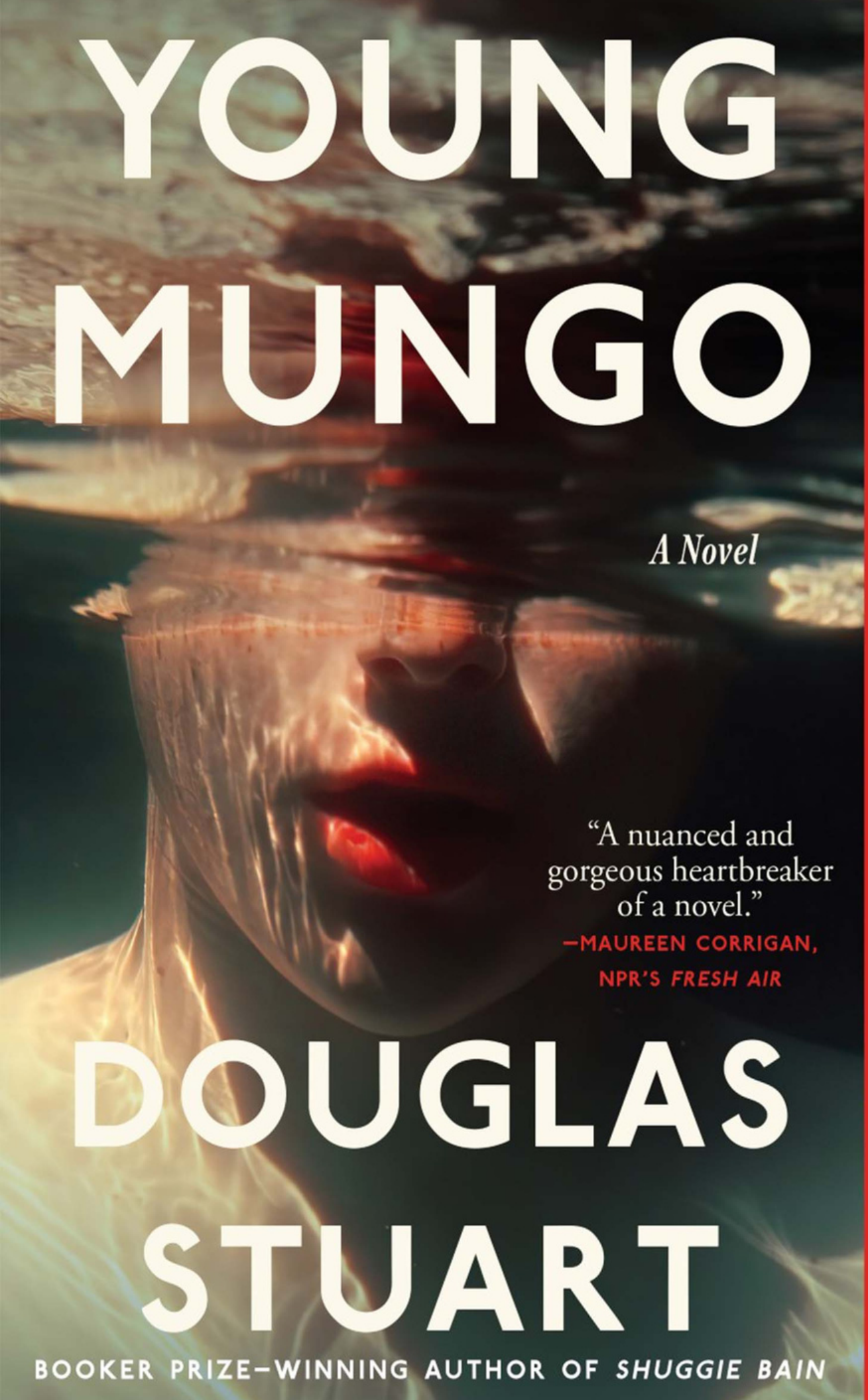

BOOK CLUB KIT - NATIONAL BESTSELLER

A NOTE FROM DOUGLAS STUART

I began writing this book in 2016, two years before my debut, *Shuggie Bain*, had even found a publisher. This is the tale of Mungo and James, and of a love between two young working-class men who have been raised to hate one another. Set beneath the same moody skies of *Shuggie*—in a housing estate in Glasgow in the early nineties—this is a story that explores the impact of class, religion, gender, and violence on the lives of two tender young souls. Mungo and James are separated by the sectarian divides and the prevailing codes of religion and masculinity that dominate their housing estate. As the men try to find a place where they can be safe, a place where they belong, the threat of discovery is real and the consequences unspeakable. Theirs is a story of violence and the hatred wielded by those who cannot recognize the unfamiliar.

I cannot thank you enough for taking such good care of Shuggie and Agnes, and I'm so excited to share the story of Mungo and James with you now. I hope that their love touches you just as much as Shuggie's did and that you might even see yourself in these pages.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel takes place on two distinct time lines, and the painful connection between the two eventually becomes clear. How did you experience the repeated shifts between these two settings—Mungo, Gallowgate, and St Christopher at the loch, and Mungo, James, and the Hamilton family in Glasgow? How did you interpret the overlapping of the novel's two basic genres: a thriller tinged with violent horror and a queer romance?

2. The author communicates a great deal about the characters through their physical idiosyncrasies: Jodie with her "*Haaah-ha*" and Mungo with his facial tics and compulsive picking, as well as the body language of other characters toward him. Yet Mungo so often misses the meaning in other people's words. To what degree do you think a queer boy's survival in a homophobic atmosphere depends on his ability to read body language over spoken word? Does Mungo's ability to find love also depend on it? Don't we all have nervous behaviors and tics that reveal things about us?

3. The characters Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, made famous by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, speak to the presence of good and evil in all of us, indeed to the drive to distance ourselves from our dark sides by naming them—by making them—"other." At age eight, Jodie conjures the name Tattie-bogle for Mo-Maw's dark side. Does naming our dark sides help rob them of power? Is there a point—as in *Jekyll and Hyde*—when this coping mechanism loses its power? If that point comes for Tattie-bogle, when?

4. As a queer young man in a tough Glaswegian scheme with a baked-in allegiance to a violent brother, Mungo has no safe means to express himself and nobody he can trust. He is ever the glaring outsider. How do you think that plays into his decision to band together with Hamish in the brawl with the Catholics that even Jodie insists he join? What about his risky acquaintance with Chickie Calhoun, whom the boys of the scheme consider "sub-human, sub-them" (p. 140)?

5 Mungo, Jodie, and Hamish are each hyperaware of the limitations that poverty puts upon their lives, and they each make choices according to these limitations. Yet as the novel unfolds, Mungo in particular sees other possible lives for himself as he is exposed to the world beyond his specific housing scheme and to the many layers of Glasgow, a city with immense beauty and diversity. How does his understanding of his family's poverty affect how he sees and experiences the city where he lives? Have you had similar experiences of limitation regarding your own hometown or region?

6 When Mungo visits James's flat the first time, he notices a collection of palm leaves twisted into crucifixes on the dining room wall and startles at the revelation that James is a Catholic—the Capulet to Mungo's Montague, with James's Catholicism yet another obstacle to their becoming friends, let alone lovers. When the electricity between them shifts to Mungo quietly comforting James in his grief that first night, how did you read it?

7 "Fifteen years [Mungo] had lived and breathed in Scotland, and he had never seen a glen, a loch, a forest, or a ruined castle . . . how could he stay on the scheme and not try to go beyond it?" (p. 155). Mungo's initial rapture in the country is contagious, but after everything that happens to him, do you think he will ever be able to recapture this sense of wonder and beauty?

8 The day Mr Campbell assaults Mrs Campbell, Jodie is eager to rebuke Mr Campbell for his abuse over a sore football loss. Yet Annie refuses her interpretation: "Ye're too wee to know anything about men and their anger" (p. 167). Is there something about the years of experience and breadth of compassion that Mrs Campbell brings to her situation that rings true? Have you ever tried to explain a morally wrong but complex situation to someone younger or more naive and faced a similar reaction? Have you excused inexcusable behavior out of compassion for someone you love?

9 Consider James and his doocot, and how the two might resemble one another, whether in strength, solitariness, or hidden yet compartmentalized beauty. The indigenous Glaswegian sport of doo fleein' is also distinctly masculine in many ways, although it also relies on elements of caretaking and tenderness. How does the doocot represent certain aspects of James and his relationship with Mungo?

10 When Mungo tells Jodie that Mr Gillespie has run away, "Jodie felt the floor tilt underneath her. Like a gable end slated for demolition, the front facade of her fell away and the private contents of her life rolled out" (p. 189). Here, the author conjures the ruins of a natural disaster or bombing—a dwelling shorn of its exterior walls and the combined shame of both peering inside and of being exposed. How did you react to the unraveling of Jodie's seemingly unshakable belief in herself?

11 Hamish gets the occasional bold redemption scene in Young Mungo, such as when he brains the cop with a brick at the builder's yard to save Mungo and when he stands in for Mungo at the end of the novel, or when he pays off Mo-Maw's Provvie loans with the money he makes selling drugs to the unsuspecting "freshers" at Glasgow University. Do these moments go far enough to convey a softer side of him?

12 Poor-Wee-Chickie turns out to be a bit of an unsung hero and muse to Mungo. What are your favorite moments of his? Were you surprised that he challenged Mr Campbell the night he assaulted Annie? How did you interpret the gift of slate for James's doocot roof? How did your impression of Chickie evolve as we discovered more about him?

13 The rain, the dreich, the smirr, all manner of damp conditions saturate the narrative in Young Mungo, and the soddenness of Glasgow underpins almost every scene. If this story took place somewhere sunny and dry, would it feel the same? Would it be the same?

14 Stuart weaves the stories and legends of saints throughout Young Mungo, first with Mungo himself, and later with St Christopher. Saint Mungo is the much beloved founder of Glasgow, whose motto "Let Glasgow Flourish" is written on the city's coat of arms. His miracles are memorialized into a poem:

Here is the tree that never grew,
Here is the bird that never flew,
Here is the fish that never swam,
Here is the bell that never rang.

Meanwhile, the original legend of Saint Christopher states that he was devoted to transporting the weak and poor across a river. Once, he was carrying a child that became increasingly heavy. The child then revealed that he was Christ and thus the saint was bearing the weight of the world. How do these legends shed light on or complicate St Christopher's fate at the hands of Mungo, whose bearing throughout the novel might even be said to be Christlike? Where else do you see inspiration from stories of the saints within the novel?

15 Mungo's physical relationship with James develops almost painfully slowly—every gesture "furtive and fleeting." When finally Mungo kisses James on the lips, "It was like hot buttered toast when you were starving. It was that good" (p. 228). Likewise, biking back to their housing scheme, Mungo allows his thumbs to creep under James's sweater, brushing his skin: "It was a nothing that felt like an everything" (p. 236). Is it a relief when they finally come together? Or are you gripped with fear for them? What's your "nothing that felt like an everything"?

16 How did you feel when Jodie didn't support Mungo after he came out to her? Did your feelings change when you discovered she'd reached out to James while Mungo was at the loch? Have you ever recovered from a negative knee-jerk reaction to something that was considered taboo, then come to understand it differently and regard it with more compassion?

17 Mo-Maw is a vexing character from beginning to end in Young Mungo. Like Mungo, we hold out hope that she will soften, grow, and do the right thing. In reading the book, did you eventually come to think of her as unforgivable, as Jodie did? Or like Mungo, with his seemingly bottomless capacity to love, did you believe she might become the kind of mother he longed for? What unique challenges does Maureen face as a single mother in a male-dominated world whose traditional social constructs have fallen apart?

18 Consider the end of the novel. Hamish steps in for Mungo with the polis, and while it seems clear to them that he is not the right brother, they quietly acquiesce. Do you think justice is being served? Is this Hamish's moment of reckoning? Do you think James and Mungo end up together?