



Bestselling author
of *What the Wind Knows*
and *From Sand and Ash*

The
Song
Book
of A novel
Benny
Lament

AMY HARMON

THE SONGBOOK OF BENNY LAMENT

*From the bestselling author of **What the Wind Knows** and **From Sand and Ash** comes a powerful love story about a musical duo who put everything on the line to be together.*

New York, 1960: For Benny Lament, music is his entire life. With his father's deep ties to the mob, the Bronx piano man has learned that love and family can get you in trouble. So he keeps to himself, writing songs for other musicians, avoiding the spotlight...until the night his father brings him to see Esther Mine sing.

Esther is a petite powerhouse with a gorgeous voice. And when Benny writes a hit song and performs it with her, their collaboration thrusts the duo onto the national stage...and stirs up old issues and new scrutiny that the mob—and Benny—would rather avoid.

It would be easier to walk away. But the music and the woman are too hard for the piano man to resist. Benny's songs and Esther's vocals are an explosive combination, a sound that fans can't get enough of. But though America might love the music they make together, some people aren't ready for Benny Lament and Esther Mine on—or off—the stage.



Publication date: March 16, 2021

Genre: Historical, Romance

Recommended for ages: +16



ATTENTION

**THIS DOCUMENT INCLUDES SPECIFICS YOU MIGHT WANT TO AVOID
UNTIL YOU HAVE FINISHED READING THE BOOK.**

BOOK CLUB KIT – THE SONGBOOK OF BENNY LAMENT

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CHARACTERS

Do you think the characters were realistically portrayed? Describe these character's personalities.

Which character do you relate to most?

Who did you like the least? Why?

Did a specific character remind you of someone you know?

How does the way the characters see themselves, differ from how others see them? How do you see the various characters?

What did you think about Benny and Esther's relationship?

Were there any moments where you disagreed with the choices of any of the characters? What would you have done differently?

How does loss shape the personalities of certain characters?

What is motivating the actions of the characters in the story?

Physical appearance plays a big role in the characters' lives. Did this change your perception of the characters?

What past influences are shaping the actions of the characters in the story?

Do the main characters change by the end of this novel? Do they grow or mature? What events trigger such changes?

How does the way the characters see themselves, differ from how others see them? How do you see the various characters?

What were the dynamics of "power" between the characters? How did that play a factor in their interactions?

QUOTES

Discuss the following quotes.

“But there’s no such thing as good guys and bad guys. There’s just people. And everybody’s rotten inside. Some are more rotten than others, and some just aren’t rotten yet. But eventually, we all get a little ripe, you know what I’m sayin’? We all have dark spots.”

“Even you?”

“Especially me.”

“That song is going to bring the devil to our doorstep.”

“Sometimes the best way to hide is in the spotlight. If the whole world knows who you are, it’s harder to snuff you out.”

“Having a gift and not using it is like having a garden and letting your family starve.”

“A movement might unite behind a face, but it needs every voice.”

Were there any particular quotes that stood out to you? Which ones and why?

STRUCTURE, WRITING & GENERAL DISCUSSION

What did you think of the overall structure of the novel?

Were you engaged immediately?

Did you race to the end, or was this a slow-burn story for you?

What did you think about the time-line and point of view? How did you feel reading it?

Which emotions conveyed the story?

Did the story keep you interested?

Would you say this is a plot-driven book or does the story unfold slowly with a focus on character development?

Were you surprised by the plot? Or did you find it predictable?

How credible did the author make the setting and dialogue?

What scene did you find was the most pivotal for the book? How do you think the story would have changed had that scene not taken place?

What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way?

Did certain parts of the novel make you uncomfortable?

Were there any scenes that made you laugh?

What is the significance of the title? Did you recognize it in the book?

Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?

What surprised you the most about the book?

What did you learn about this time period from reading the book?

Did you think the ending was appropriate?

How would you have liked to have seen the ending go?

Have any of YOUR views or thoughts changed after reading this book?

What do you think about the cover of this book? Would you change it? How?

Has this book changed you, broadened your perspective?

What did you learn from, take away from, or get out of this book? Did your opinion of the book change as you read it? How?

Did this book leave any lingering questions you're still thinking about?

If you were making a movie of this book, who would you cast?

Though this story is set in the past, how do the issues the characters face relate to today?

How original or unique was this book?

If you could hear this same story from another character's point of view, who would you choose?

How did Barry Gray's radio show contribute to the story as a whole?

Discussion questions by chapter

Chapter 1

What do you gather about Benny's relationship with his father?

What are your thoughts as Benny sees and hears Esther sing for the first time?

Chapter 2

What do you think of Esther's proposition? What do you predict will come of it for Benny and Esther?

Chapter 3

Benny managed to peg where Esther came from without actually knowing the truth. Do you think his knowledge of her history will change his impression of Esther?

Why do you think Benny's father answered his questions if he only managed to ask the correct ones? Benny said a kid shouldn't know the things he knew.

Chapter 4

Do you think it was wrong for Benny's father and Sal to get Benny his scholarship for school?

Can you understand Benny's desire to create music in the background? Does it seem strange or respectable that he doesn't crave the spotlight?

Chapter 5

Why do you think Benny resists commitment and responsibility?

Discuss the songwriting scene. Were you feeling the vibe? Could you almost hear the song as you read the words?

Chapter 6

Discuss the conflicting advice Benny receives from his father and uncle. How do you think his decision to work with Esther will impact his life and family?

Chapter 7

Esther seems to know most people don't like her and Ahmet proves her theory. Why do you think this is?

Esther is usually quite bold - did you expect her to be as nervous as she was for the audition?

Chapter 8

What did you think of Esther's meeting with Ray Charles? Can you imagine the possibility?

Why do you think Esther concedes and allows Benny to call her Baby Ruth?

Chapter 9

We discover there is more to Esther's history than we knew. Do you have a theory about the reason for Ahmet's rejection?

Why does the banter between Esther and Benny work so well?

Chapter 10

Benny admits to being scared of Esther. Why do you think that is?

Everyone seems to easily accept Benny and Esther together in the club/church. Were you apprehensive as he walked in? Did you think it would go as smoothly as it did?

Chapter 11

Benny finally learns what he's gotten himself into and the situation is dangerous. What would you do if you were in Benny's shoes?

Benny feels orphaned and untethered. Do you think this will affect his judgment going forward? Why or why not?

Chapter 12

Finally, Benny kisses Esther - what were you feeling? Was this the right time?

Was their moment ruined by the truth? What did Benny risk by telling her? Talk about Esther's reaction.

Chapter 13

Do you think Gloria made the right decision in not telling Esther where she came from? Can you understand her reasoning?

Esther says, "...if you want people to change you have to show them what it looks like." How can you show them?

Chapter 14

Do you think Benny will regret his pact with Uncle Sal?

Minefield has to deal with the changing roles in their family dynamic and Money gets in a dig at Esther. How do you think this situation makes her feel? Will the ties that bind them break?

Chapter 15

Why does Esther say she wishes she could forget Benny is white and why does that statement hurt him more than anything?

Why do you think Benny's father continued taking care of Esther? Why does she matter to him?

Do the songwriting scenes make you wish you could hear the music with the characters?

Chapter 16

Discuss the arrest. What was the point of it?

Why does Alvin's prayer move Benny?

Chapter 17

Benny realizes he never has to feel the tension and worry Esther and her brothers feel when entering a new place. What thoughts does this realization spark for you?

What did you think of the marriage proposal and Esther's reaction?

Chapter 18

“I’m just saying you can’t hide from trouble. You can’t fight against it, not with fists and weapons. That just makes more trouble. You can’t even run. You just have to stand still. You have to hold your ground and let it come.”

Do you agree with Alvin?

It seems Minefield has found support and friendship through Berry and Motown - why is this such an important development?

Chapter 19

Minefield has a blast getting situated in Detroit and Christmas shopping. Does it feel like the calm before the storm to you? What do you predict is coming?

Chapter 20

Benny comes to realize he’s more like his father than he ever wanted to be. Do you think this is inevitable? Why or why not?

Why is Benny so adamant that he’s not a good man?

Chapter 21

Finally, Benny and Money agree on something. Why do they think Bo Johnson turning up is a bad thing?

Benny thinks family is the people you choose and Money thinks it’s the people you’re stuck with. What do you think?

Chapter 22

What message is being sent to Benny in this chapter?

Can you imagine peace in the band’s future?

Chapter 23

Can you respect what Benny is trying to do for Esther and her brothers? Is he fighting evil with evil or doing the only thing he can?

Were you surprised by Sal’s call?

Chapter 24

Do you think the occasion in the lounge of the hotel will end the turmoil for Esther and Benny?

Benny was worried about Bo Johnson's sins and him still being out there. Why?

Chapter 25

Family lines blur here and Benny finds himself caught in the middle. Have you ever been in Benny's shoes?

The truth all comes to light, as it usually does. Were you shocked? Did you see it coming?

Chapter 26

Benny mentions missing Esther - even though they were together, they were never alone. Have you ever experienced this?

Benny and Esther can teach us to look inside ourselves and seek out our own prejudices and blind spots. How did this story influence you? Did it change your thinking about anything? Were you able to find any prejudices or blind spots in your own life?

Discuss the author's note.

A note from Amy Harmon

I proposed *The Songbook of Benny Lament* to my publisher in 2019 and finished it in early 2020, right before the world was gripped in our current troubles. I had no sense of what was coming when I wrote about Benny and Esther and the world they lived in. I had no idea how complicated life would become. In some ways, it made the complicated nature of the past easier to understand.

When I told my mom I was writing a historical love story set in the 60s, she said, "The 1960s isn't historical." Meaning: "I was alive then, so it wasn't that long ago." No, Mom. It wasn't that long ago. And unlike some of the novels I've written, there was no comfortable distance from the setting or the time.

I wasn't alive in the sixties. I don't have any firsthand knowledge of the decade this story was set in—not the music scene, the Mafia life, the political climate, or the civil rights movement. I was not there. But when the idea for this story took root in me, it flowered quickly. Benny and Esther started talking, and I wasn't about to ignore them. I wrote their story, and I poured my whole self into it.

When I was finished, I sent it to a handful of beta readers. Sher, who happens to be a Black woman and a pianist, shared her thoughts with me after she was done. She loved the book and had great feedback. As we visited about different aspects of the music world and the story, our conversation inevitably led to the concept of identity and how my skin color is different from Esther's. We talked about the task and the test of writing a character who is not ME. That made me laugh a little, because in eighteen novels, I've never written a character who IS me. Men, women, and children from all walks of life and experiences stroll the pages of my books and tell their stories.

Esther Mine and Benny Lament are not Amy Harmon. They are my creations, but they are not me. And though my characters are born in my heart and raised with my research, the hope is that they will become real to my readers, and that they will be authentic to the actual people who have lived similar experiences. That is the test and the responsibility.

As I told Sher, I may not be the same color as Esther. I may not be Sicilian like Benny. I definitely don't play the piano like he does. But we are the same more than we are different. We may not share an entire identity--no two people do--but we share a world. I share Benny's love of music and his passion for creation. I share Esther's hopes and her fears as a woman, a daughter, and a sister. I share Benny's complicated feelings about family, and Esther's desire to be part of something bigger and something better. In truth, I had no trouble "being" Esther or Benny at all.

That is the magic of books. Of stories. We become someone else. We walk inside them. We go where they've been and where they're going. And the walls between us and them disappear. Every reader can attest to this.

Finally, this book isn't a story about trauma. It's a story about triumph. About love. About family. It's a story about music, and how it heals and holds and helps us along when everything else fails. I hope you feel every note in *The Songbook of Benny Lament*. I know I did.