

VOX

a novel

C H R I S T I N A D A L C H E R

Book club
challenge:
discuss this
book using
only 100
WORDS



How long did it take you to write the novel?

You're not going to believe me, but . . . two months. May 23 to July 23, 2017. Granted, I'd written the short story of about 3,500 words in early May, so I had a skeleton to work with. But *VOX* the novel came together quickly.

In *VOX*, you've created two characters in direct opposition: Jean, who was politically inactive before the president came to power, and her friend Jackie, who attended every rally and protest. What did you hope to convey by their two extremes?

Jackie, even though she appears in the flesh later in the book, started out as a ghost. She's the proverbial haunter, the nagging voice that says to Jean, "I told you so, kiddo" and "You made your bed, now lie in it." Jean might never turn to activism and become a Jackie, but she does change over the course of the story; she becomes *more like* Jackie, while still retaining her own identity. We don't all have to be carbon copies of one another to work on the same team, but we can learn things from other people.

What was it like to live in Jean's head while writing *VOX*?

It was a special place to live in, and to continue to live in whenever I reread parts of *VOX*. Being Jean for a while let me experience a range of states and emotions—some familiar, some foreign to me. When I wrote her scenes, I was a mother, a wife, a woman with regrets, a woman with the power to cure a serious language disorder, a lover. And speaking of that last part—it really wasn't horrible climbing into bed with Lorenzo.

Do you think Jean views herself as a feminist?

I think of Jean as a humanist, an egalitarian, a person intelligent enough to view all human beings as created equal. But here lies the rub—Jean takes

this for granted. I doubt she ever entertained the idea that not everyone shares her viewpoint. To the extent feminism is a call for equality, then, yes, we can view Jean as a feminist.

Jean's teenage son very easily embraces the Pure Movement. Why is his role in the book so important?

Steven shows us how malleable people can be, for better or for worse. As a teenager, his thinking (and his rethinking) seemed completely natural—he's a kid, soon to be an adult, navigating a complicated system, a collection of new ideas still very much in flux, and trying to make sense of them.

"We don't all have to be carbon copies of one another to work on the same team"

Many of *VOX*'s most chilling moments involve Sonia, Jean's six-year-old daughter, and the question of whether she'll acquire language.

There's a looming threat in *VOX* that we taste but never quite swallow. At six, Sonia is of an age when time is crucial—we could refer to this period as a use-it-or-lose-it stage. And I mean that very literally. Critical periods exist for various types of learning. The theory is that children's brains are more plastic in early youth, but the circuitry changes as they reach puberty.

When I began studying linguistics, I read about Genie, a "wild child" rescued from abusive parents in 1970. Almost fourteen years of social isolation left Genie beyond hope of acquiring language. I've never forgotten her story, and my own fear and

anger about poor Genie stayed in my mind from the first word of VOX to the last.

What do you want readers to take away from VOX?

A lot of readers are probably going to think of VOX as a feminist story. In many ways, it is. But I hope people also see this as a tale about oppression, about the horrors that can occur when a faction—any faction—with a specific agenda becomes so powerful it's unstoppable.

“How easily can our world change while we're not paying attention?”

Although I wrote VOX as a cautionary tale, a warning call about gender politics and backlash and cultural shift, I also explored how much our humanity, our personhood, is tied to our ability to acquire and use language. In the book's time period we never reach a point where the language faculty is wiped out, but that threat looms. What would our world look like if we (or some of us) lost the ability to communicate, to think, to express ourselves?

There's also an exploration of cultural evolution, and we see this most in the conditioning of the main character's children as they navigate the new rules, as they either embrace them or passively accept them.

I'd love readers to come away from VOX with two thoughts: (1) How easily can our world change while we're not paying attention? And (2) How crucial to our being is the gift of language, that amazingly complex capacity we so often take for granted?

Which character in the book was most difficult to write?

I write quite a bit of flash fiction—in other words,

extremely short stories, sometimes as little as a few hundred words. Flash lets me experiment with different voices and characters, so I'm comfortable moving from Lorenzo the Italian lover to Jackie the activist to Sharon, the down-to-earth, ever-so-smart farmer. Jean's husband Patrick was tricky, though. I wanted him to be a fundamentally good guy, but also a passive man. Still, he's smart. He's the president's science adviser. So his passivity had to be believable.

What compelled you to write VOX?

VOX began as a piece of flash fiction of about 700 words, for a contest with a doomsday theme. In it, I imagined a world in which a biological warfare agent spread rapidly, inducing a certain type of language impairment. The story, titled “Wernicke 27X,” illustrates what might happen if humans were suddenly incapable of speech and, consequently, of rational thought. It was terrifying.

When I found an anthology looking for fiction written by women and featuring female protagonists whose skills were central to the plots, I returned to “Wernicke 27X.” I asked myself how I could ramp up the terror, how I could expand on the idea of language loss—but only in half of the population. I took a long look at the current political climate, and found part of the answer there. So, VOX was born.

Is Wernicke's aphasia a real communication disorder?

Yes, aphasia is very real. When the human brain suffers trauma, and language faculty is impaired, it is called aphasia, from the Greek “a-,” meaning “not,” and “phanai,” meaning “speak.” There are many different manifestations of aphasia. The one I use in VOX is Wernicke's aphasia, also called “fluent aphasia.” Instead of struggling to speak, an individual with this type of linguistic impairment will actually speak quite fluidly, although that speech can often sound like a pretty interesting sort of linguistic soup. For more information on aphasia, I'll refer you to the excellent people at the National Aphasia Association at www.aphasia.org.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 **We speak more than sixteen thousand words a day**—and the women in this book speak only one hundred words. What would it be like for your right to speak to be taken away? How would you voice your thoughts? How would you use your daily quota of words?
- 2 **Humans differ from other members of the animal kingdom** since we have language. If we take away language, what separates us from other animals? Would we be capable of rational thought? Would we survive?
- 3 **Our learned behavior is patterned after what we witness.** This is exemplified by the drawing that Sonia makes—her father and her brothers are depicted as much larger than she or her mother is. What other things do we learn to do unconsciously?
- 4 **Do you blame Steven for his actions?** Tell us how you felt about him. Did you feel remorse for him after he realized what he had done and went in search of his girlfriend, Julia?
- 5 **Were you surprised by Patrick?** Is it true that sometimes we don't know the person we think we should know best?
- 6 **How did the restructuring of the children's education make you feel?** Do you think home economics is beneficial to both boys and girls?
- 7 **Sharon comments that because of her skin color, she will be "next."** How do you think society would have progressed if the ending of *Vox* were different? Do you think people of color would have been treated like the LGBTQ community?
- 8 **Did reading this book inspire you as a parent?** As a citizen of your country? As your (preferred) gender? How?
- 9 **Were there any ideas of the Pure Movement you agreed with?** Why?
- 10 **Up until about six years old,** children learn language with few problems. Later, language learning becomes increasingly difficult—think about how hard it is for most adults to learn a foreign language. What would be the risks to Sonia and other young girls if the situation in *Vox* persisted?
- 11 **Jean gives up her voice long before the Pure Movement** comes to power by declining to use it. Are there ways in which we voluntarily silence ourselves?

THINK ABOUT
YOUR DAY—

HOW MANY
WORDS DO YOU
THINK YOU SPOKE?

ON AVERAGE,
A HUMAN SPEAKS 16,000
WORDS A DAY—

DO YOU THINK YOU COULD
GO FOR AN ENTIRE DAY
SPEAKING ONLY

100 WORDS OR LESS?

