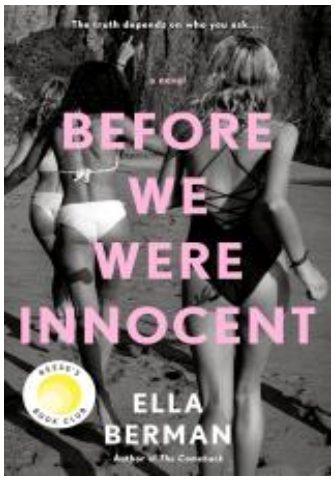
Before We Were Innocent

by Ella Berman



About the Book

A summer in Greece for three best friends ends in the unthinkable when only two return home.

Ten years ago, after a sun-soaked summer spent in Greece, best friends Bess and Joni were cleared of having any involvement in their friend Evangeline?s death. But that didn?t stop the media from ripping apart their teenage lives like vultures.

While the girls were never convicted, Joni, ever the opportunist, capitalized on her newfound infamy to become a motivational speaker. Bess, on the other hand, resolved to make her life as small and controlled as possible so she wouldn?t risk losing everything all over again. And it almost worked.

Except now Joni needs a favor, and when she turns up at her old friend's doorstep asking for an alibi, Bess has no choice but to say yes. She still owes her. But as the two friends try desperately to shake off their past, they have to face reality.

Can you ever be an innocent woman when everyone wants you to be guilty?

Discussion Guide

1. Bess and Joni are vilified by the international media after Evangeline?s death in 2008. Do you think the same thing would happen today?

2. After Bess? and Joni?s reputations are ripped to shreds, they?re expected to know how to navigate their new infamy. How successful are they each at coping with it? And what choices would you have made in their position?

3. What do Bess, Joni and Evangeline see in one another when they meet as teenagers? What were you looking for in

your own best friends at that age?

4. Bess still blames herself for what happened to Evangeline in Greece. Do you view her death as a senseless accident or an inevitable outcome of their collective frustration that summer?

5. Why do you think Bess agrees to help Joni when she comes back to her in 2018? Why does Bess find her old friend so hard to resist?

6. After Bess returns from Greece, her relationship with her family deteriorates. What could they have done differently to stop this from happening?

7. Bess still fantasizes about her stolen future with Theo. What do you think he represents for her? And what do you think the future would have held for them if Evangeline hadn?t died that night?

8. Toward the end of the book, Joni attributes her manipulative behavior to her past trauma. Do you accept this as a justifiable defense for how she acts toward Bess? Should our present transgressions be forgiven because of our past?

9. At one point, Bess asserts that ?trusting someone is a choice.? Do you believe this is true? And why do you think Joni finds it so hard to tell Bess the truth about Willa from the start?

10. The book examines the thousands of choices we make every day --- good and bad, infinitesimal and life-altering. Joni wants Bess to be fearless in her choices. Do you think Bess achieves this by the end of the book?

11. ?Everyone always talks about things being taken out of context, but in our case, it felt like the exact opposite --- every single thing we?d ever done or said was now viewed only through the prism of Evangeline?s untimely death.? Did the story make you rethink any of your own judgments of people in the public eye?

12. What do you think of Joni?s ending? Do you have any ideas on what happens to her? By then, has she learned anything from the events of 2008 and 2018?

13. Why do you think Bess is still so tied to this period in her life? Do you think she?ll ever truly move on?

14. What does the title BEFORE WE WERE INNOCENT mean to you? Do you think it encapsulates Bess, Joni and Evangeline?s story?

Author Bio

Ella Berman grew up in both Los Angeles and London, where she studied psychology before working at Sony Music. Her debut novel, THE COMBACK, was selected as a "Read with Jenna" Book Club pick, and her follow-up, BEFORE WE WERE INNOCENT, was a Reese?s Book Club pick. Raised by two former hippies on the music and art of the 1960s and 70s, she lives in London with her husband, their senior dog, and their daughter. Her third novel is L.A. WOMEN.

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