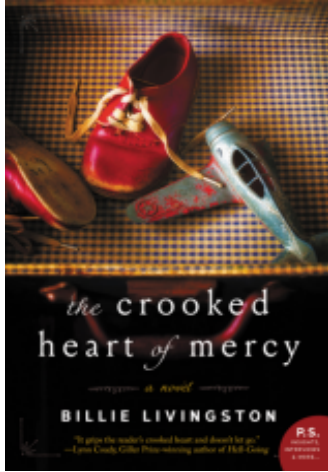


# The Crooked Heart of Mercy

by Billie Livingston

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## About the Book

From acclaimed Canadian novelist Billie Livingston comes this powerful U.S. debut that unfolds over a riveting dual narrative --- an unforgettable story of ordinary lives rocked by hardship and scandal that follows in the tradition of Jennifer Haigh, A. Manette Ansay and Jennifer Egan.

Ben wakes up in a hospital with a hole in his head he can't explain. What he can remember he'd rather forget. Like how he'd spend nights as a limo driver for the wealthy and debauched?how he and his wife, Maggie, drifted apart in the wake of an unspeakable tragedy?how his little brother, Cola, got in over his head with loan sharks circling.

Maggie is alone. Again. With bills to pay and Ben in a psych ward, she must return to work. But who would hire her in the state she's in? And just as Maggie turns to her brother, Francis, the Internet explodes with video of his latest escapade. The headline? Drunk Priest Propositions Cops.

Francis is an unlikely priest with a drinking problem and little interest in celibacy. A third DUI, a looming court date?. When Maggie takes him in, he knows he may be down to his last chance. And his best shot at healing might lie in helping Maggie and Ben reconnect --- against all odds.

Simmering with dark humor and piercing insights, **THE CROOKED HEART OF MERCY** is a startling reminder that redemption can be found in the most unlikely of places.

## Discussion Guide

1. ?How do you fill a hole? If you take from the whole to fill a hole, is anything made whole?? How do Ben?s words reflect the themes of trauma and recovery in the novel?

2. Both Ben and Maggie feel extremely guilty over Frankie's death. How do they deal with this guilt in their everyday lives?
3. Given that Maggie shows disdain for religion many times during the novel, why do you think she turns to the church in her times of need? (For instance, when it concerns her son.)
4. Why did the author choose to have the narrative jump back and forth between different time lines and events? How does this serve the novel and how would it be different if it read chronologically?
5. Why does Lucy find such solace in the United Church of Spiritualism? Why does this bother Maggie?
6. According to psychologists, dissociation from reality is a coping mechanism for dealing with extreme stress or grief and can manifest in different ways. In what ways do Ben and Maggie each dissociate?
7. Do you think that Ben's dissociation existed before his self-injury and hospital stay? When and why do you think it started?
8. Does Francis feel guilt regarding his sexual orientation or is he comfortable with who he is? Where do you think his tendency toward substance abuse originated?
9. In what ways does the author use the narrative voice to connect the reader to Ben's experience? Do you think that Ben is a more or a less reliable narrator when he is outside of his own body?
10. How are the themes of religion and spirituality explored in the novel? Discuss the differences between the characters who are more religious and those who are more spiritual.
11. The chapters of the novel alternate between the narratives of Maggie and Ben. The time lines of their respective narratives do not coincide until one of the very last chapters. How do you think this relates to the development of the characters and their relationship?
12. Ben and Cola each have very complicated relationships with their father. Do you think they love him or do they simply feel obligated toward him? Why?
13. How do Ben and Maggie each figure out that they need each other to heal from their emotional trauma? Did Dr. Lambert play any part in Ben's recovery?
14. How does Ben's view of the physical world change when he comes out of his dissociative state? How does his attitude change? Why do you think this is?
15. At the end of the novel, are Ben and Maggie finally "made whole"?

## Author Bio

Billie Livingston is the award-winning author of three novels, a collection of short stories, and a poetry collection. Her most recent novel, ONE GOOD HUSTLE, a *Globe and Mail* Best Book selection, was nominated for the Giller Prize and for the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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