The epigraph to your novel is taken from John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace*. Did this classic influence your story? Why do you think boarding schools are such fertile ground for fiction?

There’s a lot of inherent drama in a boarding-school setting, most notably the mystery of the privileged and all the unavoidable issues of class and wealth. In addition to that, adolescence is such a fraught and dramatic time in our lives. Not only are we at our most romantic and idealistic, but there’s a burning need for adventure that defies perspective or consequence. This need is something fiction has addressed in teenage boys far more than girls. That’s one of the elements I wanted to explore in *Gossip of the Starlings*: that girls have the same primal urge toward secret society, and danger. Also ambition: Catherine and Skye are each very ambitious, Catherine more realistically, with her horse shows, and Skye more altruistically—wanting to save the world in her own misguided way.

Writing my book I was conscious of a debt to Knowles’s classic, and the careful reader will find more than one homage. I wanted to write a novel that—like *A Separate Peace*—readers could discover...
at sixteen and then revisit at different ages, finding new angles every time. Phineas and Gene are archetypal characters, and I borrowed elements from each of them for Catherine, Skye, and Susannah. I also tried to use the backdrop of the Cold War as a looming presence the same way Knowles used World War II. Though obviously the latter was a more literal threat to the students at Devon, the Cold War informed and defined the political atmosphere during the Reagan years.

Other influences on *Gossip of the Starlings* include *Old School* by Tobias Wolff and *Endless Love* by Scott Spencer. The latter isn’t about prep school, but it deals so beautifully with the outsized emotions and corresponding insanity of adolescence. Strangely enough, another book I kept in mind was Jean Stein’s oral biography of Edie Sedgwick. There are wonderful passages about Sedgwick’s experience at an all-girls boarding school and her effect on the other students, which gave me great psychological insight into Catherine’s fascination with Skye.

*Gossip of the Starlings* takes place in the mid-eighties and involves prep-school students and cocaine. How closely do events in your book mirror the Choate cocaine scandal of 1984, when students were arrested for smuggling cocaine from South America?

Certainly the novel’s plot was inspired by those events, which were huge news the year I graduated from high school. I did go to boarding school, and I knew some people who were peripherally involved in that scandal. But what happened at Choate only provided the barest template for *Gossip of the Starlings*. I intentionally didn’t go back
and research any of those news stories, or conduct any interviews, because I wanted the action to belong purely to the characters in my novel. While some of the events may run parallel to what happened in 1984, the motivations and circumstances belong purely to Catherine, Skye, and their very fictional world.

The title of the novel comes from a poem. Why did you choose it for a title?

The line comes from Shel Silverstein’s “Forgotten Language,” which is in Where the Sidewalk Ends. I had that book when I was a child and read it over and over again. Silverstein’s poem describes such a yearning nostalgia for childhood—the belief in magic and the closer communion with the natural world: “Once I heard and answered all the questions / of the crickets, / And joined the crying of each falling dying / flake of snow, / Once I spoke the language of the flowers. . . . / How did it go? / How did it go?” The characters in Gossip of the Starlings are just on the cusp of losing their innocence. In life, it’s a cruelly fast progression from believing in the Wizard of Oz to having that curtain pulled back. One day it seems perfectly reasonable that the tooth fairy flies through your window, and the next you notice her handwriting is exactly like your mother’s. In my novel, many of the escapades, however unwholesome, are a form of mourning this loss, and a misguided way of clinging to the childhood belief in magical happenings. And of course Catherine, the narrator, is looking back from a remove of years, nostalgic for the adventures and idealism of her youth. One review of my novel said I employed “an elegiac tone,” and “Forgotten Language” is certainly an elegy of sorts.
A reviewer suggested sharing the book with one’s teenage daughter. Is that what you intended?

Just before I started writing this book, I reread several novels that had been important to me when I was a teenager, particularly *Endless Love* and *I Capture the Castle*. I found that while I loved these books as much as ever, my reaction to them was completely different. I interpreted events differently, and I wanted different things for the characters. When I wrote *Gossip of the Starlings*, I wanted it to appeal to teenage and adult readers in different and even contradictory ways.

One of my earliest readers sent me a letter after she’d finished the book that said, “I would have obsessed over it when I was sixteen. And I just know I will love it at sixty.” Reading that was an important moment for me, because it described exactly what I wanted to accomplish.

**Skye is such an interesting character. She seems oblivious to the way she affects everyone around her. You created her. How do you feel about her?**

Personally, I love Skye. She’s really the heart of the book, and whether or not a reader likes her from a moral perspective, I think her appeal to Catherine is very clear. One of the reasons I wanted Catherine to narrate from a present-day perspective was to accomplish an adult sort of sympathy toward Skye. From a teenage point of view, Skye is glamorous and dangerous and very powerful. But from an adult point of view, she becomes quite tragic. She has so much beauty and brilliance, and in many ways such good intentions. In her heart of hearts, Skye is an altruist, but when she tries to
translate that altruism into action, it just goes terribly wrong. What
Skye really lacks is perspective on her youth: she doesn’t understand
that this too shall pass. Everything that happens to her is infused
in her mind with inflated depth and drama. At one point Catherine
observes that Skye’s skin doesn’t seem expansive enough to contain
all that’s at war inside her.

And I don’t quite agree that Skye is oblivious. I think she re-
ally does love Catherine. But like Catherine, her identity isn’t fully
formed; both these girls have a hard time separating themselves from
the people they love. As Catherine says toward the end of the novel,
“I was seventeen years old. Love burgeoned huge, frightening, and
all consuming. It lunged in every direction—like a multiheaded
creature banging horns against itself. I loved John Paul and I loved
Skye. I loved Susannah and I loved my parents. And it never oc-
curred to me to love myself, because I had no means of disentangling
my identity from the fierce and secret and divergent emotions I felt
toward all of these people.”

It’s not so much that Skye doesn’t care who goes down with her;
it’s that she doesn’t have the power to stop herself, and can’t bear to
go down alone.

**Are there aspects of you in Catherine or Skye?**

Catherine has a classic narrator’s (and therefore a classic writer’s)
personality: she’s introspective, observant, and very confident in her
memories. On a surface level I would say she is the character who
shares the most in common with me. Certainly I’ve never been any-
where close to as glamorous (or reckless) as Skye, but sometimes I
was surprised by the elements of myself she possesses. I remember
one scene in particular, where Skye is having an emotional breakdown. I wrote about what I described as “the uncontainable mess of her—thoughts and emotions and needs and neuroses, all spilling out over their corporeal lines.” I can remember, as a teenager and even into my twenties, that very distinct feeling: my emotions being so enormous in relation to my outside self. Containing them was simply not a possibility.

One thing I really wanted to do with this book was illustrate the nature of friendship between teenage girls, and the impulse they have to tell each other everything. Certainly that was something I lifted from my own past and friendships. Catherine knows Skye and Susannah so well she can narrate their lives as well as her own, sometimes even more vividly and with sharper insight. That kind of friendship is something I look back on with exhaustion and a little regret, but also with a degree of nostalgia. As an adult I am able to put up healthy boundaries between myself and even my closest friends. Obviously this is a better and more mature place to be, but there’s something deliciously idealistic and innocent—albeit dangerous—in the impulse to blur lines between two people.

**In one scene in the novel, Catherine and her friends have an extended party at Skye’s parents’ house on the bay side of Cape Cod. It’s a scene that manages to convey both the excitement and ennui of adolescence. Did you draw from your own memories of that time period? What were you trying to reveal about the characters here?**

When my husband read the final version of the novel, he said he felt great sympathy for my parents. He wished that they didn’t have to
read it and experience all the retroactive worry of imagining me in the same situations. I was not the best behaved of teenagers, so I am drawing on some of my own experiences for that scene in particular. I wanted to establish the sense of freedom that comes from escaping rules, and at the same time illustrate the dynamics that evolve from new, self-imposed rules. In other words, Skye and Catherine may have escaped the bonds of one culture, but they’ve entered a new one. As a neophyte in the rule-breaking world, Skye doesn’t understand the importance of the new parameters. She’s as willing to flout her peers’ rules as she is her parents’, and that more than anything is what makes her dangerous.

The novel has such a sense of foreboding and impending disaster hanging over it. Was providing an ending that lived up to those expectations a challenging task?

I don’t think I would have been able to get away with such an intense narrative tone if I didn’t tilt my hand and let the reader know we were heading toward tragedy. The surprise lies in how the tragedy will play out and what emotional development occurs along the way. Sometimes I think it can be even more dramatic to know disaster is looming. As a reader, it makes me pay more attention to clues and nuance. I guess that’s doubly true as a writer!

When did you first decide you wanted to be a writer, and what drew you to the craft?

I’m very lucky to come from a book-obsessed family. We had a small TV hidden away in an upstairs room, while our living room was lined with bookshelves, as were our bedrooms and hallways. My
mother’s answer to every negative emotion—fear, disappointment, embarrassment—was to turn it into a story. She would sit at the kitchen table with her Smith Corona and I would walk around her in circles, dictating while she typed away. I don’t know if it ever occurred to me to be anything except a writer, unless it was a bookseller. I worked in bookstores for years before my first book was published. I know I will always feel most at home surrounded by tall shelves stuffed with books.

Your first book, *Of Cats and Men*, was a collection of short stories. Can you talk a little about the transition from writing short stories to writing a novel? Do you prefer one format over the other?

I wrote the stories for *Of Cats and Men* over a period of about three years. Leafing through the book, I can remember the order in which the stories were written by their length. Toward the end I started naturally gravitating toward longer and longer work, so that the final story I wrote for *Cats*—“Lieutenant Island”—was nearly sixty manuscript pages. From there it was a very organic leap to writing a novel. That was simply how my internal perception of plot and scope evolved.

I do love short stories—both writing them and reading them—and I wish there were more of a market for them in today’s publishing world. I think I’ll always write short stories here and there, but I don’t predict I’ll ever write another collection. Having written a novel and achieved a degree of confidence in that form, it would be very difficult to go back. It’s great fun to conceive characters and really live with them for a long while. I’m also a bit of a freak in that I love
revising—ripping a piece apart and putting it back together—and novel writing can provide years worth of precisely that activity.

**Reviewers have noted that Gossip of the Starlings is impossible to put down. Did you feel the same way when writing it?**

I am thrilled that readers can’t put the book down. What could be more gratifying for a writer to hear? Of course the experience of composing a book is somewhat different, though I will say that I was consistently haunted by the story—which to some degree had been germinating for almost twenty years. When I first started writing the novel, it was the middle of winter, and I had a lot going on in my life. My daughter was about eighteen months old and I was in graduate school, so I spent a lot more time ruminating on the story than actually writing it. I finally got a block of time that summer, which we spent in an eighteenth-century farmhouse on Cape Cod. I would sit with my laptop in a huge red velvet chair, and I felt like the words just spilled from the rafters into my head. A lot of revisions waited for me in the future, but that first draft was like taking dictation. Despite the dark nature of the book, for some reason the early stage of writing it was like the early stage of being in love. I would think of the story and hum to myself, smiling.
Reading Group Questions

1. *Gossip of the Starlings* takes place at a boarding school, and most of the characters come from very privileged backgrounds. Often when a novel has this sort of setting, the narrator is an outsider. Here, the narrator, Catherine Morrow, comes from a wealthy family. How does this change the way the story is told? How is Catherine an outsider despite her own privilege, and how is this important to the story?

2. The novel’s epigraph quotes John Knowles: “Everyone has a moment in history which belongs particularly to him.” Why is the time period important in this novel? In what ways does the era play a role? What is the era in your life that played a pivotal role?

3. Although Catherine narrates the story, in many ways Skye is the main character. Skye seems bent on self-destruction and not overly concerned about whom she takes down with her. Do you consider Skye a likable character? What do you think is the motivation behind her recklessness? If asked to justify her behavior, what do you think Skye would say?
4. At one point in the story, Catherine says, “None of us were addictive personalities” (page 156). Do you think this is true? On the whole, would you consider Catherine a reliable narrator? What makes you believe her? What makes you question her?

5. Catherine narrates from a remove of years. How does her distance from the events affect the way she tells the story? How has the passage of time altered your perception of your own adolescence?

6. The novel’s title comes from a Shel Silverstein poem, “Forgotten Language,” which mourns the loss of childhood magic. In what ways is this story—despite its dark overtones—nostalgic for youth? In what ways is it not?

7. The characters in this novel live extremely privileged lives. Are the issues they face unique to upper-class teens, or are they universal? In what ways do you sympathize with these characters, despite their advantages? Does their wealth explain their delinquency, or does it simply make it harder to excuse?

8. In some ways, Catherine and Skye have opposite personalities. What parts of the other does each girl contain? Are they drawn together because of the characteristics they share, or because of the ways they differ?

9. At first glance, Skye seems to have the power in her and Catherine’s friendship, but when the two girls become estranged, Skye is the one who falls apart. How does each girl wield power within this story? Do they bear equal culpability for how the story plays out, or is one ultimately more responsible than the other? Why?
10. The friendships of our adolescent years are often fraught with high drama and intensity. Why do you think this is? Do you remember similar relationships in your own life? How did they affect you then, and in retrospect, how do they affect you now?

11. From Catherine’s perspective, adults play a peripheral role in these events, but several of them — including Mr. November, Mr. Twinning, and Senator Butterfield, in particular — are clearly complicit. Could the seemingly more innocuous adults also be blamed for what transpires? In what ways do Mrs. Morrow, Mrs. Butterfield, and Ms. Latham — among others — contribute to what goes wrong?

12. Catherine is a talented and committed equestrian, and most often her moments of clarity are in conjunction with her riding. What are the connections between the appeal of a championship and the appeal of her outlaw life? How do her relationships with the two horses — Pippin and Bloom — mirror the conflict between Skye and Susannah?

13. John Paul is as guilty as his more privileged friends in terms of drug use and rule breaking, but even the adult Catherine stands firm in her assessment of what she calls his “gallantry.” Do you agree with Catherine’s perspective of John Paul, or does he ultimately deserve his fate?

14. The young people in this novel indulge in behavior that can easily be seen as immoral. Yet each one is also, in his or her own way, idealistic. Is this idealism at odds with their behavior, or is there a connection between their flouting of rules and their personal belief systems? How does this vary from character to character?
15. None of the characters in this novel has qualities that are commonly associated with delinquents. They are good students, headed to top colleges, with not only impressive achievement but active consciences. What causes them to break the law to such a serious degree? Is there any one event that might have changed the conclusion that Catherine seems to consider inevitable?

16. In the letter Skye writes to Catherine, she describes a house that she fell in love with when she saw it at night; in daylight, the house turned out to be ill repaired and unappealing, a disappointment. Skye asks Catherine, “Did that make the house I’d seen the night before, the one I’d loved, any less real?” (page 196). What does this question say about Skye as a person? How might she see this reaction as a metaphor in her own life?
Nina de Gramont is the author of the collection *Of Cats and Men*, which was a Book Sense selection and won a Discovery Award from the New England Booksellers Association. She is also coeditor of the anthology *Choice*. Her work has appeared in *Redbook, Seventeen, Nerve*, the *Harvard Review, Post Road Magazine*, and *Exquisiste Corpse*. She lives in North Carolina with her husband and daughter.