

## Not Yours to Keep: A Novel

**Zelly Ruskin**

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*Two women are pulled together by their complicated relationships to motherhood in the tense but humane thriller Not Yours to Keep.*

Fraught with heartache, Zelly Ruskin's thriller *Not Yours to Keep* unfolds the pain of infertility.

Adoption specialist Billie is trying for a baby. Then she and her husband Tyler receive the crushing news that Billie is unlikely to become pregnant and is prone to complications if she does. She sets on a new track for pursuing the baby she wants more than anything, open to nearly any means necessary. Meanwhile, another woman (known as Anne currently but as Laura to those from her past) struggles with the decision she made almost two decades ago to give her baby up for adoption. Through their connection to Tyler, the women's stories intersect, with transformative consequences.

Billie's anguish and desperation escalate slowly, beginning with her determination to try out every course of infertility treatment before progressing into fantasies of adopting a client's soon-to-be-born baby. Her experiences parallel Anne's, though the circumstances leading to each woman being childless are quite different. Their shared desire to create and heal a part of themselves through the existence of a child centers the story within the context of maternal longing and benevolence.

Portrayed with skill are the overwhelming instincts and emotions that motivate Billie and Anne. As straightforward as they can be in their human wants, needs, and love, there is also a lot of contemplation that occurs on each woman's part, especially in Billie's case. Complicated by the miscommunication between her and Tyler about their individual thoughts on being parents, the story introduces questions of what it means to do what is best for a child.

The story focuses on three perspectives—Billie's, Tyler's, and Anne's. The transitions between their points of view are smooth, and the attention given to each is appropriate in respect to their roles and how much weight they carry in propelling the story forward. The prose is often direct, but it's elevated by its commitment to portraying the trio's internal struggles. Underscored by a sense of quiet anxiety due to instances of stalking and harassment, the pace is consistent too; it is naturally altered in the last third of the story, once events culminate and the connections between the characters are clarified. The book's revelations are timed and executed well, though there is an element of convenience to the coincidences they rely on.

*Not Yours to Keep* is a humane novel whose suspense is directed by the intense emotions brought forth by the loss—or unrealized gain—of a child.

CIERRA TAYLOR (June 20, 2024)

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