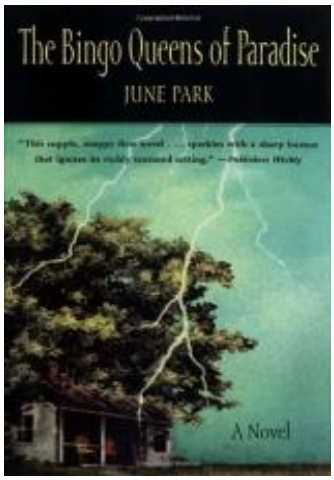
The Bingo Queens of Paradise

by June Park



About the Book

In Oklahoma, where Kraft Macaroni & Cheese is a staple and Bob Barker is king, twenty-eight-year-old Darla Moon struggles to break free and pursue her dreams. A talented seamstress and designer, she is cursed with a semi-retired hooker for a mother, a hypochondriac for a sister, a no-good loafer for a brother-in-law, a frog-collecting grandma, and Momma's British lesbian friends, Muff and Freda Bottrell ("Clairvoyants and Tea Leaf Readers Extraordinaire"). To make matters worse, Darla lives in Paradise, a drought-ridden bend in the road that's spitting distance from Lamb of God Pentecostal Church and Big Bucks Bingo - a world away from New York City, where she really wants to be. But Darla is blessed with the devotion of Elijah True, an elderly black man who nurtured her through childhood, the friendship of Brandy, the town's lonely beautician, and the unexpected love of the Reverend Spirit E. Jackson, a transplanted Australian who drives into town in an old white Cadillac and sweeps her off her feet.

Sadly, as Darla formulates her plan to escape Paradise, turmoil erupts. Family once more stands between her and her suitcase. Momma runs off with a long-distance trucker, Darla's sister is hospitalized with cancer, her sister's two children are sick with worry, and brother-in-law Frank is thrown in jail - charged with impregnating a neighbor's sixteen-year-old daughter. Left unsupervised, Granny gets into trouble of her own, and Pearl, Darla's fourteen-year-old niece, can't cope with her world.

Torn between her love for Spirit, her love for Elijah and young Jesse, her keen sense of duty, and the pursuit of a dream, Darla must, for the first time in her life, cast an unflinching eye on all the hard-to-accept truths regarding love, responsibility, and survival.

Discussion Guide

1. When Darla grew up and left home, why, considering her miserable childhood, did she remain within striking distance of Momma? Even in "normal families," mothers and daughters frequently butt heads. Why do you think that is? What

were Darla's true feelings toward Rhonda?

2. Nowadays many women, single and married, successfully juggle marriage and their chosen profession. Darla, however, has for a long time believed that she can only be fully successful and independent if she leaves Paradise and family behind. In her case, do you think she's right? What do you see in her future?

3. Unlike Rhonda, who rolls over and plays dead in the face of adversity, Darla appears strong and tenacious, but she has her weaknesses. What are they? How do the events of our upbringing shape us and make us who we are? And why, do you think, does an identical upbringing affect each child differently?

4. The novel is relentless in its portrayal of the hostile and prejudicial nature of people. How did you react to the motivations and behavior of some of the characters toward one another-specifically the hostile relationship Momma and Elijah shared, Elijah's feelings about anyone who's not Baptist, Frank's resentment of Darla, and the prejudice directed at the Moons by the townsfolk of Paradise?

5. Darla and Rhonda never discussed the fact that they might not have the same father. Would their relationship have been different had they known for certain they had different fathers? Why do so many families have difficulty discussing their turbulent pasts?

6. Do you believe in apparitions? In your opinion, who is Shamir? What does he represent? Why does he reveal himself to Darla?

7. In your opinion, how did the abortion ultimately affect Darla? Why did she sense the child nearby?

8. In your opinion, what circumstances prompted Momma to embark on a life of prostitution? How did her lifestyle affect Darla and Rhonda's attitudes and behavior in adult life? At any time during the novel, did your assessment of Momma change? If so, how did it change and why?

9. What is your opinion of Reverend Spirit E. Jackson as a man, and as a preacher? Do you think he truly loved Darla-or was he, possibly, merely psychologically infatuated by "the fallen woman?" If, as Darla claimed, she truly loved Spirit, why do you think she decided not marry him?

10. At the story's end, did you see any character's change for the better? Which character changed the least?

11. It is said forgiveness speeds the healing and growing process. Do you believe Darla would benefit if she resolved the ongoing conflict with her mother and forgave her? If you were Darla, could you forgive and forget?

Author Bio

Born and educated in England, June Park first trained as a ballerina and performed in many theatrical productions until a nursing career beckoned her. An avid reader, she cut her teeth on Dickens and Austen and every encyclopedia she could lay her hands on. But become a writer? Never occurred to me, she says. I thought most writers were ordained by God that others went mad in attics, while others fell prey to alcohol in Paris, so what chance did I have? I wasn¹t overly religious, I lacked an attic, and I had no plans to go abroad.

Park, an ardent people watcher, feels compelled to write stories hinting of discrimination, and about women scrimping and struggling to raise themselves and their children?not always well, but the best they know how. Now a multi-award winning author, she is now at work on her second novel.

Critical Praise

" This strange and involving tale sparkles with a sharp humor that ignites its richly textured setting. "***-Publishers Weekly*** " This memorable book pulsates with heartfelt characters and rousing events that will anger and bring tears. A rare gem. " ***-Library Journal***" **The Bingo Queens of Paradise** is one to read and argue over, a book to contemplate when the days are swollen with too much too fast. "***-Oklahoma Gazette***

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