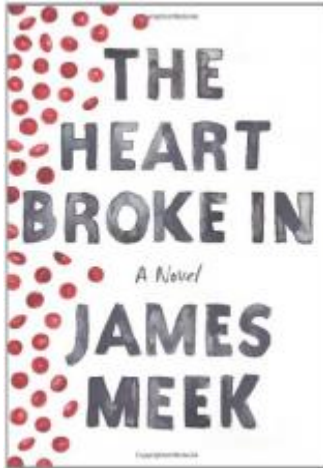


# The Heart Broke In

by

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## About the Book

From James Meek, the award-winning author of the international bestseller *THE PEOPLE'S ACT OF LOVE*, comes a rich and intricate novel about everything that matters to us now: children, celebrity, secrets and shame, the quest for youth, loyalty and betrayal, falls from grace, acts of terror, and the wonderful, terrible inescapability of family.

Ritchie Shepherd, an aging pop star and a producer of a reality show for teen talent, is starting to trip over his own lies. Maybe filming a documentary about his father, Captain Shepherd, a British soldier executed by Northern Irish guerrillas, will redeem him.

His sister, Bec, is getting closer and closer to a vaccine for malaria. When she's not in Tanzania harvesting field samples, she's peering through a microscope at her own blood to chart the risky treatment she's testing on herself. She's as addicted to honesty as Ritchie is to trickery.

Val Oatman is the editor of a powerful tabloid newspaper. The self-appointed conscience of the nation, scourge of hypocrites and cheats, he believes he will marry beautiful Bec.

Alex Comrie, a gene therapist (and formerly the drummer in Ritchie's band), is battling his mortally ill uncle, a brilliant and domineering scientist, over whether Alex might actually have discovered a cure for aging. Alex, too, believes he will marry Bec.

Colum O'Donabháin has just been released from prison, having served a twenty-five-year sentence for putting a gun to Captain Shepherd's head when he refused to give up an informer. He now writes poetry.

Their stories meet and tangle in this bighearted epic that is also shrewd, starkly funny, and utterly of the moment. *THE HEART BROKE IN* is fiction with the reverberating resonance of truth.

## Discussion Guide

- 1. The Heart Broke In** explores universal questions from many perspectives. Woven together, what do the novel's dilemmas tell us about the freedoms and challenges of life in the modern world? Which characters and storylines had the greatest impact on you? What decisions would you make if you were confronted with one of the novel's crises?
2. How do Ritchie's feelings about his family shift throughout the novel? Ultimately, what does he want from women?
3. In a July 2012 interview with *Publishers Weekly*, the author described Alex as "a gene therapist, obsessed with his own personal place in evolution." How do Alex and his family "evolve" emotionally? How does Alex's work reflect his quests in his personal life?
4. How is Bec's approach to science different from Alex's? Does the search for a malaria vaccine offer a form of healing to Bec as well? How does her quest for motherhood mesh with the other aspects of her identity?
5. Matthew's approach to morality is rooted in the threat of eternal damnation. For those who oppose him, how should our moral compass be set? How do the nonbelievers among the characters determine the difference between right and wrong?
6. How do Bec and Ritchie cope with the knowledge that their father was killed by a Northern Irish terrorist in an act of self-sacrifice? How did you react to O'Donabháin's poem (chapter 54, pages- 290-91)?
7. What did Harry want his legacy to be? Does his view of the world make you feel inspired or wary? Do you share his enthusiasm for longevity?
8. Do Val and Alex possess any similar traits? How do the two men reflect different stages of Bec's life?
9. Did Harry reject Matthew's religion simply because it seemed illogical, or because it was also a threat to Harry's power? How does Rose resolve her conflicted feelings about her father's message? What irreconcilable differences are part of your family's history?
10. What makes it difficult for Dougie to find long-term fulfillment? Is Bec a force of joy or of suffering in his life?
11. Discuss the role of fame in the novel. Was there much reality in Ritchie's reality TV show? As Ritchie sings his own song at a karaoke bar in a closing scene, what does he discover about himself, and about the world of entertainment?
12. Val and the Moral Foundation use a variety of unsavory methods to dig up dirt on celebrities. As the characters fall victim to blackmail, are their "crimes" truly worth exposing? How does the Moral Foundation define morality? How far should a journalist be able to go when conducting research? How much privacy does a celebrity deserve?

13. The novel's title can be read multiple ways. How would you apply it to characters whose hearts were "broken in," losing their newness or innocence? If you read it as "the heart committed a burglary," what did the heart steal from the various characters? How can the title be read in terms of biology?the heart as supplier of blood (life)?

14. Discuss the novel in the context of James Meek's previous works that you have read. How do his characters find solace in situations that threaten to dehumanize them?

## Author Bio

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