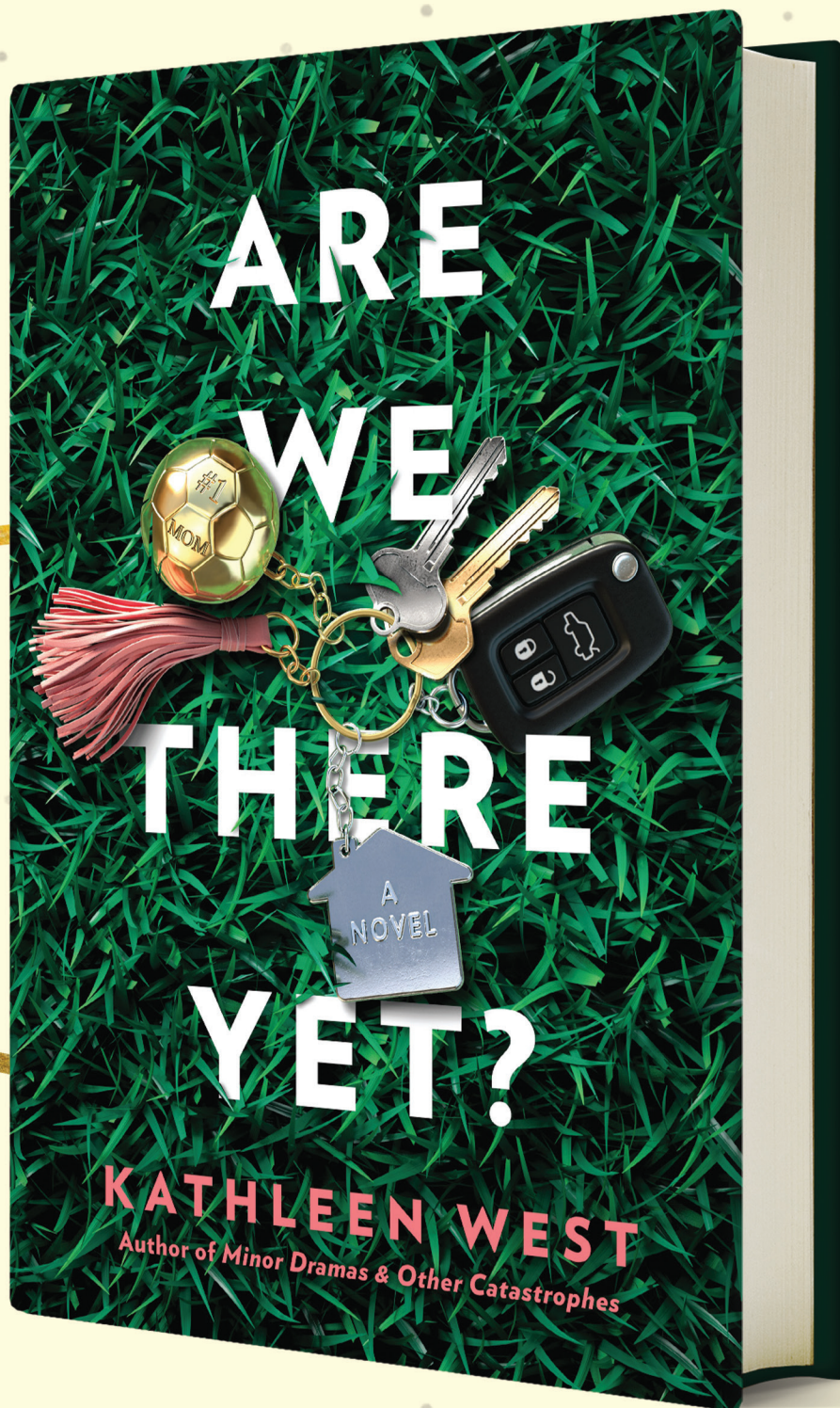


BOOK CLUB KIT



LETTER TO BOOK CLUBS

DEAR BOOK CLUB MEMBERS,

I've spent most of my life pretending to have it all together. Part of this charade has been my job. It would be highly irregular, if not downright unprofessional, for a teacher to show up to class in dirty sweatpants with wild hair and tear-streaked cheeks. (If I have to choose one of those three, I go with the hair. Ask my students, and I'm sure they'll tell you I've given many a lesson with a messy ponytail.) The other driving force behind my façade is my deep desire for it to be one hundred percent true that I am actually totally on top of it. All of it.

Like me, Alice Sullivan, the main character in *Are We There Yet?*, feels she should be able to handle everything. Her kids are older, her business is booming, her marriage is pretty good, and she has a healthy relationship with her mom. On top of that, she knows the right people, says the right things, and (unlike me) has the perfect handbag and shoes for every occasion.

It's extra hard for Alice, then, to find out that her reality doesn't actually match the veneer. What would you do if your son turned out to be the junior high bully? What about if your daughter fell eight levels behind in reading? How would you handle it if your mother unloaded a family secret that changed the way you understood your identity? When all of this happens to Alice, she starts to crack, at the edges first and then all over.

When I was writing this novel, I started to think it might be nice if we didn't try to keep every struggle hidden from the world. The pandemic seems to have stripped away some of the pressure to be impervious. We're all wearing dirty sweatpants at least some of the time, whether or not they're visible on Zoom. Alice lives in the pre-pandemic world in this novel, but she's about to head into 2020 as it closes. When she has to homeschool Teddy again, she'll already have had a great head start.

Whether you've got it all together right now or you don't, I want to thank you sincerely for choosing *Are We There Yet?* for your book club. The most wonderful thing about becoming a novelist has been connecting with readers. I've visited many clubs via Zoom and some even in person (outside, masks on). I'd love to part of your book club as well. Head over to my website or tag me on social media to invite me. I'd be thrilled.

All my best to you, and for goodness' sake, don't comb your hair on my account,

KATHLEEN

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHLEEN WEST

Tell us about *Are We There Yet?* What inspired you to write this story?

Are We There Yet? became a novel mostly about the ripple effects of tweens' misbehaviors, but when I first started it, I felt a strong desire to write an adoption story. I was adopted at birth in 1978. In 1995, I met my birth mother, and in 1997, my birth father. Each of those parents had other daughters who became my sisters. I wanted to explore the tenuous connection of new sisterhood. What did it mean for my sisters to discover a huge family secret, and then to get to know me, a virtual stranger, as family?

The adoption thread in this book remains close to my heart, but the other storyline took over. The idea of kids' behaviors impacting parents' reputations and relationships sprang from two of my own real-life experiences. First, in many of the parent-teacher conferences I've conducted, I've felt that families feel I'm giving them a grade, rather than reporting on the performance of their children. If our kids are doing well in school, it's tempting to feel that we ourselves are doing well at parenting. If they're failing? Then perhaps we are, too. As a teacher, I know the relationship between school performance and parenting success is not quite so uncomplicated.

I see the same phenomenon—the tendency to link parenting prowess with kids' behaviors—when I attend my own children's sporting events. If my sons race fast or earn a shutout, other well-meaning parents will congratulate me on these excellent results when I'm not the one who trained or raced or played.

I think we'd all do a little better as parents if we separated our own identities a bit more from our children's. In adoption, I think this might happen slightly more naturally. I'm not an adoptive parent myself, but my mom has told me that watching me develop into an adult felt like putting together a nature-nurture puzzle, deciding which aspects of my character sprang from my DNA and which from the household in which I was raised. She didn't feel she had to take credit or responsibility for every little thing.

The idea of kids' behaviors impacting parents' reputations and relationships sprang from two of my own real-life experiences.

What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in *Are We There Yet?*

I continue to be fascinated by competitive parenting. You know what I mean, right? It's people casually dropping their children's ACT scores into everyday conversation, mentioning their placement in advanced math courses, or detailing the way Junior made the varsity team as a freshman. Interactions with other parents can make us question whether we're doing enough for our children, and then ultimately feed the fire of competition. If the "good" moms are wild with excitement on the soccer sidelines and then waiting in the car at math tutoring, then the "bad" moms might be heating up leftover Kraft macaroni and cheese and bending the screen-time rules to allow for a fourth hour of Xbox. In *Are We There Yet?*, I really wanted to think about what happened to the "good" moms when they were suddenly deemed "bad."

Besides that, I wanted to explore mistakes and forgiveness on a number of levels: social media, parenting, anger and temper, in a marriage, and among friends.

I wanted to explore mistakes and forgiveness on a number of levels: social media, parenting, anger and temper, in a marriage, and among friends.

Did the book require any special research? If so, please provide any interesting details about your research.

Alice's career as an architect and interior designer is perfect for her. So much of her identity hangs on maintaining a flawless veneer, and her job also provides a point of tension between her and her mother. Evelyn feels that valuing the ideal sectional or throw pillow is a strike against a person's authenticity. So, I was committed to Alice's line of work as a story element, but I myself am completely unskilled in design. Luckily for me, I have a friend who knows all (and who is wonderfully genuine—not even remotely shallow, as Evelyn might surmise). I compiled a long list of questions for Emily, from wallpapers to brands of handbags, and plied her with coffee as I scribbled down her brilliant answers.

I also had to ask targeted questions of my friends and family who know things about synchronized skating, physical therapy, school discipline, and HIPAA violations. I don't know enough about any of those things to get details right on my own. I tried to interview my children about the intricacies of Instagram and Snapchat, but they weren't very cooperative, and I had to resort to Google on those topics.

How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?

When I wrote *Minor Dramas & Other Catastrophes*, fiction was a hobby. I just wanted to see if I could finish a novel. I did it, but it took more than three years. *Are We There Yet?* was written under contract and with a deadline and as my full-time job within one calendar year. While the process seemed much

more compressed, I felt infinitely more supported by my team. I didn't have a literary agent or an editor when I wrote my first book, and they both made such thoughtful and smart contributions to the second, early in the process.

And this detail about process is small but not insignificant: I used to write from 4:45 to 6:15am and then teach all day, but when I wrote *Are We There Yet?*, I could write from eight to noon like a normal person and then think about it all day long.

How did your own experiences as both a teacher and a parent play into writing this novel?

I love kids. I love working with them and writing about them. I hope my teaching experience helps make my kid characters feel real and believable. I've been observer and confidant during many a kid-related fiasco. I've watched kids make and recover from lots and lots of mistakes.

As a teacher, I've also had the privilege of knowing many families. I've seen and considered all kinds of parenting. I used to judge parents more harshly, but when I became a mom myself, that discernment transformed into empathy. Every decision a parent makes (and every angry phone call they make) usually stems from love or fear. As a mom, I know these motivations viscerally.

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

Titles are difficult for me, in general, but I love the title *Are We There Yet?*. It speaks to the tedium and frustration of parenting (find me a mother who hasn't heard that line on the back end of a road trip or on a crosstown sprint to a soccer field), but it also asks us to consider the concept of arrival.

Are we finished growing and changing and becoming more authentically who we are? Are we there yet? The answer for the characters in the book is no, and the answer for me is also no. We're never "there," we're always on the way. I hope people think about that idea as they read the novel. And I also hope they go easy on themselves when they make their inevitable mistakes.

We're never "there," we're always on the way.



ABOUT KATHLEEN WEST

Kathleen West is a veteran schoolteacher. She graduated with a degree in English from Macalester College and holds a master's degree in literacy education from the University of Minnesota. She lives in Minneapolis with her A+ human family and two B- dogs.

KathleenWestBooks.com • WordSavvyBlog.com

🐦 [KWestBooks](#) • 🗣️ [KathleenWestAuthor](#) • 📷 [KathleenWestWrites](#)

TRANSLATION GUIDES

WORK-FROM-HOME TRANSLATION GUIDE

THEY HEAR

“Looks like my Internet is unstable!”

“I’m on my fifth glass of water for the day.”

“I have a hard-stop at four pm.”

“I’ll put together some research on that.”

“There’s some construction going on next door, so I’m going to mute myself.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

I MEAN

I can’t possibly turn my video on. I’m wearing last week’s stained sweatshirt.

Vodka is also clear.

I’ll die if I’m on this call for even a second longer than is absolutely necessary.

Please leave me alone while I buy yet another pair of designer soft pants from Gilt.

My children have been screaming at one another at 8,000 decibels for several hours, and it’s all I can do to keep this mild smile pasted on my face.

After I watch five or six reruns of *Friends*, season 6.

HOMESCHOOL TRANSLATION GUIDE

WHAT YOUR KID HEARS

“Try your best!”

“Have you had a healthy lunch?”

“All you can control is your attitude and your effort.”

“I know this is a weird way to learn, but I’m sure your teacher knows what she’s doing.”

“Maybe that’s enough screen time for the day.”

WHAT YOU REALLY MEAN

Don’t you dare leave your room until four p.m.

I left six packs of instant Velveeta and a family-sized bag of Oreos right there on the counter for you.

Would you just stop whining for one ever-loving second?

No one has any idea what they’re doing and none of it even really matters.

Oh well, who cares about another six hours of Xbox.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. All of the women in this book worry about being “good mothers.” How would you define a “good mother”? Do you think it looks different depending on where you are in your life?
2. Alice loses friendships after Teddy gets in trouble. Does it seem fair to you to hold parents responsible for their children’s behavior? Conversely, how much credit can they take for their successes?
3. In your opinion, did Evelyn do the right thing by keeping Julianne a secret for all of those years? How would you have felt in Alice’s shoes? Was her reaction to the news justified?
4. All of the teens get into trouble on social media. Given how ubiquitous social media is now and how pervasive its use is in teen culture, what should the parents in this novel have done to prevent their kids’ missteps?
5. How do the kids in the novel overcome their public mistakes? Do you think they will handle social media differently after the events of this book?
6. Were the kids’ punishments appropriate? What should be the consequences for the types of behaviors they engage in?
7. What roles do the husbands play in this novel? Do the characters have strong marriages? Which marriage seems the healthiest?
8. Alice feels the environment at Elm Creek Junior High is toxic. Do you agree? Would you have pulled Teddy from school?
9. Which character do you most relate to, and why? Did you find it difficult to relate to any character?
10. Competitive parenting seems to negatively impact all of these characters. In what ways do mothers in contemporary society judge one another? In what ways have you seen mothers supporting one another?
11. The radical feminist mothers seem misguided in their graffiti campaign. What ways do you think it would be appropriate for parents to engage their children in activism?

MOM FAIL SCORECARD

**DIRECTIONS:
ASSIGN ONE POINT FOR EACH ITEM**

- Barely skimmed the weekly newsletter from the teacher.
- Drive-thru on the way to sports practice. Again.
- Haven't logged into the online gradebook since parent-teacher conferences.
- Didn't call to verify that the teens' parents would be home.
- Ditched a nearly full shopping cart in order to haul a screaming toddler to the car.
- Failed to send your photo for the kindergarten "This Is My Family" display.
- Didn't sign the October reading log, and your kid is aced out of the "Super Reader" award.
- Deleted the third-grade moms' group chat.
- Threw together the Valentine's Box in the Walmart parking lot minutes before school started.
- Brought only one jersey to soccer practice when the Team Snap app clearly says, "Bring both jerseys."
- Out of breast milk at daycare.
- Dump store-bought cookies into a Tupperware to pass them off for the bake sale.
- Failed to disable the in-app purchases on the iTunes store. Exorbitant charge for virtual "gems" appears on credit card statement.
- Lied about daylight savings time.
- Breakfast in the car. Again.
- Don't know how to sew. Or knit.
- Nut butter (or nut-free butter) handprint on the back of your fancy work blazer.
- BONUS:** Remembered the class snack, but forgot the gluten-free option.

SCALE

0-5: For the love of God, please stop making us look bad.

6-11: Congratulations! You're fully human.

12-17: Gold star. You're paving the way for the rest of us. Call all of the new moms and offer lessons in grace and forgiveness.