Book Club Kit

HOW TO FIND YOUR WAY HOME

A Novel

Katy Regan
UNSURPRISINGLY FOR A WRITER, I have always loved listening to people’s stories. Particularly those who don’t get much chance to tell theirs—people on the sidelines. Those are the ones with the gems, I find.

I was seventeen when I first volunteered at a soup kitchen for the homeless. Amidst all the hardship you’d expect, I was struck by how much laughter there was in that place. The basic love of life, despite the rough hand that life had dealt the people who came there.

My favorite bit of the shift was to sit down after we’d served breakfast and chat. What surprised me then, besides the sheer resilience these people possessed, was how little there was between my life—a “normal life”—and theirs. A few wrong turns, a relationship breakup, some bad luck was all it seemed to take for you to wind up sleeping on the streets and relying on charity to eat. Most of all, what I learned there (as well as from my research for *How to Find Your Way Home*) was that the difference between those who managed to dodge homelessness and those who slipped through the net was just that: too-big holes in the net. If you’d burned the bridges of your support network or had been abandoned by the people in it, you were out of luck.

When I became a writer, I promised myself I would one day write a book telling the story of a homeless person. But I didn’t want their homelessness to be what defined them: They’d have passions and hopes and dreams like anyone does—like the people I met in that soup kitchen. They’d have a past, mistakes they’d made, and, perhaps most importantly, a future. They’d have something to teach us about survival and what’s really important, especially when the chips are down.

The result was *How to Find Your Way Home* and the character of Stephen Nelson. Stephen loves bird-watching, nature, and drawing. Most of all, he loves his sister and will do anything to protect her.

Why did I make Stephen an ornithologist when I couldn’t have told you the difference between a bullfinch and a chaffinch, you might well ask? Well, firstly, I like a challenge—the ex-journalist in me loves to infiltrate foreign worlds—and secondly, I felt strongly that Stephen needed to have something that was just his, something to give him the strength to keep going when all else was lost.
The brother of a close friend of mine lives with severe mental illness, and yet bird-watching gives him joy and peace of mind. He told me: “[In the birdwatching world] it’s a level playing field. Everyone is the same. People just respect you for what you know.” I loved that and wanted it for Stephen.

Stephen and Emily spend their childhood on the wild, beautiful marshes of Canvey Island (Essex’s answer to the Mississippi Delta), and it’s them against the world. Every spring, swifts—“their swifts”—come to nest in the eaves of the memorial hall. Stephen and Emily are in awe of these tiny beings that brave seas and deserts and thousands of miles to get there. If the swifts can be so undaunted by life, then maybe they can, too?

The decision to make this story about siblings arose from one question, which preoccupied me: Why, if two people are brought up in the same household with the same parents and the same circumstances, might one end up homeless and one not? What could have happened?

From speaking to people, it was clear it could be a chain of events, but often it took just one specific life event that acted as a catalyst for setting someone on a downward spiral to homelessness.

So now I had the dramatic axis of my novel: Stephen and Emily had a fierce bond, secured by a shared love of birds, but one explosive event in their childhood propelled them apart, leaving them both homeless—one literally and one spiritually, never being able to find peace in her own skin.

For each of them to find their way home, Stephen and Emily would have to confront the truth about their past. But could they even do it? And what were the stakes if they couldn’t?

*How to Find Your Way Home* explores what “home” really means and our human drive to find it. It’s about sibling love and the healing power of nature. I hope most of all that my readers enjoy this story! But I also hope that next time you pass a homeless person on the street, it might make you stop and wonder more about their story and what brought them there. I wrote this book to explore what “coming home” meant to me and hope reading it will prompt you to do the same.

Thanks so much for reading!

*Katy*
1. Discuss how birds (especially the swifts that nest in the memorial hall every year) are used to explore different themes in the book, especially the idea of “home.”

2. When Stephen tries to tell his mother about Mitch and how he treated him as a child, she says: “He just wanted to make a man out of you.” And Stephen replies, “There are different ways of being a man.” What do you think each of them means?

3. How has *How to Find Your Way Home* changed your perception of homelessness and how homeless people are treated, if at all? What factors contributed to Stephen ending up on the streets?

4. How do you think Stephen’s and Emily’s memories of their childhood differ, including the June day in 1999, and why?

5. It could be said that—besides Mitch—Alicia is the most flawed character in the novel. What are her flaws and how far does she overcome them? Do you think she finds her own resolution at the end?

6. Stephen is literally homeless, but Emily is homeless in a spiritual way. Why is this? And how does her spiritual homelessness manifest and/or affect her life?

7. What has Stephen’s passion for nature and bird-watching brought to his life, and how has it helped him, particularly during difficult times?

8. What do you imagine happens to each of the characters after the book has ended?
How would you describe *How to Find Your Way Home*?

It’s a moving, ultimately uplifting family drama with a mystery at its center—and a twist!

I love exploring and writing about the secrets and stories that make up the fabric of all families. I am fascinated by what causes them to break down, but also the unbreakable bonds of familial love.

Through a touching, uplifting narrative between a brother and sister, you explore the topic of homelessness and its causes. What inspired you to center a novel on this topic?

I volunteered at a soup kitchen when I was seventeen. What struck me most about the people there were their stories of how they ended up homeless. Many of them were so... unremarkable. It made me see homelessness totally differently: as something that could happen to anyone.

It would be over a decade before I became a novelist, but the seed of an idea was planted. Then, a few years ago, I read a “Letter to my Homeless Brother” in the newspaper and couldn’t stop thinking about it. I was struck by the powerlessness and guilt that the sister (the writer) felt, but also by how she admired her brother’s resilience. I started to think about how homelessness affects not just the homeless person but their loved ones, too, and how that wasn’t something I’d ever read about.

Also, I considered what those who
have lived on the streets might be able to teach us about life. My best friend’s brother lives with serious mental health issues and, like homeless people, is sidelined in society. However, he finds joy and a sense of belonging in bird-watching, and this really interested me—what was it about birds and nature that did this for him?

People make assumptions about homeless people—I know I did—and I wanted to challenge those preconceptions in my novel, as well as write a damned good story, of course!

At the start of the novel, Emily discovers that the brother she hasn’t seen in more than a decade is living on the streets, sleeping rough. Tell us about Emily and Stephen’s dynamic.

As children, Emily and Stephen had a fierce bond. It was them against the world. Stephen was the ultimate caring big brother and vowed to protect Emily, come what may. A nature lover, he teaches her everything she knows about the wild and birds, and they spend their childhood on the beautiful, wild marsh where they live. In some ways their childhood is idyllic, but there are also dark forces at play. Stephen tries to protect Emily from these by presenting a kind of parallel universe of wonder and security.

Then comes a June day in their childhood that changes everything, meaning Emily and Stephen lose touch. For over a decade, Emily looks for her brother with no luck. So, when he turns up where she works one day, she is overjoyed. They can’t move on, however, without revisiting the past—their biggest challenge yet.

What kind of research did you do before writing the book? Did anything surprise you?

I did an awful lot of research. I was already helping out at an amazing local charity for the homeless. My job was at reception, so I got the chance to really chat to people, and a few were kind enough to share their stories with me. I read newspaper articles, spoke to people working in housing (an ex-housing officer, for example), and watched a lot of documentaries! Not just about homelessness, but about the housing crisis, too.

For the bird-watching element: Luckily, I know a few avid birders (my friend’s brother, for example), so I mined them for information. I try to go to all the places I write about and was lucky enough to go to the beautiful Lincolnshire Wolds and Spurn...
peninsula, where there were incredible opportunities to see wildlife and birds and ask experts about them. I am forever indebted to the Swift Conservation society, who were so patient with me.

Many things surprised me, from the wonders of bird migration to the brutal realities of the housing crisis.

A powerful theme explored in the book is the importance of compassion. Why do you think this is important now more than ever?

Back when this book was in its infancy, I read a quote that stayed with me and informed so much of the writing, from the plot to the characterization:

“Compassion is not just a relationship of healing and wounded, it is a relationship of equals. You have to know your own darkness to understand another’s.”

I think this is so true. If the pandemic and the madness of the last few years have taught us anything, I think it’s how connected we all are, how little separates us, and how much we all need one another. I think it’s forced us to reconsider the importance of compassion.

What do you hope readers will take away from How to Find Your Way Home?

Without wanting to sound worthy, what I’d love is for readers, next time they pass a homeless person on the streets, is to notice them, to be more curious about what might have taken them there; above all (because everyone I spoke to said the worst thing was being ignored and feeling invisible) is to smile, pass the time of day, and have a chat.

I also hope readers will have their appreciation of nature ignited and realize how the smallest of wonders can help us to feel happier in our own skin, especially when times are tough.
Books that inspired the writing of
How to Find Your Way Home

*Birds Art Life*
by KYO MACLEAR

*Common Ground*
by ROB COWEN

(Both of these are nonfiction and are beautiful meditations on our relationship with nature. They helped me form the character of Stephen, who is homeless and loves both.)

*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*
by RACHEL JOYCE

*Everyone Brave Is Forgiven*
by CHRIS CLEAVE

*Olive Kitteridge*
by ELIZABETH STROUT

Books on Katy Regan’s TBR pile

*Betty*
by TIFFANY Mc DANIEL

*The Paper Palace*
by MIRANDA COWLEY HELLER

*A Calling for Charlie Barnes*
by JOSHUA FERRIS

*The Push*
by ASHLEY AUDRAIN

*Young Mungo*
by DOUGLAS STUART
Passport to Freedom

In the book, Stephen and Emily come up with their Passport to Freedom. Below is the passage from the book:

Our Top Five by Emily and Stephen Nelson
(aged eight and a half and thirteen)

1. Spot TWO rare birds in twenty-four hours
2. Night birding woodland walk
3. See an owl in flight
4. See a seabird colony
5. Watch the swifts’ migration from the Spurn Peninsula

“My mind flashed back to when we made the list, by torchlight, in our little tent on one of the many mini camping adventures Stevie used to take me on. I had the exact same list, in the exact same handwriting. Stephen had made me a copy and I had kept it, all these years, tucked inside a book about garden birds that he had also given me.

His list felt like the matching piece to mine, the other shoe, and an idea formed in my head: we’d made a pact, actually, our Passport to Freedom; we had something that bound us.”
What would be on your Passport to Freedom list?

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Why did you pick these items?