



# BOOK CLUB KIT

"Tarkington's understanding of the human heart and mind is deep, wise, and uncommonly empathetic."  
—PAULA McLAIN, author of *When the Stars Go Dark*

# THE FORTUNATE ONES

A NOVEL



# ED TARKINGTON

author of *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*



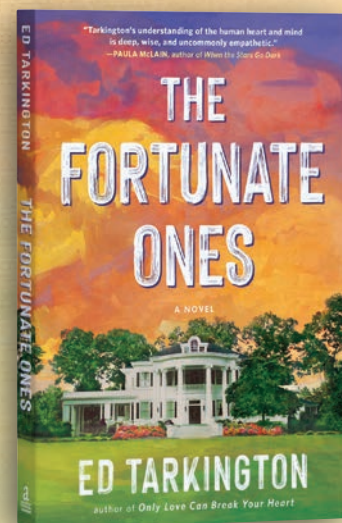
# THE FORTUNATE ONES BY ED TARKINGTON

## Questions for Discussion

### WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST ED TARKINGTON AT YOUR BOOK CLUB?

Ed is available for free virtual author visits for groups of eight or more, for up to thirty minutes. To arrange a session with your book club, bookstore, or library, please contact the author at [ed.tarkington@gmail.com](mailto:ed.tarkington@gmail.com) for details.

1. How does the prologue of *The Fortunate Ones* establish Charlie's character? What is the effect of having Charlie learn the news of Arch's suicide while delivering notice of a soldier's death to his parents?
2. Discuss the parallels between Bonnie and Vanessa, particularly in regard to the choices they made when they became pregnant as teenagers.
3. Charlie, Arch, and Terrence all grow up without fathers. What might we infer about the absence of fathers in terms of these characters' personalities and motivations?
4. Near the end of Part One, Dean Varnadoe cites a Latin aphorism: "Truth is hidden, but nothing is more beautiful than the truth." Why do you think he says this? What do these words mean to Charlie, and how does their meaning bear out in the second half of the novel?
5. Discuss the novel's love triangle. What makes the characters love each other? Is their love sincere? Selfish? Self-destructive?
6. Discuss the issue of Archer's sexuality. Why do you think he marries Vanessa? How might Arch's life choices have been different had he not chosen to enter politics? What if he had not grown up in a culture built around heteronormative codes of masculinity?
7. Discuss Charlie's conflicted relationship with his mother. How do you feel about Bonnie as a mother? Is she a bad mother to Charlie, or does Charlie overlook or misunderstand the love she has for him? What does Bonnie do right?
8. Jim plays a significant role in the lives of Charlie, Archer, and Vanessa. How does Jim's background shape his character? How do Charlie's, Archer's, and Vanessa's respective understandings of him shape their actions and choices?
9. Discuss the role of class in *The Fortunate Ones* and which characters might be described as lower class, "old money," and "new money." What is your definition of "class"? What does the novel suggest about the relationship between wealth and privilege?
10. At Yeatman, Charlie has two influential teachers, Walker Varnadoe and Teddy Whitten. How do these teachers shape Charlie? What qualities or characteristics do they embody?
11. Why do you think Teddy was fired from Yeatman? Do you think Charlie neglected to ask her, that he chose not to say, or that he believed the reason should be understood?
12. Compare the world of San Miguel de Allende to the world from which Charlie has fled. Aside from climate, in what ways are these places different? Why does Charlie choose to return to Nashville?
13. Discuss the role of race in *The Fortunate Ones*, particularly in regard to Charlie's relationships with Terrence and Arch. Is Charlie a racist, an opportunist, or both?
14. At the midpoint of the novel, Charlie observes, "We can no more choose to put away the past than we can cease to breathe and go on living." Near the novel's conclusion, Jim tells Charlie that "the past is as good as it's going to get." Are these ideas contradictory? In what ways might both statements be true?
15. When Arch enters politics, Charlie observes, "There is nothing in this world to which people connect more willingly in uncertain times than the appearance of genuine certainty. If there was one true thing that could be said about Arch, it was this: he seemed so sure of himself that people couldn't help but believe in him." How does this observation resonate in our current sociopolitical climate?
16. When Charlie challenges Arch's decision to run a negative campaign, Arch replies, "I can't do any good for people if I don't win." Do you think this is a valid rationale for moral compromise in politics? At what point do Arch's negative or dishonest tactics cease to be acceptable? How do you feel about the idea of a "necessary evil"?
17. The prologue and epilogue suggest that the story itself is a form of confession to a priest. Discuss the ways in which the influence of organized religion, Christianity in particular, saturates the novel's subtext. Is religious faith ultimately a negative or positive force in the lives of the characters?





# THE PERILS OF PRIVILEGE

an essay by

ED TARKINGTON

**IN 2007**, I moved to Nashville to take a job teaching English at Montgomery Bell Academy, a prestigious boys' school with a long history and an alumni database that resembles a who's who of the city's social and economic elite. I'd always been drawn to the idea of a boys' school as depicted in books like *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and *A Separate Peace*, and films like *Dead Poets Society*: idylls of wholesome aspiration and idealism populated with earnest strivers and charismatic teachers. In fact, on the first floor of the building in which I teach is a lecture room named the Dead Poets Society Hall, in honor of the film, which was written by MBA alum Tom Schulman and inspired by his experiences there. I was a high school student myself when I saw that movie. Robin Williams's performance as the unconventional and inspiring John Keating had, in my eyes at least, done for English teachers what Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones had done for archaeologists. I couldn't exactly see myself mounting a desk and demanding to be called "O Captain! My Captain!" But I was smitten by the idea of finding purpose through beauty and preaching the power of poetry to bright and eager students, and I remain so to this day.

But there were, and are, parts of the school's culture and history that give me pause and have cost me sleep. For instance: until recently, outside the school's library stood a statue of Sam Davis, the "Boy Hero of the Confederacy," who attended the Western Military Institute, which closed in 1867 and became absorbed into the newly chartered Montgomery Bell Academy. For many years, Sam Davis has been one of Tennessee's most notorious symbols of the Lost Cause myth. Just this past summer, thanks to the efforts of some of my former students, the school voluntarily removed the statue. It was a decision that to many seemed late in the making but that is representative of the larger cultural challenge we face: separating those parts of our history and tradition worth holding on to from those that contradict our progress toward a fairer, more inclusive future. In this moment of cultural awakening, removing monuments or renaming buildings associated with the more ignoble parts of our history is a small but meaningful gesture. Purging the legacy of what they represent, however, is a more complex problem.



Contradiction and complexity: these are the themes of *The Fortunate Ones*, a story told by Charlie Boykin, a boy from the less affluent side of Nashville who, in the mid-1980s, finds his way to a school much like Montgomery Bell and befriends an extraordinarily gifted and charismatic son of privilege named Archer Creigh. The novel begins in 2012, when Charlie learns that Arch, now a US senator, has committed suicide. We learn how Charlie came to meet Arch and become absorbed into the world of Nashville's upper class, a world defined both by tremendous affluence and the perilous tension between noblesse oblige and entitlement.

Through Charlie, we see both the glamorous allure of wealth and the moral rot that can infect even the most noble of the fortunate ones when they are raised to assume that those who have everything can get away with anything. We see in Arch a person who is not good or bad, but good and bad. We see how beauty and power seduces both those who are near it and those who possess it, and how the confidence that comes along with privilege translates into certainty. As Charlie says, "There is nothing in this world to which people connect more willingly in uncertain times than the appearance of genuine certainty. If there was one true thing that could be said about Arch, it was this: he seemed so sure of himself that people couldn't help but believe in him."

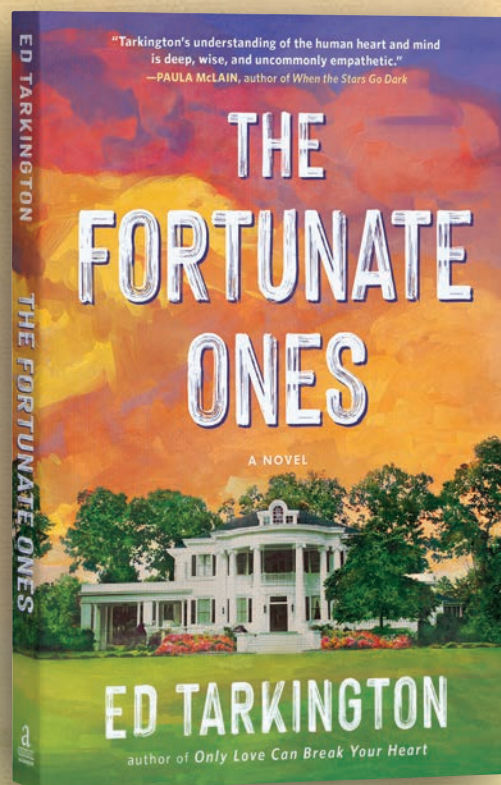
Much of this novel was inspired by my own conflicted relationship with wealth and my status as a person of limited means working in a school that would not exist but for the support of those whose means seem unlimited. I have taught the sons of billionaires, of senators and congressmen and governors and mayors. Some of them are among the most decent, humble, and hardworking kids I've ever known. I've also taught even more remarkable boys who grew up in public housing and attended the school on financial aid. I've seen those boys embraced by the fortunate ones. I've watched them wrestle with the conflict between their gratitude to have been afforded access to opportunity and their understandable insecurity when they first step into a house with an entry hall big enough to swallow their own homes three times over. I've seen some slip seamlessly into that world, and others grow resentful. I've also seen (as so many of us have) how privilege does not always provide happiness, and how unchecked entitlement can sometimes result in corruption and tragedy. Over and over again, I've seen how we are all products of our circumstances, and that we can so often start out with the best intentions and end up very far from where we thought we were headed.

Now more than ever, the world outside of novels is cast in stark shades, free of nuance. People have become so accustomed to one-dimensional portraits



of those with whom they differ or who come from a place unrecognizable to them that we seem to have given up on even trying to understand one another. This is why stories matter. A novel is a mirror we hold up to see ourselves more clearly, to understand the complexity of human character. With *The Fortunate Ones*, I wanted to write a book that shows both sides of our fractured country in three dimensions, so that we can more completely see both ourselves and those whose lives seem vastly different.

But most of all, I wanted to tell a good story. Faulkner once said that “there is nothing worth writing about but love, money, and death.” I took those words seriously when I wrote *The Fortunate Ones*. I hope you enjoy it; my heart is on every page.





# THE FORTUNATE ONES, A PLAYLIST

## BY ED TARKINGTON

[Click here to listen to this playlist on Spotify.](#)

It seems that any playlist accompanying a novel about Nashville—even one that diverges almost entirely from its identity as “Music City”—should consist of music from, well, Nashville. This list, however, may defy type and expectations. Though Nashville is indeed the home of the country music industry, it is not now nor has it ever been solely a country music town. Artists from every imaginable genre have either emerged from or ventured to Nashville to record. Here are some of my favorites, along with some comments about their work and its relevance to *The Fortunate Ones*.

### 1. “Glory/Stranger,” the Fisk Jubilee Singers (from *Celebrating Fisk! The 150th Anniversary Album*)

Perhaps the most important group ever to emerge from Nashville is also its longest-running act. In 1871, to save Fisk University from bankruptcy, school treasurer and music director George L. White organized an a cappella group to go on tour performing the spirituals that form the backbone of gospel music as we know it. The group became an international sensation and continues performing to this day; “Glory/Stranger” is a breathtaking example of why.

### 2. “Every Time I Hear That Song,”

**Brandi Carlile (from *By the Way, I Forgive You*)**

In the last few years, Brandi Carlile has finally received the kind of attention she’s long deserved. Every time I hear “Every Time I Hear That Song,” I stop whatever I’m doing and sing along.

### 3. “Jesus Came to Tennessee,”

**Will Hoge (from *Modern American Protest Music*)**

Will Hoge is the Bruce Springsteen of Nashville. His shows are legendary for their soul and energy. Like Springsteen, Will also tends to have a lot of good-time fans who don’t share his left-leaning politics. But he tells the truth as he sees it and couldn’t care less if you don’t like it (best rock ‘n’ roll T-shirt ever: “Will Hoge vs. All Y’all”).

### 4. “Temporary Ground,”

**Jack White (from *Lazaretto*)**

Jack White came South to Nashville some years ago and continues to influence the scene here, both with his personal brilliance as a writer and performer and with his Third Man Records operation—a combination studio, label office, record store, and “novelties shop” celebrating White’s obsession with all things analog and vintage.

### 5. “Traveling Alone,”

**Jason Isbell (from *Southeastern*)**

Around a decade ago, Jason Isbell got sober and transformed from the bloated enfant terrible guitarist who got kicked out of a band called the Drive-By Truckers for being too rowdy (imagine what that must have been like) into perhaps the most sensitive and among the most admired singer-songwriters in the Americana genre. *Southeastern* is his *Blood on the Tracks*.

### 6. “Boulder to Birmingham,”

**Emmylou Harris (from *Pieces of the Sky*)**

The great Emmylou Harris is the first person I ever saw live in Nashville—for free, in Centennial Park. Not a bad way to start. This song—a lament for her friend and mentor Gram Parsons—is one of my all-time favorites.

### 7. “exile,”

**Taylor Swift (feat. Bon Iver) (from *folklore*)**

Come on, you didn’t think I could give you a list of Nashville tunes without including Tay-Tay, did you? All kidding aside, I’m a fan. Her Covid quarantine recordings are fantastic. My favorite track is this one, with Bon Iver.

### 8. “Suspiro Azul,” the Mavericks (from *En Español*)

I have long considered Raul Malo to be perhaps the most underrated singer in country and Americana music. Since an important part of *The Fortunate Ones* takes place in Mexico, I thought it fitting to



include a track from the Mavericks' acclaimed new Spanish-language album, *En Español*, honoring the Latin heritage of Malo and guitarist Eddie Perez.

### 9. "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,"

**Kitty Wells (single, on multiple compilations)**

I spent my first decade in Nashville living in the Inglewood neighborhood, less than a mile from the great Kitty Wells. I often passed by her home while jogging. Though she had not performed for many years (she died in 2012 at the age of 92), her vintage tour bus was still parked in the driveway. When I imagined the character of Sunny Brown in *The Fortunate Ones*, I heard the voice of Ms. Wells singing her signature tune, which in 1952 was the first song by a solo female performer to reach #1 on the country charts, inspiring the likes of Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton.

### 10. "Seven Bridges Road,"

**Dolly Parton (from *Little Sparrow*)**

Did I mention Dolly Parton? I love Dolly (who doesn't, especially these days?! My favorites of her songs are the ones that show her roots in Appalachian music, like this show-stopping bluegrass cover of Steve Young's "Seven Bridges Road," made famous by the Eagles.

### 11. "Wayfaring Stranger,"

**Rhiannon Giddens (from *There Is No Other*)**

At a crucial moment in *The Fortunate Ones*, Sunny Brown performs the old-time music traditional "Wayfaring Stranger," popularized by Burl Ives, Glen Campbell, and, later, Emmylou Harris and Johnny Cash. Afterwards, Sunny discusses how the song has been performed both in country and gospel styles. This version, by the incomparable Rhiannon Giddens, straddles the two genres effortlessly, to haunting effect.

### 12. "Graceland,"

**Justin Townes Earle (from *Kids in the Street*)**

The first performer I saw in the Ryman Auditorium, aka "the Mother Church of Country Music," was Justin Townes Earle, who grew up in Nashville in circumstances similar to Charlie's, and who lost his battle with addiction this past year,

alone in an apartment not far from where much of *The Fortunate Ones* is set. He pretty much blew my mind. Early drafts of *The Fortunate Ones* included a scene in which Charlie and Vanessa visit Memphis and pass by Graceland. Though I ended up cutting the scene, its sentiment remains, and I feel it every time I hear JT's cover of the Paul Simon classic.

### 13. "Everything Is Free,"

**Gillian Welch (from *Time [The Revelator]*)**

Like everyone else who is old enough to remember it, I can recall every detail of September 11, 2001. Among my recollections is the voice of Gillian Welch and the tones of her and collaborator David Rawlings' guitars on *Time (The Revelator)*, released just over a month before that fateful day, and which was the soundtrack through which I processed the grief and fear and confusion I experienced in those strange hours. This song captures well the sense of shock and disorientation felt by Charlie in *The Fortunate Ones* when his story reaches that day.

### 14. "Pueblo Waltz,"

**Townes Van Zandt (from *Flyin' Shoes*)**

For me, the archetype of the black-sheep, self-destructive, beautiful loon who just can't get it right always takes the shape of the doomed Texan troubadour Townes Van Zandt (namesake of Justin Townes Earle, whose father, Steve Earle, and Van Zandt were close friends and mutual enablers in their addiction to heroin). I saw Townes play in a small club near the end of his life; the show was memorable mostly as a cautionary tale. Townes and Steve were famously mentored (along with the great Rodney Crowell) by Guy Clark. Townes lived with Clark and his wife, Susanna, on and off in the early 70s in East Nashville, not far from where Charlie grows up in *The Fortunate Ones*. Apparently, this was a bit of a love triangle, perhaps not unlike Charlie's with Arch and Vanessa. Guy and Susanna are mentioned in this "pretty little song," as Townes liked to introduce it.

### 15. "Mercy Now," Mary Gauthier (from *Mercy Now*)

In imagining Charlie's time in the army, I thought a lot about Mary Gauthier's recent collaboration



with Iraq War veterans on *Rifles & Rosary Beads*. That's a brilliant record, but the song that sticks in my head is an older one, 2005's "Mercy Now." Couldn't we all use a little mercy now?

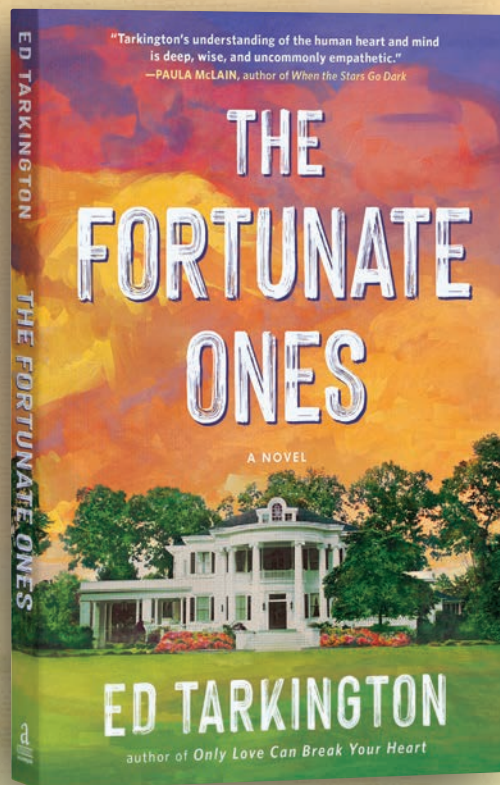
**16. "I Remember Everything," John Prine (single)**

Perhaps the biggest casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic for Nashville was the loss of the great John Prine. I am so grateful to have been able to take my children to see John perform at the legendary Ryman Auditorium in what I believe was his last time on that stage, as part of a fundraiser for Thistle Farms, an organization founded by Becca Stevens, the chaplain at my church, St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel. Thistle Farms serves women who have been victims of addiction, sex trafficking, and domestic violence by giving them a safe place to live while in recovery and the opportunity to make a living manufacturing healing and beauty products. John Prine changed so many lives with his music and his example of fearless independence, and he used his talent and influence to change the lives of many women survivors by

helping to raise roughly two million dollars over ten years for Thistle Farms (please visit their store and/or donate if you can: <https://thistlefarms.org/>). "I Remember Everything" is the last song John wrote and recorded before succumbing to symptoms of Covid-19 in April 2020.

**17. "Life Is Beautiful," Keb' Mo' (from *Suitcase*)**

Kevin "Keb' Mo'" Moore became famous (by Americana standards) for reviving the Delta blues style. In his early days onstage, dressed in suit and tie and porkpie hat, rail-thin, playing "Come on in My Kitchen" on a Gibson Sunburst acoustic guitar, Moore could easily have been mistaken for Robert Johnson, but for his baritone singing voice (Johnson was a tenor). For some years now, Moore has been a neighbor of a good friend of mine, the essayist Wayne Christeson, out in lovely Leiper's Fork, where Charlie lives briefly with his mother and stepfather in *The Fortunate Ones*. As Kevin reminds us, we must remember that, in the end, despite everything, life is beautiful.

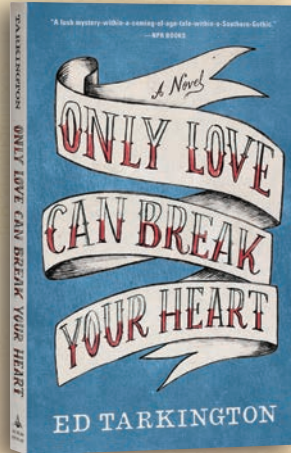




ALSO BY ED TARKINGTON

## ONLY LOVE CAN BREAK YOUR HEART

Available in Paperback, E-book, and Audiobook



**“A lush mystery-within-a-coming-of-age-tale-within-a-Southern-Gothic . . . Interesting, readable, and beautifully written.” —NPR Books**

**W**elcome to Spencerville, Virginia, 1977. A time when teenagers roamed wild and free. And when eight-year-old Rocky still worshipped his older brother, Paul—sixteen and full of rebel cool—who was happy to have his younger brother as his sidekick, until one day things went terribly wrong and Paul disappeared.

Seven years later, Rocky, now a teenager himself, must reckon with the past after a mysterious double murder brings terror and suspicion to their small town, and to their broken family.

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