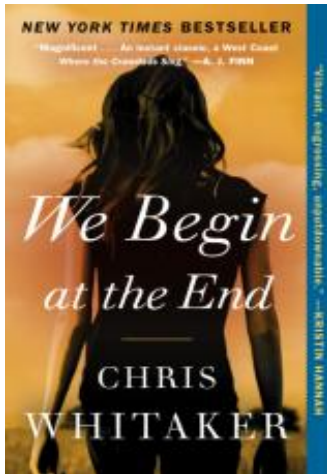

We Begin at the End

by Chris Whitaker



About the Book

With **WE BEGIN AT THE END**, Chris Whitaker has written an extraordinary novel about people who deserve so much more than life serves them. At times devastating, with flashes of humor and hope throughout, it is ultimately an inspiring tale of how the human spirit prevails and how, in the end, love --- in all its different guises --- wins.

There are two kinds of families: the ones we are born into and the ones we create.

Walk has never left the coastal California town where he grew up. He may have become the chief of police, but he's still trying to heal the old wound of having given the testimony that sent his best friend, Vincent King, to prison decades before. Now, 30 years later, Vincent is being released.

Duchess is a 13-year-old self-proclaimed outlaw. Her mother, Star, grew up with Walk and Vincent. Walk is in overdrive trying to protect them, but Vincent and Star seem bent on sliding deeper into self-destruction. Star always burned bright, but recently that light has dimmed, leaving Duchess to parent not only her mother but her five-year-old brother. At school the other kids make fun of Duchess --- her clothes are torn, her hair a mess. But let them throw their sticks, because she'll throw stones. Rules are for other people. She's just trying to survive and keep her family together.

A fortysomething-year-old sheriff and a 13-year-old girl may not seem to have a lot in common. But they both have come to expect that people will disappoint you, loved ones will leave you, and if you open your heart it will be broken. So when trouble arrives with Vincent King, Walk and Duchess find they will be unable to do anything but usher it in, arms wide closed.

Discussion Guide

1. Duchess says to Walk, "There's always a man. Whenever anything fu--ed up happens in the world, there's always a man." (chapter 1, p. 10). Later, Duchess thinks about Darke: "She knew what men could do, all of them, capability was enough." (chapter 24, p. 199). What do you make of the portrayal of each gender in this book? Are men or women worse in this novel, or might they be equally good or bad?
2. Star tells her daughter, "Selfless acts, Duchess. They're what make you a good person." (chapter 5, p. 42), yet she seems to be entirely selfish in many of her actions. Why do you think this is? Do you agree with Star? What makes a good person good?
3. Hal asks Duchess, "If the good stand by idle, are they still good?" (chapter 25, p. 204). What do you think? Are there any ostensibly good characters in this novel who lose their goodness by standing by?
4. Hal tells Duchess: "I am a constant disappointment to myself." (chapter 25, p. 207). Why do you think he feels this way? What could he have done differently in his life? Is self-disappointment what makes people decent?
5. Considering Walk's intervention, Duchess thinks: "...sometimes adults thought watching out meant doing sh-t that'd lead to the kind of consequences that rippled far from them." (chapter 6, p. 48). In this novel, are good intentions a dangerous thing?
6. Duchess addresses Vincent: "'Freedom', she said. 'Is it the worst thing to take? Worse than anything. Maybe it is.'" (chapter 6, p. 53). Later, talking about Vincent, Hal tells Duchess: "After that night, after what he did, he knew none of us would find freedom again." (chapter 25, p. 208). Why do you think Duchess asks Vincent this? What could be worse than losing freedom? Do any of the characters reclaim it?
7. Star says to Walk: "You're like a kid. Better and worse. Bad and good. None of us are any one thing. We're just a collection of the best and worst things we've done." (chapter 8, p. 67). Later, Duchess talks about Dolly's abusive father to Hal: "Some people are all dark." (chapter 25, p. 203). But Hal, thinking about Sissy, tells Duchess, "But with children there is no bad." (chapter 25, p. 206). Are any of the characters in this novel morally pure in either direction?
8. Star believes "the universe finds a way to balance the good and the bad" (chapter 8, p. 67). Thinking about the story, do you agree with her?
9. Warden Cuddy and Walk discuss morality (chapter 13, p. 114): "But then maybe there aren't degrees of bad. Maybe it doesn't matter by how much you cross the line." "Most people get near. At least once in their life." "Not you, Walk." "Is there a moral line that, once crossed, cannot be retraced?"
10. Cuddy tells Walk that he sees himself in Vincent: "His life and mine. They aren't all that different, save for a single mistake." (chapter 13, p. 114). Later, explaining to Duchess how Star found out that he'd sent Baxter to kill Vincent, Hal says, "All and everything. A single act on a distant night and here we are because of it." (chapter 25, p. 217). Is it fair for one mistake to forever change a life? What does this novel say about the possibility of forgiveness for mistakes?
11. Is Duchess right to tell Robin several times that he doesn't ever need to apologize to her? Why does she tell him that?
12. At school, Duchess learns that the triangle is the strongest shape (chapter 23, p. 189). How is this fact reflected in her

life? What's the strongest trio of characters in this novel?

13. It was cold, no matter how he felt, it was a cold and cruel thing to do. When she saw him she remembered the darkest part of her life, and she always would. (chapter 27, p. 221). Is Walk selfish to try to come back into Martha's life?

14. Duchess tells Walk, "Ours is a small story, Chief Walker. Sad enough, but small. Let's not pretend different." (chapter 28, p. 233). Why do you think Duchess says this? Why does she revert to calling him "Chief Walker"?

15. Duchess derides Thomas Noble, telling him: "You sound like a child. The notion of fair." (chapter 40, p. 311). Why do you think he believes in fairness and Duchess does not? Is the world of this novel fair?

16. About Walk, Duchess thinks: "Star said he was all good, like that was a thing." (chapter 1, p. 10). Did Walk do the right thing in killing Darke?

17. About Robin, Vincent tells Walk: "I couldn't let him be me." (chapter 44, p. 344). What do you think Vincent meant?

18. Do you think Duchess would have shot Vincent if he hadn't gone over the cliff's edge (chapter 45, p. 351)?

19. To his doctor near the beginning of the story, Walk says: "I tell you, you ever see me wasting my days on some fishing boat, you just come down and shoot me." (chapter 7, p. 58), yet this seems to be the life he chooses at the end. Later Walk thinks, "The future was a frightening thing, but then he reasoned it always had been." (chapter 46, p. 357). Why has Walk changed his mind? What does this frightening future mean with regard to Walk? Is Walk better off at the beginning or the end of the novel?

20. Duchess asks Thomas Noble, "You think there's such a thing as a truly selfless act...?" (chapter 31, p. 248). Does Duchess find out the answer to this question by the end of the story? Do you think there is such a thing?

21. Why do you think Duchess leaves Robin with Peter and Lucy? Did she do the right thing in letting him stay with the Laytons rather than reclaiming him (chapter 48, p. 366)? Is this her truly selfless act?

22. Is Darke a good person? Why do you think he gives the gun back to Vincent?

23. Why do you think Duchess clings to the belief that she is an outlaw? Why does she reference outlaws throughout the book?

24. Do you think each character gets the ending they deserve?

25. Why do you think the author named this book what he did? Do you think the title fits the book? Why or why not?

Discussion guide courtesy of Macmillan Publishers

Author Bio

Chris Whitaker is the award-winning author of TALL OAKS, ALL THE WICKED GIRLS, ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK and the *New York Times* bestseller WE BEGIN AT THE END. Chris lives in the UK.

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