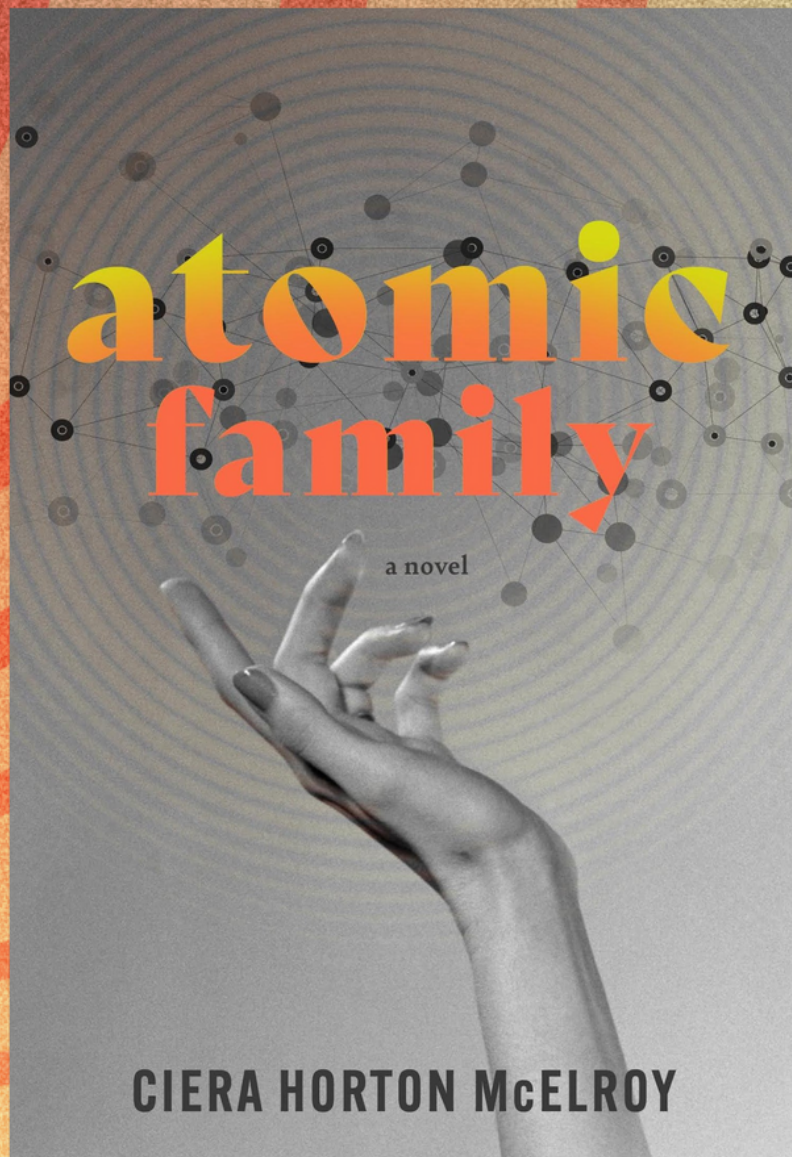


# Book Club Kit



BLAIR



# Introduction

It's November 1, 1961, in a small town in South Carolina, and nuclear war is coming. Ten-year-old Wilson Porter believes this with every fiber of his being. He prowls his neighborhood for Communists and studies fallout pamphlets and the habits of his father, a scientist at the nuclear plant in town.

Meanwhile, his mother Nellie covertly joins an anti-nuclear movement led by angry housewives—and his father, Dean, must decide what to do with the damning secrets he's uncovered at the nuclear plant. When tragedy strikes, the Porter family must learn to confront their fears—of the world and of each other.



PC: Ooh St. Lou Studios

Ciera Horton McElroy (b. 1995) was raised in Orlando, Florida. She holds a BA from Wheaton College and an MFA from the University of Central Florida. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Bridge Eight*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, the *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Saw Palm*, among others. She currently lives in St. Louis with her husband and son. *Atomic Family* is her first novel.

# Questions

- 1)** There are three different perspectives in the novel. How did the different perspectives shape your view of the characters and situations in which they find themselves?
  
- 2)** Going into the Halloween party at the top of the novel, Nellie is already upset with Dean. What are some of the issues that exist in their marriage to begin with? What pushes her over the edge?
  
- 3)** Is Nellie justified in her reaction to learning that Dean has been sneaking Wilson's baby teeth and taking them to the lab at the Sterling Creek Plant? Is Dean justified in taking them?
  
- 4)** Wilson has clearly taken the Cold War propaganda to heart. What are some of the factors that have influenced his childish paranoia?
  
- 5)** Why do you think Nellie decides to join the Women Strike for Peace movement after being previously ambivalent to it? What are some of the other reasons women give for joining the protest?
  
- 6)** Nellie is constantly thinking about her own mother and how disapproving she'd be...What do you think this tells us about how Nellie was raised and how she views motherhood?
  
- 7)** At the heart of ATOMIC FAMILY is a marriage in shambles. How are Dean and Nellie missing each other? If they were sitting down in couples' counseling, what do you think they'd say to each other?



# Questions

- 8)** How do Nellie and Dean treat Wilson's behavior and paranoia? How does that treatment reflect the ways in which they themselves are coping with the current climate?
- 9)** Dean is facing incredible pressure at work. What do you make of his ethical dilemma? What do you think about Hal's perspective on "fixing the problem from the inside"?
- 10)** If you were filming *ATOMIC FAMILY*, who would you cast as Nellie, Wilson, and Dean?
- 11)** The news and Civil Defense propaganda clearly affect the kids in Wilson's world. How do you think current events and news impacts kids today?
- 12)** The setting of the "bomb plant" creates an ominous presence throughout the book—how do all of the characters interact with the "bomb plant" differently? How does the presence of the nuclear site affect the mood of the novel?
- 13)** What cultural parallels do you see from the Cold War in today's culture?
- 14)** What do you think happens after the end of the book for the Porters?



# Retro Drinks

## The "Manhattan Project"



**Ciera says:** *The Manhattan is my favorite go-to cocktail! This classic drink is perfect for a cozy and retro book club meeting.*

### *Ingredients:*

Rye Whiskey  
Sweet Vermouth  
Angostura Bitters

*Combine 2 parts whiskey with 1 part vermouth. Shake in a chilled shaker and add a dash of bitters. I like to top with a cherry garnish or lemon peel. Cheers!*

## Let the Party "Be Gin"



**Ciera says:** *My husband made a gin fizz once at home—and it was a game changer. This is a great refreshing drink and easy to make!*

### *Ingredients:*

Gin  
Lemon juice  
Simple syrup  
Egg white  
Club soda or sparkling water

*Combine 2 parts gin to 1 part lemon juice in a chilled shaker. Add about 1/2 ounce simple syrup and 1 egg white. Shake well, then pour into a glass and top with club soda (1 ounce). Garnish with lemon!*



# A Conversation with Ciera

## **How did you get the idea for this novel?**

My grandfather was an agronomist at the Savannah River Plant, a facility that produced materials for the hydrogen bomb. Growing up, my dad never knew what his father did. Everything was top secret. And this had a big impact on their family and town. Hearing these stories, I knew there was a novel hidden in there somewhere. First, I tried writing this as a short story cycle, following Nellie, Wilson, and Dean through different key moments in the Depression, the war, the 70s—until I realized that the real story was in the Cold War.

## **Did you have to do a lot of research into nuclear waste management?**

Let's just say—I combed through a lot of declassified documents! I've worked as a journalist before, so I really enjoy research and incorporating facts into the text. The hard part is understanding all of the nuclear science, but I'm grateful to have an amazing support team of advisors who have helped me with some of the key facts.

## **What do you think makes a Cold War novel relevant today?**

In the 1960s, we had duck and cover drills. Today, we have active shooter drills. It's a daily threat that our students have to live with. My earliest childhood memory is 9/11. I grew up afraid that terrorists could attack at any moment, because that was the narrative given to me. Reflecting on the anxieties of my childhood—and witnessing similar anxieties among my students—really affected the writing of this novel. I wanted the nuclear family to become a microcosm for the Cold War, a war really of fear. What happens if a bomb drops? What happens if they beat us to space? War never happened, but our country lived in fear and anticipation. What does this do to

the psychological development of a child, being told that an atomic bomb may drop on his town at any moment? Wilson became a psychological exploration for me. But honestly—there's a lot of my childhood anxieties in there, too.

## **ATOMIC FAMILY takes place over the course of one day. What made you decide to compress the plot this way?**

It really made sense for the thematics and plot. If the family is functioning like a microcosm of the Cold War, a day is like a window into their whole life. I wanted the novel to feel like there's a whole history and future surrounding the Porters on November 1, but I also wanted to be really focused on how seemingly small events can create a chain reaction. How the little things can become meaningful. I'm indebted to Virginia Woolf and Ian McEwan and Michael Cunningham, who showed me how to write a circadian novel.

## **Your novel takes place the day after the Soviets launched the largest hydrogen bomb in history—but this is a mostly forgotten event today. Can you speak to why you chose this as your grounding historical event?**

I feel like there are two overlooked historical events in the book — both that test bomb and the Women Strike for Peace movement, which was a bold proclamation of women's civic engagement. Their march on November 1, 1961, is considered by many to be one of the first monumental moments sparking second wave feminism. I wanted to tell the stories we have ignored, stories that played a significant role in our modern history.

## **One of the threads throughout the novel—especially for Nellie—is financial strain. Why is this such an important part of her character?**



# A Conversation with Ciera

I think a lot of the financial theme has to do with gender restrictions in the 1960s. This is pre-second wave feminism. Most housewives were completely dependent on their husbands for “allowance” and for financial support. But in writing this novel, I’ve realized that this kind of financial control still happens. I recently overheard a man berating his wife in public saying, “I make all the money, and what do you do? You ask for it to buy things.” She was standing in an aisle for women’s socks and underwear. And her husband was publicly making her feel guilty—making her ask permission to buy necessary items. So in this way, it’s sadly not historical fiction for many women.

## Can you speak to the real life models for the Sterling Creek plant?

The plant in question is based largely on the Savannah River Plant, though I did a lot of research on other nuclear sites, such as Hanford and Oak Ridge, and streamlined for narrative clarity. I wanted to focus on the environmental legacy, the unforeseen consequences of the nuclear waste disposal, drawing information from many of the nuclear sites, not simply SRP. Dean, therefore, is a composite character, honoring many early scientists and activists who saw the danger in nuclear waste management, and who dared to say something, even when they feared the worst.

## Which character was the most challenging to write?

Writing any character is difficult until I find the right voice. Wilson came the most naturally, and then Nellie. But once I realized what motivated Dean, and that the central struggle was miscommunication between him and Nellie, compounded by the secret work, his chapters moved with a new fluidity, too.

## When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I’ve always known. There was no beginning, really. I wrote all through high school and college, and then my MFA. But I’m grateful to have a range of interests, like painting and photography and marketing, which I think helps balance my work life!

## What are some of your favorite novels?

So many! I love literary fiction with an edge. Some current favorites are *Sea of Tranquility*, *The School for Good Mothers*, and *The Incendiaries*. Basically, I love lyricism. But I also love my old favorites like *East of Eden*. John Steinbeck taught me a lot about writing place and using research well.

### Connect with Ciera online!

