

BOOK CLUB KIT

**NOW IN
PAPERBACK**

"A resonant song of the South, all whiskey,
bluegrass, Dolly Parton, and tobacco fields"

—LAUREN GROFF, *Florida and Fates and Furies*

HOLDING ON TO NOTHING

a novel

ELIZABETH CHILES SHELburnE



BLAIR

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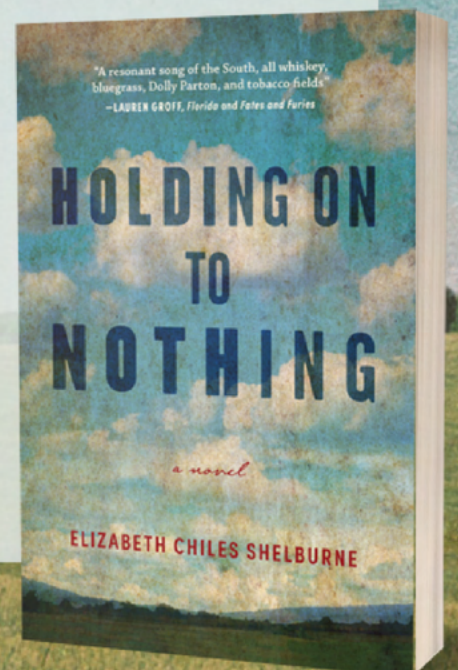
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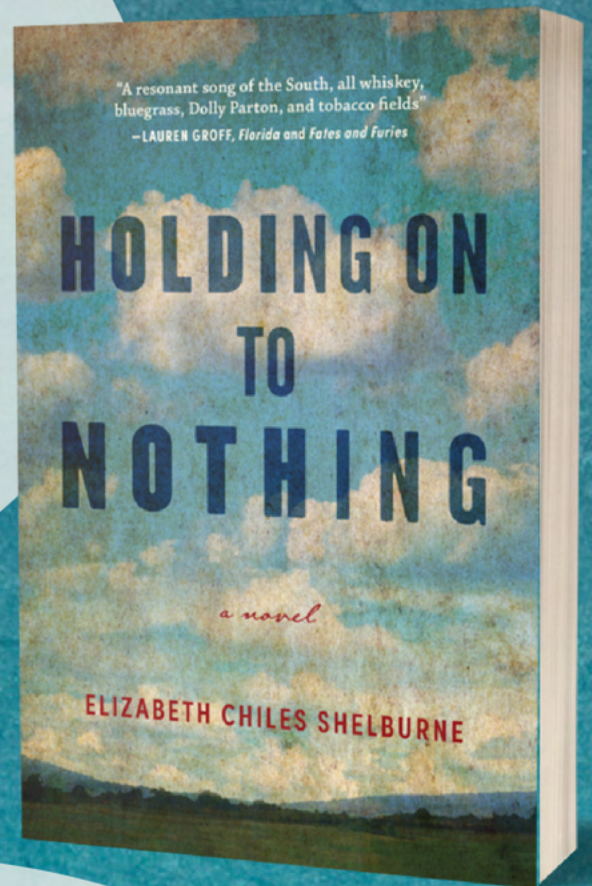
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Lucy Kilgore has her bags packed for her escape from her rural Tennessee upbringing, full of loss and disappointment. She's all but ready to leave, when a drunken mistake after a night of bluegrass music at the local bar where she works tethers her to the town and one of its least-admired residents, Jeptha Taylor, who becomes the father of her child.



PRAISE FOR HOLDING ON TO NOTHING

Most Anticipated Books of Fall 2019, *The Millions*

5 Hottest Debuts of Fall 2019, *The Writer*

“A stunning debut...riveting, touching, heart-wrenching, tragic, and beautiful.”—*Booklist*

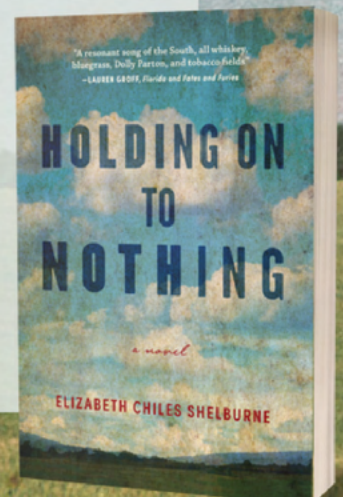
“A resonant song of the South.”—Lauren Groff, *Matrix*

“A gem.”—Ron Rash, *Serena*

“A compassionate but unsentimental tale of love, loss, and hardship in modern-day Appalachia.”—Whitney Scharer, *The Age of Light*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does community play a role in Lucy's development and how she approaches her relationship with Jeptha? How does community play a role in Jeptha's development and how he approaches his relationship with Lucy?
2. Both Lucy and Jeptha must reckon with the legacies of their blood and chosen families. The Taylors have a reputation in their small town. How has that reputation affected Lucy's relationship with Jeptha? How has being a Taylor shaped Jeptha's view of himself?
3. Music plays a big role in Jeptha's life and in the first sparks of his relationship with Lucy. How does music influence Jeptha's experiences? Lucy's?
4. Several characters in the book are giving or being given second chances or opportunities to start over. How does the hope for redemption shape Jeptha's character and influence his decisions? How is Lucy shaped by having her hopes of leaving town for college replaced by the need to stay and raise a child with Jeptha?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

5. In their small town, change seems inevitable but difficult and often met with resistance. How do the different characters view the changes they see happening to the town, their lands, themselves, and each other?

6. In the beginning, Lucy is convinced that the only path to the life she wants lies outside of her small town. What have you or the people in your reading group experienced of living in a small town versus trying to escape one?

7. Firearms, alcohol, and tobacco seem omnipresent in Jeptha's and Lucy's environments. How do these contribute to the culture and economy of the town?

8. How do Lucy's and Jeptha's incomes and support systems affect their ability to raise their child?



Photo by Karen Kelly

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Chiles Shelburne grew up in the Appalachian foothills of East Tennessee. A graduate of Amherst College, her writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe*, *Boston Magazine*, *Broad River Review*, and *Barren Magazine*, among others. Her debut novel *Holding On To Nothing* won an IPPY gold for Best Regional Fiction from the South and was long-listed for the Clara Johnson Award. She lives in Cambridge, MA with her husband and four children.

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Q&A WITH ELIZABETH CHILES SHELBURNE

Music plays a huge role in your novel: Jephtha is a musician, Dolly Parton features prominently, and characters are named after country music singers. What role does music play in your own life? Do you play an instrument?

I wish I played an instrument! When I was a kid, I could play you a couple Indigo Girls songs on a guitar, but that's about it. I dream of taking mandolin lessons when my kids are a little bigger. In fact, a few weeks before *Holding On To Nothing* came out in 2019, I had two beers and walked into a music shop and walked out with a guitar! (I've only ever played it about four times, and I think it's missing two or three strings since my four kids keep messing with it, but it exists!) I've always been a singer, though. I sang in the church choir most of my life and then did a capella in college. I grew up in, if not a musical family, then a music-appreciating family. My father doesn't play an instrument, but he loves music, particularly classical. He has a natural ear, and he appreciates music more than anyone I know. (His brother can play any instrument that you put in front of him and grew up to be the director of the Army Band.) My mother was a gifted pianist in her youth. My grandmother was a beautiful singer, also in the church choir, and at her funeral last year, music featured prominently in everyone's eulogy. All this to say, my family loves music, and I think that kind of seeps into your bones when you're a kid. And if it's in your bones, you walk around as the protagonist of your own life, with a soundtrack that you can't ignore.



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Another major theme in *Holding On To Nothing* is family: the family you choose versus the family you're born into. Lucy sort of gets to choose her family, but Jephtha is tied to his family name and the expectations that come along with it: why did you want to create that dynamic in this novel, and what was the inspiration behind it?

When I was in college, I came home for a summer. My parents were taking apart a log cabin, which are truly like Lincoln Logs. I'd borrowed my parents' Honda CRV and was helping them out by taking pictures and hammering up the flat tops of Mason jar lids to use as labels before we took the logs apart. This black Camaro drives by once, and then twice, and then on the third go-around, finally stops. This guy gets out and walks over to me, pep in his step, and says, "That's a fine-looking vehicle and you're a fine-looking woman." His name, it turns out, was Jephtha. He offered to let me take some pictures of a barn up at his house, an invitation which I declined in the same breath as I mentioned that my father was a lawyer up in town. I could never forget that guy's name. A few years later, a line about a woman named Lucy who had a smile that made people feel safe came into my head, and I knew that she never felt that way and that a man named Jephtha was part of the reason why. When I sat down to write, I found that the Jephtha character had taken on traits of all the men and boys I'd known on the peripheries of my life. My father, brothers, and the other men in my family are nothing like him, but we all

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know people who are. Like Athena from Zeus, Jephtha sprang out of my head fully formed. I wanted him to have a few good traits—this love of music, love for Lucy, and a good heart deep down despite a complete inability to get out of his own way. But, because of his family, the way he was raised, and his alcoholism, he has no idea how to translate those into a life in which he would make good choices.

***Holding On To Nothing* is a great portrait of a small town: complete with gossip, preconceived notions of family and expectation, and central meeting places like the local bar and the Walmart. You grew up in East Tennessee but now live in Boston. What do you love/hate/miss about living in a small town versus living in a city? What is your ideal?**

I miss almost all of it, and I've spent my whole life in Boston trying to create my own personal small town. And Boston is so neighborhoody that you can do that, to some extent. I know my bartender and my mailman and the dogs in the neighborhood. We even put a door in the fence separating us from our neighbors who lived behind us, so we didn't have to walk around the block when the kids wanted to go from house to house or when we needed to borrow a stick of butter or sleeping bags or lemons. But then Boston is also extremely transient, so you'll build up a world and watch with dismay as everyone moves away in large waves. (The neighbors that

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lived just over the fence moved, and we don't see them nearly as much anymore.) That doesn't happen in a small town. We head up to New Hampshire for much of the summer and spend those weeks barefoot, dirty, and pulling ticks off each other. That mix works for me, although if I had my druthers and could shrink the map, the summer escape place would be somewhere in Tennessee or western North Carolina. I miss the lightning bugs and the cicadas, the natural music of the South in the summer.

Lucy and LouEllen (and even Judy) are very strong, determined women who definitely keep this town running. The men in this book seem to get cut a lot of slack, but the women clearly “don't have it all.” Were you thinking about that when you were writing the book? Do you think any of the men in this book are “good men”?

Now, that is a question! Depending on how angry I'm feeling on any given day, I don't know if I think there are any good men anywhere in the world, much less this book! But that's a story for another novel. In this book, I think Rick Mullins and Cody Gilliam are good men. Not the best men, but good men. I think Jephtha would dearly love to be, but he truthfully just doesn't know how. And he is a diehard alcoholic. It's awfully tough to be a good man or a good woman when you are battling a disease like that. I think we still fall prey to this notion that alcoholism is a choice, one that a “good man”

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wouldn't make. But addiction is real, and when it's real, it's not something you have a ton of choice over. I think none of us are all good or all bad, and real life is somewhere in that gray zone. I like fiction that hangs out in that space—good people doing bad things or bad people doing good things sometimes. A friend of mine's grandmother used to say, "Nobody becomes the Devil in a minute." I think of that saying a lot, because it's very, very true.

Lucy is desperate to escape her small town, but every time she tries to leave, she gets sucked back in. Do you think that is common in small towns in America these days? What do you think of the idea of going back to your hometown?

I grew up with tons of smart, hardworking people who never wanted to leave our town. Home was home and that's that. The more kids I have, the more I appreciate the values of a small town and being a part of that village. But I did always want to leave. I always had this notion that there was more out there. That the racism and misogyny and other things I hated wouldn't exist if I left my small town in Tennessee. That's the kind of fallacy only an eighteen-year-old can believe. People are awful (and wonderful, sometimes in the same package) the world over, which I pretty quickly found out when I left. The way it's expressed in Massachusetts may be different, but the core is often the same. As for going back, there are times I deeply wish to, but my kids are in school

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here. Our jobs are here. We have a home and a life here. Lastly, we moved my parents up here to Boston several years ago so they'd have easier access to good medical care as they get older. So, I no longer have a Tennessee home. I don't have any roots there anymore. I feel rootless in a deep, discombobulating, makes-me-cry-when-I-type-this-sentence way, but life takes us where it takes us. So, although Tennessee still feels like home, it no longer is my home.

In your bio, you talk about growing up in a gun culture and how hunting made you a feminist. How do guns feature in *Holding On To Nothing* ? Could you have written the book without guns?

Guns are just a part of growing up in the South. One of my favorite stories growing up was hearing about the time my dad shot his brother in the ear with a bb gun when he was a kid because his brother kept saying he was Superman and couldn't get hurt. Turns out, he was not Superman, and that ear bled like stuck pig. We had many, many rifles and shotguns in our home—locked up, bullets kept separate from the guns themselves, and only my dad had a key. It never struck me as scary. We never had handguns. I went to a shooting range a few years ago up here where they only shot handguns, and frankly, I think my dad was right when he said, "Now, those are scary."

The difference was why we had guns. They were either for collecting or hunting. We didn't have them as some

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exercise of our second-amendment rights. We used them. We ate the animals we shot with them. My dad is a gun owner who is adamantly against the NRA. That is a thing. Or it can be.

The motivating idea for this book was about what happens over the rise in a small town—the sort of violence that can come out of anger and accidents. Having guns around and accessible raises the stakes of any accident or any altercation. That’s just true. I suppose that’s part of what I wanted to explore—how bad decisions can pile up on each other and, with the right spark, flame into tragedy.

Lucy had a decision to make very early on in the book, whether or not to keep the baby, effectively keeping her from leaving her hometown. What do you think would have happened if she had had an abortion and moved away? What would that story have been? Was getting an abortion ever an option for her?

It was never something I considered for her because it would have been so against her character. My hope is that people don’t read her choice as some kind of anti-abortion screed, but as a choice. I wanted her to have that choice—which at the time the book was first published in 2019, she would have—but choose to go in the other direction because that’s what her character would have done. Abortion just wasn’t something that was talked about when I was growing up.

[continued]

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The anti-abortion lobby wasn't as strong as they are now or as organized, but I saw plenty of girls get pregnant and have babies too young because it wasn't presented as a true option. And, of course now, with the Supreme Court's Dobbs decision, it's not an option anymore, which is infuriating and heartbreaking to me. In the original drafts of the book, I didn't even have her ever consider abortion. But early readers kept asking if she wouldn't at least think about it. It's possible this was the issue with having some early readers from up North. My southern readers never questioned that. But in the end, I was glad to have put that in. I want women everywhere to have the option of safe and accessible abortion at all times and decide whether or not they need to avail themselves of it. It should be a choice she makes, not one someone else makes for her.

LISTEN ON



SPOTIFY

PLAYLIST

FEATURED ON LARGEHEARTED BOY

“Down in the Valley” by The Head and the Heart

“Little Sparrow” by Dolly Parton

“Whiskey and You” by Chris Stapleton

“Holding on to Nothing” by Dolly Parton

“I Hung My Head” by Johnny Cash

“Day to Day” by Alabama Mike

“Wild Horses” by Old And In the Way

“Shady Grove” by Jerry Garcia, David Grisman, and Tony Rice

“Man of Constant Sorrow” by Soggy Bottom Boys

“Boondocks” by Little Big Town

“Rank Stranger” by Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys

“Hold On” by Sam Bush

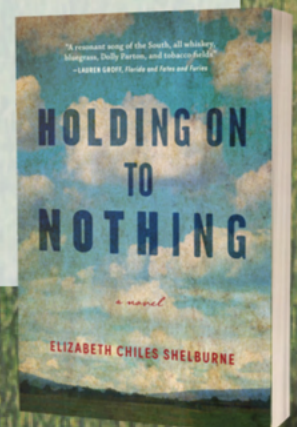
“East Tennessee Blues” by Bill Monroe (with Doc Watson on guitar)

“Come On In My Kitchen” by Guitar Slim

“Down To the River to Pray” by Alison Krauss

“Rocky Top” by Dolly Parton

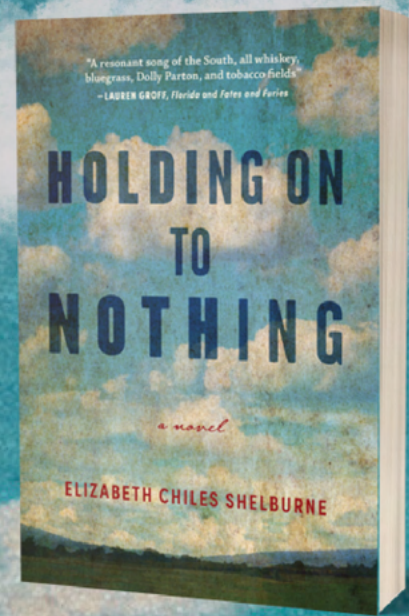
READ THE BOOK NOTES AT LARGEHEARTEDBOY.COM





DRINK RECIPE

WHISKEY RIVER



1 oz. whiskey

1 oz. lemon juice

1 oz. Tennessee honey simple syrup

6 oz. beer

(For easy drinking, this cocktail wants a lager. Any of Jephtha's favorites like Budweiser, Miller, Milwaukee's Best, Coors will do the trick.)

Shake first three ingredients together in a mason jar, add ice. Slowly pour beer to the top. Stir gently.