

Reading Guide for *After Hours at the Almost Home* by Tara Yellen

About the Book

Late nighters at the Almost Home Bar and Grill are mostly young and foolish. A few are mostly foolish.

On this special night, a rowdy crowd watches the Broncos win the Super Bowl. The most compelling games, however, are being played by the bar's staff. Marna, the bartender, has just walked off amidst the busiest night of the year. But Almost Home is a fresh start for new hireling J.J., who is starting to suspect she has run out of beginnings. And substance-abusing waitress Colleen, devastated by the death of her husband, is playing fast and loose with her life—and that of her precocious 14-year-old daughter Lily. Before the night is over the girl will ask something of the troubled Denny that no child should ever ask a man.

In this simply-told story, life is never simple. An array of compelling, gutsy, and memorable characters populates a world where all, in different ways, struggle to graduate from mere survival to something just an inch closer to happiness.

Tara Yellen delves into broken human hearts and the result is a work of outstanding compassion and sly humor. She renders her characters' voices and lives as clearly and expertly as if she truly knows each one. *After Hours at the Almost Home* is sharp slice of life today.

About the Author

Tara Yellen was born in Ft. Collins, Colo., but grew up in Fredonia, NY, a college town south of Buffalo, where her father was a math professor and her mother taught reading to adults. At ten, when her parents divorced, she turned to reading for solace. "I think it really helped me through that period," she says.

She describes herself as a "super studious student" in high school, but after college she was not sure what she wanted for the future, so she took time off to travel. Yet she was not lost to academics. She returned and completed the MFA program at the University of Virginia. *After Hours at the Almost Home* is her first novel.

Interview with the Author

Did you ever work in a bar similar to the one in *After Hours at the Almost Home*?

Sure--though the Almost Home Bar and Grill isn't any one bar I've worked at. It's a conglomeration, bits and pieces of real places with plenty made up in-between. When I began the book, I was, in fact, working at a place in the Cherry Creek neighborhood of Denver, called Legends, and there is certainly a sense of that place in the Almost Home. But by no means are they the same (Legends is well-managed, for one thing). I've worked at a lot of restaurants, and I'm sure that every one has made it into the book somehow.

Apparently you were drawn to using Denver as a setting for your book. What are your ties to Colorado?

I was born in Ft. Collins, where my father was finishing his graduate work, and we moved soon after. I always felt a connection, though, with Colorado, and after I finished college and was moving around the country, working at bars, I went on a hiking trip to Boulder and decided on a last-minute whim to move there. I was living in San Francisco at the time and my best friend and roommate said she'd come with me—and that we'd leave that week—but she changed her mind at the last second. I drove to Colorado with my parakeet and stayed in a youth hostel until I found a part-time

<http://unbridledbooks.com/afterhours.html>

nanny job and a waitressing gig. I loved it. The mountains, the harsh beauty. There's something about hiking that settles my mind back into place.

I didn't stay in Boulder long that stint, but returned a few years later to get my Masters at the University of Colorado, then moved to Denver. I still miss Denver. It's a great, vibrant city, with quick access to mountains. Plus, it was the only place I've ever lived where I had anything semblance of a sense of direction (the mountains are always west).

In your story, the Broncos are playing the Super Bowl. What does football and the Broncos mean to you?

To be honest, I'm not much of a football fan. I enjoy the atmosphere that surrounds watching this kind of event, and, having worked in many sports bars, it's certainly been a part of my life. It's an important part of the story, I think, in that it sets the stage for a night where everyone has to come together.

Why did you choose to write about a 14-year-old like Lily?

Well, for one thing, I didn't choose--Lily kind of just popped herself in there. When I write, it feels more like I'm uncovering something that already exists than creating something new.

In my first year in grad school at the University of Virginia I helped run their Young Women Leader's Program—a great mentoring program for middle school girls that partners the girls with (trained) undergraduate women, and has them meet in groups for fun, for talk, and for goal-oriented projects. I learned so much from that experience and from those girls. While Lily isn't modeled after any one of them—not by a long shot, in fact, her character already existed before I went to UVA—she was developed, at least in part, out of working with kids of that age.

Most of your characters are people in their 20s. Do you feel they are having a "quarter life" crisis? Why or why not?

That's funny. They shouldn't be allowed one. I do think, however, that there's a strange out-of-time feeling inherent to the restaurant/bar world—it's like entering a different time zone—you go through the motions, work your shifts, and while things change—break-ups, people leaving, people arriving—there's not much progression. The shifts start and end each day just the same. When you immerse yourself in it, it can be a bit disorienting—you come up for air and realize you're getting older.

I'm 35. But I am, indeed, a little surprised I'm not still in my twenties. Despite the fact that I've always wanted to be a writer, my life hasn't felt very linear. Probably because I chose to live a life where my writing was central, I've had a lot of different jobs (restaurant and otherwise) and moved around a great deal. I also stayed in school as long as possible.

The dialogue is precisely realistic. How are you able to remember and recreate the way people speak, particularly in a bar setting?

Thank you. I think it probably just sank in somewhere along the line. These characters felt real to me, as if they existed and I was discovering them--and it was almost as though I would try on different things to say until I figured out what it actually was.

Why were you inspired to write about the sort of characters you created for "Almost Home"?

These are people I've met—and I'm sure there's a bit of me in every character. Again, they sort of came to me. It was hard work, I'm not saying I was channeling some muse, but, on good days, it was as if they would just start talking on the page and reveal themselves....

Does it feel like you chose to become a writer or did writing choose you? Please elaborate.

Definitely the latter. I read like mad as a kid—and from the time I was five I wanted to write a book. Books were central to my childhood. My parents are both teachers, and a love of reading was instilled early. My mom always had a book in her hand and my father would read poetry to me. Somewhere I still have my first collection of short stories, bound with grocery-bag paper and staples.

What authors have you been influenced by? What are your favorite books?

That's always hard to answer because it changes. As a kid, I read everything and anything I could get my hands on as a kid—I had full access to my parents' books— and all of it influenced me. Every one of them. From Hemingway to Erica Jong. Imagine my surprise when I grabbed *Night* by Eli Wiesel to the beach thinking the title sounded like a dark romance....

These days I'm still pretty random with my reading selection. I just pick things up. Fiction, nonfiction, cookbooks, newspapers, grocery fliers.

How long did it take to write this book? How long were the characters and plot percolating in you mind?

The book took a weekend to write and years to revise. The characters percolated the entire time. I would go for runs to think things through and try to "hear" the characters, figure out what they were up to. I've finally stopped dreaming about them.

Are you working on another book? If so, please tell us about it.

I am—only one main character this time. It's about a woman who makes some very... untraditional choices as she tries to separate sex and love—and then tries to put them back together again.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is this novel driven by its characters? And where is it driven to, i.e., what conclusions does it lead you to about these people and their lives?
2. How well does the setting work as a platform for the characters?
3. What does Lily need from her mother?
4. How does the author's writing style compliment the storyline?
5. How would you interpret the death of Colleen's husband?
6. Why do you believe Keith and Marna are attracted to each other?
7. Is J.J. a free spirit or a screw-up? If so or not, why?
8. How does the author show compassion for her sometimes mixed up characters?
9. Is Colleen really a bad mother? Why or why not?
10. Does smoking marijuana change the bar staff's mood? If so, how?
11. What do you think Lena was looking for in her past relationships with men?
12. What is Denny going through that may prompt him to do something that he should not? Should charges be pressed against Denny?

Recommended Reading

Life After God by Douglas Coupland

Generation X by Douglas Coupland

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

Small Acts of Sex and Electricity by Lise Haines

Leaving Las Vegas by John O'Brien

Less Than Zero by Bret Easton Ellis

Story of My Life by Jay McInerney