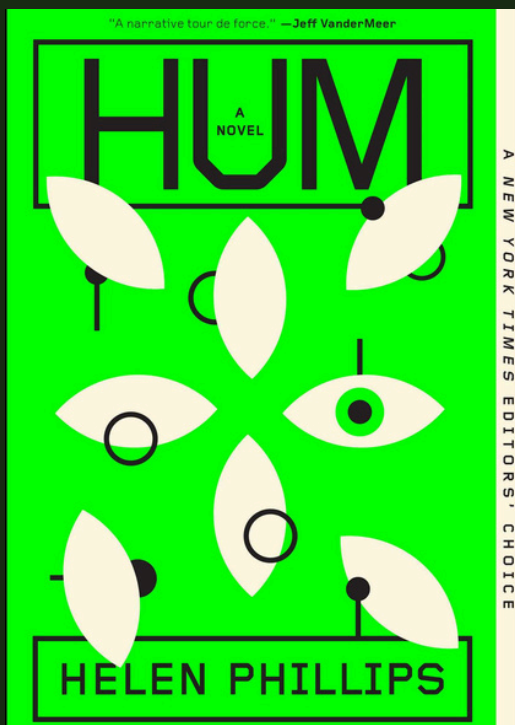


BKLYN BOOK CLUB KIT

HUM

HELEN PHILLIPS



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BOOK SYNOPSIS

From “one of our most profound writers of speculative fiction” (*The New York Times*), this “tense dystopian thriller” (*Time*) and “tender portrait of love and care in an uncertain world” (*Esquire*) is an urgent and unflinching portrayal of a woman’s fight for her family’s security in a world shaped by global warming and rapid technological progress.

In a near-future world addled by climate change and inhabited by intelligent robots called “hums,” May loses her job to artificial intelligence. Desperate to resolve her family’s debt and secure their future for another few months, she becomes a guinea pig in an experiment that alters her face so it cannot be recognized by surveillance.

Seeking reprieve from her recent hardships and her family’s addiction to their devices, May splurges on passes for her family to spend three nights in the Botanical Garden: a rare green refuge where forests, streams and animals still thrive. But when her children come under threat, May is forced to put her trust in a hum of uncertain motives to save her family.

Written with “precision, insight, sensitivity, and compassion” (*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review), *Hum* is a “striking new work of dystopian fiction” (*Vogue*) that delves into the complexities of marriage, motherhood, and selfhood in a world compromised by global warming and dizzying technological advancement, a world of both dystopian and utopian possibilities.

AUTHOR BIO: HELEN PHILLIPS

Helen Phillips is the author of six books, including, most recently, the novel *Hum*. Her novel *The Need* was a National Book Award nominee and a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award. Her collection *Some Possible Solutions* received the John Gardner Fiction Book Award. Her novel *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* was a finalist for The New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. A professor at Brooklyn College, she lives in Brooklyn with artist/cartoonist Adam Douglas Thompson and their children.



Photograph by Andy Vernon-Jones



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BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

WARNING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INCLUDE SPOILERS!

- 1** May undergoes a significant procedure in the story. What do you believe motivates her decision, and how does it reflect broader societal pressures?
- 2** Discuss the role of hums in the narrative and world setting of the novel, and what it symbolizes in terms of human connection. How would you feel interacting with a hum?
- 3** How do technology and societal change affect the dynamics of May's family? Consider the role of “bunnies”; does this technology feel realistic or familiar to your world? Have you encountered discussions around children’s use of technology?
- 4** The story juxtaposes the natural world with technological advancements. Discuss how Phillips portrays this relationship and what commentary the novel offers about our future.
- 5** Examine how technology in the book impacts personal identity. How do characters struggle or adapt to technology that alters their sense of self?

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BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- 6** **May's life is upended by a viral video. In what ways does the story address the consequences of our online lives clashing with our real-world existence? Have you experienced a viral piece of media being misinterpreted or deeply affecting someone's life?**
- 7** **Discuss your experience with artificial intelligence; is it part of your daily home or work life? What benefits and shortfalls have you experienced with artificial intelligence?**
- 8** **What could the Botanical Garden signify in May's life? How does its portrayal contribute to the novel's narrative and thematic depth?**
- 9** ***Hum* dives into topics such as job loss, financial stress, and health care. Are these pressures familiar to you? How would you behave if faced with the same stresses as May's family experiences? Discuss the socioeconomic themes explored in the novel.**

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10

Reflect on how May and Jem balance parenting and their relationship; what three words would you use to describe their marriage? Do you recognize elements of their relationship in your own life? In what ways does their environment impact their marriage?

11

Helen Phillips includes endnotes detailing her research into artificial intelligence, climate change, and technology. Were you familiar with any of the examples or media listed? Is your experience of the novel affected by exploring these real-life examples and inspiration?

12

Reflect on the quote by Paracelsus included in the book. How do its details of poison and remedy relate to the story's events and themes?

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BONUS CONTENT: A BUTTERFLY KISS COCKTAIL

For years, common milkweed has been dismissed as a weed rather than appreciated for its many virtues. Few people know that during World War II, the waterproof fibers inside milkweed seed pods were used to fill life vests when the United States no longer had access to the traditional kapok filling imported from the South Pacific. Today those same fibers are used as an effective material to absorb oil spills.

Lepidopterists appreciate milkweed as the essential food source for the caterpillar stage of the monarch butterfly, and foragers eat the young stems, unopened flower buds, and immature seed pods as delicious green vegetables. The fully ripe blossoms of common milkweed make a naturally pink simple syrup that can be used in sorbets, ice cream, jellies, and cocktails.

INGREDIENTS

- **2 ½ ounces vodka**
- **1 ½ ounces milkweed flower syrup
(instructions below)**
- **½ ounce seltzer, sparkling water, or club
soda**

To Make One Drink

Combine the vodka and milkweed flower syrup in a shaker full of ice and shake for 30 seconds. Strain into a coupe and top with seltzer, sparkling water, or club soda. No garnish required.

Continued on next page.

A BUTTERFLY KISS

Milkweed Flower Syrup (makes 2 ½ cups)

The nectar of common milkweed flowers is thick and sweet, with a unique flavor. It's difficult to describe a new flavor in terms of familiar flavors, so I suggest you taste the nectar straight off the plant to see if you like it. When the flowers are ripe, each individual bloom exudes a large, glossy drop of nectar. Dab that with your finger and have a taste. It's floral (of course), rich and a little spicy, but not in a hot-spicy way.

INGREDIENTS

- **2 cups milkweed flowers**
- **1 ½ cups sugar**
- **1 ½ cups water**

Instructions

Combine the milkweed flowers and the sugar in a glass or plastic container with a tight lid, stir well, and let sit, covered, for 24 hours.

Transfer the milkweed flowers and the sugar to a saucepan and add the water. Whisk over medium heat until the sugar is fully dissolved and the liquid just begins to simmer. Remove from the heat and cover. Let the syrup sit overnight.

Strain the syrup and pour it into a pretty glass bottle or a canning jar.

The syrup will keep up to 3 months in the refrigerator. For long-term storage, process half-pint jars in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes. Leave ¼ inch headspace.

Continued on next page.

A BUTTERFLY KISS

Picking Milkweed

There are many species of milkweed, but only *Asclepias syriaca* (in the east) and *A. speciosa* (in the west) are universally acknowledged as edible. To harvest milkweed flowers, wait until they are fully open and dripping with nectar. It's easy to see when the flowers are ripe. The umbels will be almost fully round and each individual flower will glisten with a drop of sweet nectar. Snip off the whole umbels and shake off any insects. Don't wash the flowers or you'll rinse away the nectar.



EXCERPT FROM *THE WILDCRAFTED COCKTAIL: MAKE YOUR OWN FORAGED SYRUPS, BITTERS, INFUSIONS, AND GARNISHES* BY ELLEN ZACHOS. STOREY PUBLISHING. 2017.

MEDIA INTERVIEWS FEATURING HELEN PHILLIPS

- *Elle* – [With Hum, Helen Phillips Embraces the ‘Vast Gray Area’ of Modern Technology](#)
- *WAMU Radio / The Book Show* – [Helen Phillips - Hum](#)
- *Wisconsin Public Radio / BETA* – [Helen Phillips Explores Surveillance Capitalism and Artificial Intelligence in ‘Hum’](#)
- *KERA Radio / Think* – [A Novel About Near Future Maternal Anxieties](#)
- *CBC Arts* – [Novelist Helen Phillips Speaks to Mattea Roach About AI, Parenting and What Makes Us Human](#)



YOUTUBE/CBC ARTS INTERVIEW WITH HELEN PHILLIPS. [LISTEN HERE.](#)

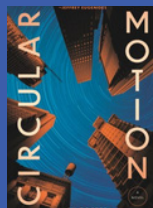
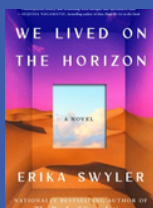


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BKLYN BOOKMATCH READALIKES

Did you enjoy *Hum*? Want to read something similar? Check out these readalike titles below:

- *Toward Eternity* by Anton Hur
- *We Lived on the Horizon* by Erika Swyler
- *You're Safe Here* by Leslie Stephens
- *Circular Motion* by Alex Foster
- *Loneliness & Company* by Charlee Dyroff



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