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READING GUIDE

Claire Ross Dunn's *At Last Count*

Dear reader,

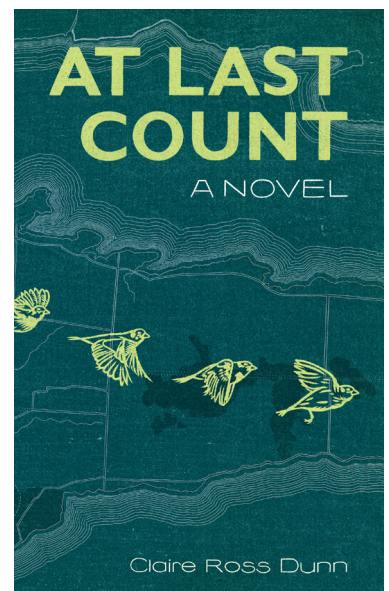
In some ways, *At Last Count* comes straight from my personal experience—certainly with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)—but also just from the point of view of a sensitive, vulnerable, tremulous thirteen-year-old who didn't know which end was up (don't get me started). I wanted to find a way to talk about OCD and participate in that important conversation: normalize it, de-stigmatize it, just even be brave enough to admit I struggle with it myself. Telling that story from the point of view of both a teen and an adult seemed, hopefully, like an interesting way to invite readers along on Paisley's journey.

I took my cue from other coming-of-age novels for adults which explore the interiority of a young person's life so well: think Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.

In other ways, though, *At Last Count* is entirely fictional. I did not grow up on Amherst Island, a wonderful place in Eastern Ontario that I hope will delight readers and pique their curiosity, if they don't know the island already. However, I spent many weekends and summers there with my husband and kids, visiting my in-laws and friends' farms, swimming off the public dock, and participating in community events. I wonder if you are familiar with other small communities—Canadian or not—and what your experience was like.

Whether you live in a rural community or a big city, relationships can be intense. Paisley and her parents, Paisley and birds, Paisley and OCD, Paisley and Garnet. Their relationship is painted in two time periods and it demonstrates how hard (especially if you hold secrets, either familial or mental health-related), but also how transformative one can be, too. Paisley and Garnet have a sort of charged, magnetic force between them—attracting and repelling each other, never sure which pole is going to meet which. Do they have a chance at redemption, either in their own journeys or from one another? It's a question they ask—and I hope readers will wonder, too.

So, yes, the book is set in two time periods: 1981 and 2007. I grew up in the 1980s—pre-cell phones, pre-Internet, pre-computers (was there ever a time before computers?). Simpler in many ways, on the outside—not as fast or pressure-filled. But life inside people's hearts and minds was just as complicated and layered, especially if they were living with something as challenging as OCD. What were you like at thirteen and thirty-nine—two moments in life where everything and nothing could happen?



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And did you, or do you, have an obsession (both in the positive and negative sense of the word) like Paisley? It felt like a good fit to give Paisley birding as a focus; something that both calmed her, and also fed into her counting—bird counts being so important to birders everywhere. But goodness, I'll share that this piece of the book was hard for me! I am not a birder (but now look at birds through new eyes, when they are in my midst) so it was really important, once I'd decided Paisley would be a birder, to get these details right.

Birding also offers a unique way to echo Paisley's migration from Toronto to Amherst Island. Even though I started the book a while ago, the last two years, 2021–2022, were when the most rigorous editing happened in the run-up to its publication. The questions people have faced during the pandemic about what is home—or even, where is home—as they try to find a place they can afford, stay safe, and live comfortably, during this incredibly hard time, added another dimension to the book. Paisley's journey took on a new level of meaning for me as I worked through the story during the pandemic, and I hope it does for you, too.

Most of all, I wanted to write a story that was uplifting. Uplifting because a tiny human like Paisley, in a tiny place like Amherst Island, courageously fights the David and Goliath battle against a giant, OCD, and maybe, even, has a shot at victory. And in that is a message of hope: that it is possible to live a beautiful, fulfilling life with a bright future, even with OCD along for the ride. If fact, maybe this is what we need to say: that OCD can come along for the ride if it must, but it doesn't get to drive.

If there is one message in the book, it's that you don't have to believe everything your brain tells you. You are free to create the life you see in your mind's eye, love who you decide to love, and be as brilliant a shining light as you can be. You deserve it.

Happy reading. And thank you for reading.

Claire Ross Dunn

