“Dawn Tripp brings Georgia O’Keeffe so fully to life on every page and, with great wisdom, examines the very nature of love, longing, femininity, and art.”

—J. COURTNEY SULLIVAN,
New York Times bestselling author of Maine and The Engagements

THIS IS NOT A LOVE STORY.
If it were, we would have the same story.
But he has his, and I have mine.

Georgia O’Keeffe, her love affair with photographer Alfred Stieglitz, and her quest to become an independent artist come vividly to life in this sensual and exquisitely written novel, a dazzling departure into historical fiction by the acclaimed novelist Dawn Tripp.
Georgia O’Keeffe once remarked:

“I often wonder what would have happened to me if I had been a man instead of a woman.”

I was initially drawn to O’Keeffe’s story when I saw an exhibit of her abstractions at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Up until then, I had always associated O’Keeffe with cowskulls, southwest landscapes, massive flowers.

When I saw her abstractions, I was transfixed. They were gorgeous evocative shapes of color and form—and they were stunningly original. I wanted to know: Who was the woman who painted these works? What was she thinking? feeling? What was taking place in her life?

Click here to see some of the paintings in that exhibit.

O’Keeffe’s abstract paintings are among her most innovative works, although it is her representational art that she is most well known for. In my research, I learned that when O’Keeffe died she owned half of her known output; she owned most of her abstractions, some of which had not been exhibited since 1923. She kept many of them in a storage room at her house in Abiquiu behind the famous patio door.

Recently, there has been a call to reassess O’Keeffe as a key figure in American art—an artist who played an essential role in the evolution of Modernism and whose vision and paintings helped shape the abstract art movement in America.

In summer 2016, the Tate Museum in England is holding its first major retrospective of O’Keeffe’s work.

According to the press release, it is the museum’s hope that “this ambitious and wide-ranging overview will review O’Keeffe’s work in depth and reassess her place in the canon of twentieth-century art, situating her within artistic circles of her own generation and indicating her influence on artists of subsequent generations.”
Throughout her life, O’Keeffe had a distinct fashion sense. Below are some quotes that detail her very particular style. In some photographs she almost looks like an abstract work of art herself. She was always very attuned to color, line, contrast, form, not only in her art, but in her style as well.

“She was unusual looking. The most unusual thing about her was the absolute plainness of her attire. She wore a tan-coat-suit, short, severe, and loose, into this room filled with girls with small waists and tight-fitting dresses bedecked in ruffles and bows.”
—Georgia’s classmate from boarding school, Christine Cocke, as cited in Roxana Robinson’s Georgia O’Keeffe

“O’Keeffe’s keen awareness of fashion has been underestimated. Indeed she had considered a career in fashion illustration and was a crack seamstress who designed and made her own clothes out of the best available materials until she could afford to hire one of New York’s renowned tailors. She customized her look with pragmatic accessories including men’s flat shoes and hats.”
—Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, Full Bloom

“She liked A-style skirts and white shirtwaists with men’s collars and ties. She was very small around the waist. She showed us a buckram belt six inches wide she had made to ride on her hipbones to make a straight up and down look to her body.”
—O’Keeffe’s student, Ruby Cole Archer, as cited in Drohojowska-Philp’s Full Bloom
“Even if she was going to a black tie dinner, she always went as herself, in black and white, and what could be more stylish than that?”
—Susan Girard, as cited in Hunter Drohojowska-Philp’s *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O’Keeffe*

“Oh, she wore black. Black, black, black! And her clothing was all like men’s clothing. Straight lines, she didn’t believe in lace, or jabots in blouses, laces or ruffles or things like that. Everything on straight lines.”
—O’Keeffe’s student, Ruby Cole Archer, as cited in Roxana Robinson’s *Georgia O’Keeffe*

“O’Keeffe’s attitude toward clothes had always been individualistic, though this became more pronounced with age. Ever since reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1915, O’Keeffe had chosen her clothes for practicality and freedom of movement, as well as for her private aesthetic pleasure. High heels and cosmetics were anathema. Simple and severe, her clothes were often monochromatic, black or white, and idiosyncratic as to line.”
—Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O’Keeffe: A Life*

“She moves in one piece. Her black clothes have no suggestion of waist line. From the delicately poised head to the small stout shoes is a rhythm unbroken by any form of hampering. Delicate, sensitive, exquisitely beautiful, with the candor of a child in her unafraid eyes and the trained mind of an intuitive woman.”
—Blanche Matthias as cited in O’Keeffe, Stieglitz, and the Critics by Barbara Buhler Lynes
In 1978, O’Keeffe agreed to an exhibition of Stieglitz’s serial portraits of her at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

O’Keeffe had not seen many of the serial portraits since 1947 when she left them to the museum, the year after Stieglitz’s death. And most of the nudes had not been viewed publicly since 1921. In the introduction to the catalog, O’Keeffe wrote:

“When I look over the photographs Stieglitz took of me—some of them more than sixty years ago—I wonder who that person is. It is as if in my one life I have lived many lives. If the person in the photographs were living in this world today, she would be quite a different person—but it doesn’t matter—Stieglitz photographed her then.”

As I was writing this novel, I kept this passage pinned to the window above my desk. O’Keeffe continued throughout her life to make bold choices. And she understood that she could choose how the world saw her. She made the choice to present herself, as well as her art, intentionally—in ways that reflect the self-reliance, intelligence, fierce strength, and spirit that defined who she was as a woman and what she believed.

O’Keeffe had a powerful way of compartmentalizing different segments of her life, which almost seemed to allow her to be fully present during one time period, as if she could literally cut herself loose and move on.

Click here to view images that document O’Keeffe’s changing selves.

When I look at these photographs, it strikes me that O’Keeffe was a woman who was able to inhabit and express a stunning range of human emotion. The portraits reflect the active choice she made, again and again, to redesign her life, and self, on her own terms.
During the 1960s and 1970s, O’Keeffe—with her fierce independence, self-reliance, and commitment to work—was held up as an example of feminism by the women’s movement. O’Keeffe balked at this.

While she was a lifelong member of the National Woman’s Party, she eschewed feminism, and believed that considering women’s art as “separate but equal” undermined a woman’s opportunity and place. When Gloria Steinem, the founding editor of *Ms.* magazine, showed up with a bouquet of flowers at O’Keeffe’s door at the Abiquiu House, she was turned away.

Receiving an invitation for an interview on women artists, O’Keeffe responded: “A silly topic. Write about women. Or write about artists. I don’t see how they’re connected. Personally, the only people who ever helped me were men.”

Despite this claim, however, O’Keeffe had many friendships with women that were transformative and vital to the evolution and success of her art. There was her close friend Anita Pollitzer, who first brought O’Keeffe’s drawings to Stieglitz at 291 on New Year’s Day 1916.

There was Blanche Matthias, who wrote a stunning piece profiling O’Keeffe in 1926, which described O’Keeffe’s art and vision on her own terms. O’Keeffe maintained deep and close relationships with her four sisters throughout her life, and she had strong female friendships with Beck Strand, Marjorie Content, the Stettheimer sisters, Marie Garland, and Peggy Kiskadden, among others.

In my research for *Georgia*, I came across a number of exchanges that O’Keeffe had with other female artists, which I found particularly intriguing.
In the summer of 1931, O’Keeffe met the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay when Millay stopped in for a visit at Lake George. The only record of their meeting exists in a letter O’Keeffe sent to Millay afterward:

My dear Edna St. Vincent Millay!
I did not mean to be cold—I was surprised to see you—and you came so quickly and were gone so quickly that I did not recover from my surprise . . .

And I am rather inclined to feel that you and I know the best part of one another without spending much time together—

—It is not that I fear the knowing—
It is that I am at this moment willing to let you be what you are to me—it is beautiful and pure and very intensely alive.

From SAVAGE BEAUTY, by Nancy Mitford. p. 341
O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo met for the first time in 1931 during the MoMA retrospective for Kahlo’s husband, Mexican painter Diego Rivera. Two years later, on March 1, 1993, when Kahlo, 26, learned of O’Keeffe’s breakdown, she called O’Keeffe, then 46, on the telephone and also sent the following letter.

Georgia,

Was wonderful to hear your voice again. Every day since I called you and many times before months ago I wanted to write you a letter. I wrote you many, but every one seemed more stupid and empty and I torn them up. I can’t write in English all that I would like to tell, especially to you.

Frida

O’Keeffe and Kahlo would maintain a friendship until Kahlo’s death in 1954. They exchanged letters, and O’Keeffe visited Kahlo several times at Casa Azul, her home in Mexico City. Some of the comparisons and similarities between the two women are fascinating:

Both women were married to famous artists—O’Keeffe to Stieglitz, Kahlo to Rivera. Both had stormy, tempestuous relationships in which their art and brand were impacted. Both experienced marriage as a double-edged sword. O’Keeffe was an abstract artist. Kahlo was a surrealist. Both women used personal hardship and suffering as a powerful engine for their work. Both strove to define and redefine interpretations of their art. Each woman—in her own way—achieved a kind of cult-like status. Both are recognized as feminist icons of art and art history.
CAROLINE LEAVITT: Admission: We are friends, but here’s another admission: I loved your work before I knew and loved you.

DAWN TRIPP: And that is mutual!

CL: So let’s get to the first question: I feel my novels are, in a way, ghost stories, because they come out of the things that haunt me, the things I’m desperate to figure out. Is it that way for you?

DT: It’s a gut impulse, always, that drives me into a story. A kind of burn—in my heart, bones, fingertips.

I came to O’Keeffe through her art, specifically an exhibit of her abstractions I saw at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. That show was a revelation. Growing up, I’d always admired O’Keeffe’s art but, like many, I knew her cow skulls, her giant flowers, and southwestern landscapes. That day at the Whitney, I fell in love with her abstractions. As early as 1915, at age 27, Georgia O’Keeffe was creating gorgeous, radically new abstract forms when few other American artists were bold enough to explore this new language of art, and I wanted to know: Who was the woman, the artist, who made these shapes? What did she think, feel, want? What was happening in her life? And why hadn’t I seen the full range and power of her abstract work before? Why wasn’t she known for this?

It wasn’t until I was close to finishing the novel that this last question emerged as the singular driving question. Looking back, I realized it had been from the start.

CL: You can’t talk about O’Keeffe’s abstract work without talking about Stieglitz—tell us how that relationship factored into your novel.

DT: In the Whitney exhibition, O’Keeffe’s art was paired with photographs Alfred Stieglitz had taken of her as part of a portrait that spanned twenty years—O’Keeffe’s hands, face, body—some clothed, others nude. There were also excerpts from the letters they exchanged. The language of those letters was sharply intimate. It felt aligned with the
abstract pictures and photographs I was seeing on the walls, but at odds with the image I had always held of O’Keeffe: doyenne of the southwest, cloaked in black, her gorgeous lined face ravaged by sun and weather. An American icon. Holding the world at arm’s length.

After the Whitney show, I began to dig into O’Keeffe’s story, in particular the years between 1917 and 1933 when she lived with Stieglitz in New York.

Their love affair was a loaded one. Here was a young woman—strong, fiercely intelligent, independent, with a stunning, artistic talent and a revolutionary vision years ahead of her time—and here was a man—the father of modern photography, at the tail end of his own artistic career, who fell so deeply in love with her, who had faith in her greatness but needed to orchestrate every element of the world around him, blind to the risk of losing what he loved most.

There was a brilliant, nuanced intensity to the passion between them—not just sexual, but intellectual, philosophic. Later in her life, O’Keeffe would say it was “the art” that kept her with Stieglitz. There’s an extraordinary quote in her memoir where she describes the sense of being with him: “As if something hot, dark, and destructive was hitched to the highest, brightest star.”

Everything I learned about the workings of their relationship was fascinating to me. I kept thinking: Here is a woman most people know of, yet at some level barely know at all.

CL: There is definitely that split. There is also the split/connection between authors and their characters. Flaubert said that Madame Bovary was him. Did you feel any personal connection to O’Keeffe?

DT: There were a few distinct parallels. O’Keeffe loved her solitude. She took direct inspiration from the natural world. During her years in New York, she continually worked to balance work and life, the demands of others’ expectations with her own needs. As I was drafting scenes between O’Keeffe and Stieglitz in the second half of the novel—scenes that were difficult to write—I noticed echoes between the politics of their stormy marriage and a relationship I’d had in my twenties with a man whose passion for art and relentless charismatic intellect were so intriguing to me—a relationship that only quietly devolved into possession, betrayal, control.

In writing Georgia, I was aware of these parallels, but kept them off to the side. My best work comes when my mind is focused on the present moment in a story. That focus allows other things to emerge in ways that feel true—not to my life, because that’s no longer relevant, but to the lives of the characters.

For me, writing is discovery. A kind of soul-exavation that is personal and, at the same time, transcends the personal. I strip back layers of the story and what it means to me, why it burns in me, as I go, but I only see the cogent underlying design once a book is done.

CL: Georgia is so much about finding your way as an artist, and the price you pay for that—and she very much succeeded. Do you think that is why people are so obsessed by her? (Besides the fact that she was a brilliant painter?)

DT: O’Keeffe’s fierce spirit, her determination to build a life on her own terms, and the sacrifices she makes for the sake of her art remain the most inspiring aspects of her story. As a young woman she was willful, but her strength crystallized into something more enduring as a result of her relationship with Stieglitz. She opened herself to him—to his faith in her and the full range of passion between them. That passion infused and inspired her art. Then, at a certain point, when the damage between them had exacted so much, she owned her own role. “This is not what he has done to me; it’s what I let him do.” These are not the words of a victim. They are the words of a woman asserting her own power to change a situation she finds herself in, a woman determined to build something different.
CL: Did you always know you were going to be a writer? What was your path like, and do you think you paid a price or sacrificed something because of it?

DT: I believe in stories. That’s how I make sense of the world. I’ve wanted to be a writer since I was a child, but it’s only as I have come into my late forties that I’ve begun to understand that a key part of a creative life—whether you are a working artist or not—is recognizing that every day is a choice. You choose to dedicate more or less time to a given endeavor. You work to develop ways to balance your work with your personal or family life. To me, that awareness of everyday choices is exhilarating. And yes, every choice comes with a sacrifice, but that’s not a reason not to make it, or to apologize for a choice you have made. Choices that are right at one point in your life may change as the parameters of your life change. It’s important to stay open to that.

CL: Do you also paint? I do (badly, though I used to be good ages ago) and I ask this because you really captured what it feels like to paint. Is there, do you think, a difference between putting paint or words on paper? Both are, in a way, visual, and both are intellectual, I think. Do you agree?

DT: I don’t paint, but I love visual art. My husband is an artist. Both of my boys are artistic. I used to sculpt when I was in college, and I love the physicality of clay. One of the bedrooms in our house is a dedicated art room and, when I began Georgia, I would go in there with my sons and mess around with paper and paints on the floor. I also took photographs. Mostly landscapes. I needed to learn how to see like a visual artist—how to break down the world into color, line, form. My early drafts of the painting scenes in the novel felt flat to me. So I rewrote them, then ripped them up and rewrote them again until I felt I’d found a way to express O’Keeffe’s creative experience more viscerally, more kinesthetically.

I do feel there’s a difference between putting paint and words on paper. While a writer and painter might apprehend the world in similar ways, the act of painting, like sculpture, can take place outside of language. When I work in clay, I can drop my mind and be fully immersed in that creative moment, the cool and the wet, the form taking shape under my hands. O’Keeffe made incisive intellectual choices when she approached a canvas but she was also an intensely physical person. Once I realized her experience of painting would have a strong sensory component, I was able to make those scenes work.

CL: There is always the question of love. Can an artist have both work and love, and what sacrifices do you have to make? (Fun fact: I live about two blocks from the Stieglitz house, where a friend lives!)

DT: Love—like all emotion—fuels creative work. Part of being an artist is cutting yourself open to the world, to see and feel as much as you can bear. Then you take those feelings and reimagine them into a story on the page. Love also brings you right up against what you can’t bear to lose. That alone is galvanizing, when you lean into it.

I think it’s easy to romanticize the life of a writer, or living with a writer. Day-to-day though, that life is hard. I can be impossible—my work is all-consuming. When I am deep in a story, that story is with me all the time. I eat, sleep, dream it, often for years. I’ve only had one partnership that could hold space for my life as a writer. That’s my marriage. My husband and I have been together for 17 years, and I am lucky. He gets my need for solitude, and he gives me that space, but when I need to talk through some knot in a story, he is right there, talking it through with me. He reads every draft, and he has brilliant editorial instincts. It’s not simply that he comments on what’s on the page. He’ll also point out some aspect of the story I could push deeper into, some risk I haven’t taken yet. He knows my strengths and weakness. And he is very direct, which has taught me to be more ruthless with my own work.

CL: Georgia is also about the difference between what the world says about your work and what you feel about it. I always feel that writers write their novels for themselves, to answer those haunting questions, to get into the zone, and it’s only when the work is out in the world, that we
have to come face-to-face with the world—and then the anxiety begins. Can you talk about this, please? Do you read your reviews? Do you take them to heart? And how do you keep yourself centered when your work is out in the world?

DT: There is a divide between my life as a writer and my life as an author. Having your work out in the world is an extraordinary gift. It’s also a challenge you’re never quite prepared for, no matter how many times you’ve done it. In the months leading up to publication, it’s not reviews or criticism I brace myself for, but the seismic shift from private world to public space. I love events when I have the chance to connect with readers, but I am an introvert. My sense of self and peace and ground comes from the time I spend alone, writing, or with my closest friends and family. Sometimes I read my reviews, but often I don’t. The fact is, by the time you receive reviews, that book is done, finished. It’s part of your creative past. You can’t go back and change it. I’m always grateful for a reviewer’s honest, thoughtful response to something I’ve written, particularly when that response captures the creative intent behind the work. My heart, though, is in the act of writing itself.

CL: Your writing is just exquisite. Just this morning, you asked my opinion of one sentence written six different ways, and there was something exhilarating about looking at that sentence, and how the meaning could change radically just by adding or subtracting one word. How do you approach language when you write?

DT: My early drafts are a mess. There is no punctuation, no quotation marks. I often have several versions of the same sentence—or four or five images to describe the same thing. I make a margin note to myself to choose which one feels right down the road. I love that early mess. It keeps things raw, open to change. I handwrite the bones of every book in ruled notebooks, often in pencil, or on slips of paper I throw into a box. Once I have the equivalent of 50 pages of material, I’ll begin to transcribe those handwritten fragments into my laptop. Then I map the arc of a story. I wrote poetry for years before I started writing fiction. Language drives me. But I don’t start perfecting the language in a novel until I have a complete draft and I’ve done at least one structural revision. An image or a word placed a particular way can entirely transform a moment. It’s a thrilling stage in the process – when the story is essentially finished, scenes in their places, and you have the chance to bear down on each sentence, each mood, each phrase. I love that.

This novel took me six years. Even after the book was delivered, my editor and I went back in and cut 3,500 words. Just this past fall, I rewrote several passages, including an entire scene detailing Georgia’s creation of a painting. That passage never quite worked. So I gutted it and wrote it again from scratch. It was the last passage I wrote, and I’m happy with it now.

CL: Writing is so hard—so wonderfully hard—that I am always curious about how each book changes from the last. This is your first historical novel, and I’m wondering what the challenges were for you?

DT: The greatest challenge was finding the voice. During the first year of work on the novel, I did research and looked at art—O’Keeffe’s art, Stieglitz’s photographs of her, the work of other artists in their circle. I took pages of notes. But I couldn’t quite nail the voice. I’d catch glimpses of what I felt the voice would be, but nothing really stuck. During that first year, apart from the catalog of that first show at the Whitney, I stayed away from reading material written in O’Keeffe’s own voice, her letters, even her memoir. Before I allowed myself to do that, I needed to find the voice of the novel, the voice that would tell her story to me. I was not at my desk when it hit me. I was outside with my boys. It was a Sunday afternoon in April, unusually warm. We were down by the river; they had their jeans rolled up and were playing in the water. I was lying in the sun and the words came:

*I no longer love you as I once did, in the dazzling rush of those early days. Time itself was feverish then, our bodies filled with fire . . .*

I remember sitting up suddenly, looking around, and the world was different. Everything was different. I started writing the following day.
CL: You’ve had to inhabit (which you do gorgeously, by the way) Georgia O’Keeffe. Was there ever any moment while you were writing the novel that you felt that you were her, that you were living in her world and coming out of it made you feel discombobulated? Do you still have that feeling, and will you be sad when it fades, or are you already onto something else?

DT: When I am working on a book, I always have the sense that my thoughts and instincts belong more to my primary character than they belong to me. That feeling of a character’s emotionoverlaying mine can last for years, although it usually fades when I’ve finished my last round of substantial edits on a book and I’m hurling myself into a new one.

The central conflict in *Georgia* is one I am still sitting with—it feels very present, very much alive in me—even though I have moved on to my next novel.

CL: Can you talk in more detail about that central conflict, and why it is still with you? Writing a book overtakes us in ways we don’t expect, doesn’t it? What surprised you in the writing?

DT: One hundred years ago, in her late twenties, O’Keeffe had just tapped into her unique artistic voice in a groundbreaking series of abstract charcoals. Stieglitz recognized the striking power in her work. He brought her to New York, and that was the beginning of a legendary artistic collaboration and an intense love affair. Their relationship launched O’Keeffe’s career and reignited Stieglitz’s. She became his mistress and protégé. They became each other’s muse. In 1921, with O’Keeffe’s consent, Stieglitz exhibited his photographs of her—many of them nudes. O’Keeffe became a sensation, their affair a scandal overnight. Stieglitz’s consequent decision to employ the highly eroticized language associated with the photographs to market O’Keeffe’s own paintings two years later worked to great effect in the predominantly male, modernist art world of 1920s New York. But it also precipitated a power struggle in their relationship as O’Keeffe fought to reclaim her image and artistic vision from the explicitly gendered branding of her art. Although O’Keeffe achieved fame and success during those years, her early abstractions were, as she once said, “written down” by men—men who had described her work as uniquely feminine. On the surface, it might have been intended as praise, but it arguably had the opposite effect of diminishing her significance. Like many artists and writers working today, O’Keeffe had no interest in being a great female artist. She wanted her work viewed simply as art. She began to take clear, methodical steps to create a new lens and new language to frame her work and vision as an artist.

Those years O’Keeffe spent with Stieglitz in New York were a kind of crucible for her. Those were the years when her art was first recognized, when she fell in love, craved a child, had her heart broken, became famous, nearly lost what mattered to her most, and resolved never to compromise again. Those were the years when she made sacrifices in her life and key innovations in her art. What continues to strike me is that those years forged her greatness. Not because of what Stieglitz, or anyone else, did for her, or to her, but for how she met and overcame the bias and the challenges she faced; how she went on to shape the direction of her art and career on her own terms. O’Keeffe continued to make bold choices throughout her life. She continued to stay true to the prescient force of her artistic vision.

That makes her story intensely relevant to women and artists today. It will make her story relevant years from now.

At one point later in her life, O’Keeffe questioned who she would have become if she had not gone with Stieglitz to New York—if she had simply continued working on her own, making art in Texas.

We do this, don’t we? We wonder if our lives might have been better, greater, more shining if we had made a different choice. But it is the act of questioning itself that triggers meaningful change. When we sit with our choices, our risks and failures and mistakes — when we consider what we’ve done and left undone, what we’ve not yet been brave enough to try — that’s when we learn, in deep irrefutable ways, who we are, where
we are going, who we’re meant to be. That’s when we discern what we need and what we have, what we love and long for, what drives us, intellectually, emotionally, creatively. Those are the precise turning points where we can cast off habits or belief systems that no longer serve us, and move toward a fuller, more dynamic life.

CL: You have held my hand both in the cyber world and in the real one, through many books, and somehow just knowing that you are out there calms me down and makes me feel centered. I don’t know what I’d do without you and your friendship! So can you talk about the writer relationships in your life and how they sustain you? (And it doesn’t have to be me!)

DT: You began this interview with an admission: that we are friends, and that you met (and loved) my work before you met me. I find this to be one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Internet. Through the Internet and social media, writers have had the opportunity to build webs of support and connection—strong relationships with other writers and with readers. Writing is solitary but there’s a certain amount of discussion among writers, even online – via private messages or posts. I wouldn't call it “camaraderie.” It seems to run deeper than that. Several of these online relationships have become friendships I treasure. We support one another. We swap anecdotes about the challenges and exhilarations of a working creative life. We share insights into the process of building a strong story and exchange tips on how to navigate the current state of publishing and the larger culture of books and reading that continues to change. Good work is born out of solitude, dedication, and a fierce imagination. A strong community supports that work. You may say I make you feel more centered and calm. I could in turn cite the number of times that you, Caroline, have talked me down from the skinny branches or hauled me back into the boat. In my acknowledgments for Georgia, I thank you and a few other writer friends, along with my family, my agent, my editor, and my incredible Random House team. I also thank a number of scholars—women I have never met—whose written work and theories on O’Keeffe, her art, and relationship with Stieglitz guided me in my creative journey with this story. In a similar way, writers I love—Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Anne Carson, Edna O’Brien, Michael Ondaatje, Yasunari Kawabata—are writers I’ll always return to. Writing and reading are solitary endeavors. They are also keenly relational. The intimacy between a writer and a reader is singular, and irreplaceable.
Music—along with poetry—is a vital part of my creative process. As I work on a novel, I will find myself reading and re-reading certain poems.

I will gravitate toward certain songs. Sometimes, I will make a playlist and listen to those songs over and over—when I am driving or folding the laundry, when I am out for a walk or sometimes even while I am working—because there is something about those particular songs that will kick open the sense and spirit of a scene in my story.

Throughout their relationship, O’Keeffe and Stieglitz shared a love of music, some jazz, but mostly classical music. Below is a short list of music they listened to during the years they were together. When O’Keeffe was an older woman, living alone, she would often ask her assistants to sit with her as a record played.”

- Beethoven First
- Beethoven Second
- Beethoven Sonatas
- Beethoven’s Violin Concerto
- The Flying Dutchman Overture (Munch’s version)
- Mozart Quintet
- Mozart Quartet in G
- Stravinsky
- Bach
- Rachmaninoff (Symphony in E Minor, No. 2)

One fall, when O’Keeffe was alone at Lake George, she wrote to Stieglitz, who was in New York, and told him that she had played all of the Stravinksy in the house, and the day after she played all the Mozart, and then all the Schubert.

“And so it goes,” she wrote.
1. Georgia O’Keeffe is a woman many people know of, but her life as a young woman in New York is a chapter that is less well known. How did your understanding of O’Keeffe and her art change as you were reading *Georgia*?

2. O’Keeffe was a groundbreaking female artist at a time when the art world was dominated by men. O’Keeffe had to navigate this world—of male artists, male critics, and gallery owners—to build a successful career without sacrificing her unique artistic vision and her sense of herself as a woman. Discuss some of the challenges O’Keeffe faces in *Georgia*. Discuss how those challenges as well as the risks she took—as a woman and as an artist—feel relevant to women today.

3. Think about O’Keeffe’s childhood. Do you feel that the lessons she learned growing up shaped her early relationship with Stieglitz and the choices she would make later? Although O’Keeffe’s mother died from tuberculosis a year before O’Keeffe traveled to New York to see her first show at 291, O’Keeffe is haunted by her mother, and by the choices that her mother made. Why were these choices significant, and what was their impact on O’Keeffe?

4. O’Keeffe’s passion for the landscape is a powerful engine for her art. At one point, early in the novel, O’Keeffe thinks to herself that Stieglitz and his faith in her art are “like that open space, vast like these plains, this night, vast enough it seems sometimes to hold me.” Do you agree with this? In what ways is this perception true when O’Keeffe first meets Stieglitz, and in what ways does it change as she matures? Do you feel her experience is one common to women as they evolve and change in the course of their lives?

5. In the opening chapter of the book, O’Keeffe contends: “This is not a love story. If it were, we would have the same story. But he has his, and I have mine.” What do you think O’Keeffe means when she says this? In what ways is *Georgia* a love story? How does O’Keeffe’s understanding of the word love change in the course of the novel?
6. When their relationship was going through a challenging time, O’Keeffe wrote to Stieglitz from New Mexico: “There is a bond—that is my feeling for you—it is deeper than anything you can do to me.” What are your first impressions of this statement? Do these words reflect Georgia’s strength and self-awareness? Her commitment to Stieglitz? Or do they reflect something else? How do these words interface with Georgia’s struggle to balance her own needs with the demands of her relationship? How do these words play out in the course of the story?

7. Discuss O’Keeffe’s breakdown. Why do you think she falls apart?

8. Discuss what it means to O’Keeffe when she feels she is unable to paint, and when she thinks: “This isn’t just him, and what he’s done to me. It’s what I’ve let him do.” Do you agree? Do you believe that every relationship—no matter how passionate or spiritual—is a kind of transaction?

9. Desire is a powerful force for O’Keeffe—artistic desire; desire for place, connection, and solitude; desire between two people. How does O’Keeffe’s relationship to desire change? What does her exchange with Toomer toward the end of the book say about what she has learned? Discuss the ways in which love and desire overlap and diverge. Which is more vital to O’Keeffe? Which do you believe is more vital in your own life?

10. Georgia’s relationship with Stieglitz was complex and controversial—it was a source of artistic growth for both artists, but it was also restricting. Discuss the dynamics in the relationship. Do they remind you of relationships in your own life—either relationships you have observed or relationships you have experienced? How have those relationships impacted your life? What have you learned from them?

11. Reflect on O’Keeffe’s relationships with other women in the novel. What did those relationships mean to her? How did those relationships differ from her various relationships with men—including Stieglitz, Strand, Steichen, Rosenfeld, and others?

12. In the final sections of the novel, O’Keeffe becomes the legendary artist we know. What sacrifices does she make as a result? Do you feel these were sacrifices she had to make in order to live and work on her own terms? Do you think those choices are unique to her? In what ways do you feel they are common choices that all women face?

13. If you could have one O’Keeffe painting in your home, which one would it be? Before reading this novel, would you have chosen a different O’Keeffe painting? How has your understanding of O’Keeffe and her art changed as a result of reading Georgia?

14. What do you think it means to be an icon? What did it mean to O’Keeffe during the time she was with Stieglitz? How did her identity and portrayal as an American icon change over the course of her life?

15. O’Keeffe is known for being fiercely independent, and she is often seen as a “foremother of the feminist movement.” O’Keeffe herself, however, publicly eschewed any “–ism,” including feminism. Consider the gender dynamics in Georgia. Do you feel it was the politics of O’Keeffe’s relationship with Stieglitz, her upbringing and the hardship of her young adult life, or her unique creative vision that shaped her resolute unwillingness to be associated with any movement, artistic or otherwise? Why do you feel that was so important to her? Discuss.