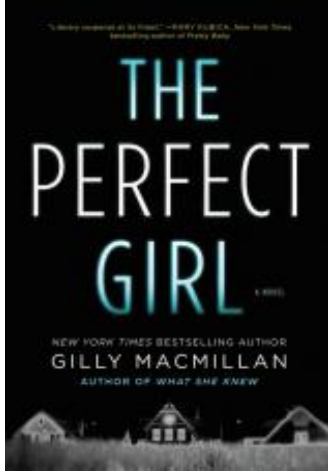


# The Perfect Girl

by Gilly Macmillan

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## About the Book

From Gilly Macmillan, the international bestselling author of the Edgar Award-nominated *WHAT SHE KNEW*, comes a sharp, gripping, whip-smart second novel about the secrets that unravel us.

Zoe Maisey is a 17-year-old musical prodigy with a genius IQ. Three years ago, she was involved in a tragic incident that left three classmates dead. She served her time, and now her mother, Marie, is resolved to keep that devastating fact tucked far away from their new beginning, hiding the past even from her new husband and demanding Zoe do the same.

Tonight Zoe is giving a recital that Maria has been planning for months. It needs to be the performance of her life. But instead, by the end of the evening, Marie is dead.

In the aftermath, everyone --- police, family, Zoe's former solicitor and Zoe herself --- tries to piece together what happened. But as Zoe knows all too well, the truth is rarely straightforward, and the closer we are to someone, the less we may see.

Unfolding over a span of 24 hours through three compelling narratives, *THE PERFECT GIRL* is gripping, surprising and emotionally complex-a richly layered look at loyalty, second chances, and the way secrets unravel us all.

## Discussion Guide

### Discussion Questions

1. What advantages do Zoe's abilities give her? Can you understand why Maria pushed her daughter musically? What responsibility do you think parents have to a child showing strong aptitude for something? What is fostering and what is pushing too hard?
2. Zoe makes a very difficult decision towards the end of *THE PERFECT GIRL*, one that will certainly have significant and long-lasting consequences both for herself and others. Do you think she did the right thing? How much sympathy do you have for her?
3. To what extent do you think of Maria as a victim, or as somebody who is deliberately deceiving others?
4. What does the character of Zoe's solicitor add to the novel?
5. What is the importance of music and its redemptive power in the novel?
6. At the end of the book both Tess and Richard seem to have an inkling that Zoe has deceived everybody but they don't discuss this. Do you think they will talk about it eventually, and work out what might have happened and, if so, what do you think they'll do as a result?
7. Lucas is a quiet character. How do you feel about him? Do you think he'll thrive in his new family, or could he be in danger of ultimately remaining loyal to his father and telling the truth about what happened?
8. A number of novels deal with the burden of a deadly secret --- how well do you think this idea is handled in *THE PERFECT GIRL*?
9. Do you recognize some of the pressures that the family find themselves under more generally? Is that urge to keep up with others, to be a successful unit, to put on a good show familiar to you?
10. "My mother: who never talks about what really matters?" How far is this question explored in the book?
11. The ending is both satisfying for Zoe and enigmatic --- how successful do you think it is, and do you think Chris deserved what happened to him at the end?

### **Bonus Material: 10 Books That Inspired *THE PERFECT GIRL***

**Gilly Macmillan:** While I was writing *THE PERFECT GIRL* I wanted to read any books that did one of three distinct things. I searched for novels that featured either a strong teenage voice, took place over a very short timeframe, or had multiple narrators. I read very widely in those categories, and more, over the nine months that I took to write the novel, but the following are 10 of my favorites.

#### ***THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* by J.D. Salinger**

A classic, obviously, but there is undeniable power in teenage narrator Holden Caulfield's voice, and the insights into his feelings of alienation and his struggle to understand his identity that the book provides. I love the quirky stream of consciousness writing style that makes you feel like Holden's confidante, and the way Salinger brings his wild,

powerful, and clever mind alive so vividly.

### **THE OUTSIDERS by S.E. Hinton**

This is a classic coming-of-age story but also a wonderful, heart-breaking novel that perfectly illustrates the way in which teenagers can be victims of their circumstances. In yet another powerful first person narrative the story is told via the character of Ponyboy Curtis. He's a character who has stayed with me ever since I first picked up this book. I still feel a pang of concern for him now, and I'm writing this a good 30 years since I first read it!

### **SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS by Marissa Pessl**

Blue van der Meer is the clever, academic teenager who narrates this novel, and I loved her energy and the way her mind spills out all over the page as she tries to work out why one of her favorite teachers committed suicide. It's a smart, insightful story, full of challenges for the reader, and a great whodunit, too.

### **WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES by Karen Joy Fowler**

Rosemary is the narrator of this novel, and although she's not quite a teenager because she's at college, much of the book describes her early years and her fresh, quirky voice hooked me in right from the start and led me through the pages at a gallop. It's a witty, brilliant and unusual book where the action grips but some very thoughtful, important themes form its heartbeat. I defy anybody not to have a richer understanding of love and family after finishing it.

### **THE FAULT IN OUR STARS by John Green**

How I love Hazel Grace Lancaster, the teenage narrator of this wonderful novel. *THE FAULT IN OUR STARS* was originally written for teens, and passed to me by my daughter after she had read it. I'll admit I picked it up with some skepticism but once I had, I simply could not put it down. Hazel's wit, kindness and perceptiveness combined with the unusual perspective on life that her illness gives her, and of course all of her normal teenage vulnerabilities, make this a very lovely, if sad, story about family and life, and absolutely essential reading.

### **AS I LAY DYING by William Faulkner**

This novel tells the story of the death and burial of Addie Bundren, who has been the matriarch of a large family in 1920s Mississippi. It's told from around 15 different viewpoints in intense stream-of-consciousness narratives that intersect and almost seem to weave through one another. As the book progresses, each narrator reveals more about Addie's life and the lives of her family members, and others. It's a demanding read, and a bleak story, but it's incredibly powerful, compelling and, above all, humane.

### **CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD by Gabriel Garcia-Marquez**

This short novel is a masterpiece. Set over just one day, it tells the story of the final hours of Santiago Nasar. We learn in the very first line that he finishes the novel dead, yet are gripped by Marquez's extraordinary observation of both the ordinary and the extra-ordinary as we learn how, against the odds, death stalks Santiago through those hours until it finally catches up with him. It is a tour-de-force study of human nature, love, fate and revenge.

### **THE MEZZANINE by Nicholson Baker**

This novel has the shortest timeframe of any that I discovered while I was developing *THE PERFECT GIRL*. It takes place over a single lunch hour and we spend this time in the mind of the narrator, Howie, hearing his every thought. The extraordinary attention to detail is a marvel, as is the rendering of the paths our minds can wander along, and if nothing

else the novel makes a virtue of the mundane. Not a book to race through, it's a demanding yet strangely relaxing read.

### **THE DINNER by Herman Koch**

This is a gripping novel. The action takes place over just one evening at an elegant dinner where the protagonist and his wife must meet his brother and sister-in-law for a meal to discuss what they should do about their teenage sons who have done something very shocking indeed.

### **ORDINARY PEOPLE by Judith Guest**

This powerful novel inspired a film that is one of my all-time favorites. It tells the story of a well-off suburban family who are struggling to live normally again in the aftermath of two life-shattering events. Narrated by Conrad Jarrett, a teenage boy, it's a sensitive exploration of depression, love, grief and guilt, and illustrates in painful detail the tremendous psychological strains of keeping up appearances when life is never going to be the same again.

## **Author Bio**

Gilly Macmillan is the internationally bestselling author of *WHAT SHE KNEW*, *THE PERFECT GIRL*, *ODD CHILD OUT*, *I KNOW YOU KNOW*, *THE NANNY*, *TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH*, *THE LONG WEEKEND* and *THE MANOR HOUSE*.

A former art historian and photographer, Gilly studied at Bristol University and the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She lives in Bristol, UK, with her husband and three children.

Her first novel, *WHAT SHE KNEW*, was a Target pick, a LibraryReads pick, an Indie Next pick, an Edgar award nominee, and an International Thriller Writers award finalist. *THE NANNY* is a Spring 2020 Richard & Judy WHSmith Book Club pick.

Gilly's novels have appeared on the *New York Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Globe & Mail* and *Der Spiegel* bestseller lists and have been translated into over 20 languages. She's been described as "one heck of a good writer" (*Wall Street Journal*) and her novels have been praised as "nuanced, completely addictive" (*People*), "riveting" (*Publishers Weekly*), and "visceral, emotionally charged?heart-wrenchingly well told" (*The Daily Mail*).

## **Critical Praise**

?As the suspenseful, serpentine tale unreels from the alternating perspectives of several key players, readers will be rooting for the resilient, resourceful Zoe all the way to the perfectly executed final twists.?

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