

## LAST BEST CHANCE

BROOKE DUNNELL

### ABOUT THE BOOK

With her biological clock emphatically ticking, Rachel embarks on a clandestine mission to a fertility clinic in Central Europe. Meanwhile, in the chilly heart of the nation's capital, expat Jess loves her new life with Viktor, despite their struggle to make ends meet.

When a green-energy expo comes to the overlooked city, Jess seizes the moment to ignite her journalism career and the chance to bring her career goals to fruition, but Rachel fears that the heightened scrutiny might jeopardise her last chance to become a mother. When the two women meet, they discover that each has something the other needs.

Exploring the intersections of love, fertility and climate change, *Last Best Chance* is an honest portrayal of difficult life choices and the complexity of human relationships.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Dunnell is a writer, mentor and workshop facilitator, and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Western Australia. Her first novel, *The Glass House*, won the 2021 Fogarty Literary Award. Her short fiction has been widely published, including in the short story collection *Female(s) and Dogs*, which was a finalist for the 2020 Carmel Bird Digital Literary Award and shortlisted for the 2021 Woollahra Digital Literary Award. She lives in Boorloo (Perth).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Rachel want to have a baby?
2. To what extent do you think her fertility quest gains a momentum that seems impossible to halt?
3. Do you think Rachel gains more or less clarity on her quest as she undertakes this last, best chance?
4. What are Jess's reasons for *not* wanting to have children?
5. Do you think some of the differences between the two women may be a result of their age? Are there other factors? Do they have different visions of the future?
6. What do you think of Viktor's pragmatism in his dealings with Cassandra Caspie?
7. What is the connection between the grandfathers of Viktor and Caspie? What are the consequences of the different life choices they made?
8. Why do the 'nannas' in Jess's English class want to leave the city during the expo?
9. How do Boris's and Viktor's stance on the green energy industry differ?
10. Why is Jess surprised at Lena's willingness to sell her eggs?
11. Why is Cassandra Caspie such an enigma? Do you think a man in her position would be regarded differently?
12. Why does Rachel initially shy away from Gabby?
13. Why do Ana and her mother help Rachel navigate the 'politics' of the clinic?
14. After Jess and Rachel discuss the issue of Rachel's 'absent husband', Jess says to Rachel 'let me look into it, okay?' (p.231). Given Jess doesn't have a relationship with the clinic, why does Rachel think she can help her?
15. Why do you think the author has ended the novel where she does – both for Jess's story and for Rachel's?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***What was the inspiration behind Last Best Chance?***

The idea of writing a story about a woman undergoing fertility treatment overseas had been on my mind ever since I came across online forums where women, mostly from the United States, travelled to Prague or Brno for more affordable IVF. It occurred to me that an IVF cycle follows the same arc as a conventional narrative, with the tension rising as patients come closer to finding out if they've achieved a pregnancy. Having also been to various cities in Central and Eastern Europe, I was keen on using this setting to explore the effects of a patient being far from home, unable to speak the local language and confused as to the customs of the place where they're undergoing such a massive life experience.

I originally wrote the story as a novella that just followed the character undergoing fertility treatment, but that version was more conceptual and the stakes weren't as high as they are in *Last Best Chance*. Later it occurred to me to expand the story by adding a second protagonist who's also a foreigner, but otherwise has little in common with the original character. Rachel's concerns while she's overseas are necessarily quite limited, so adding another expat, Jess, allowed me to widen my view.

### ***You delve into complicated issues – such as fertility, greenwashing and the divisiveness of mining under the guise of environmentalism in poorer countries. How did you decide to connect these particular subjects into one story?***

The process came about quite organically. Once I'd imagined the type of treatment program Rachel would be offered, with all the bells and whistles, it made sense that this country would have quite a low cost of living to make it attractive to patients from wealthier countries. This premise led me to think about a range of issues like economic disparity, living donors, and what makes a parent—biology, nurture, intention...?

In terms of developing the plot, I wanted there to be a complication that would put Rachel's treatment at risk, and that the expat character Jess could get involved in, thus bringing the two together. Climate-based events like the Paris Agreement and COP26 have become massive news stories, drawing a lot of visitors and attention to the host cities, so I decided to have something similar take place right when Rachel is undergoing her cycle.

From the beginning, I wanted this novel to have an uncertain quality, with characters who can never quite find their feet in a foreign environment. For Rachel, this plays out in the way her treatment is constantly threatened for reasons she can't understand. Jess, on the other hand, is better equipped to deal with the idiosyncrasies of her new country, but only to a point: She can't navigate the deep complexities that Viktor, Lena and the others know so well. Over the course of the climate expo, her beliefs about her adopted home country, her relationship and her own values are all shaken. I didn't want there to be any straightforward right or wrong answers, as Jess naively expects, which is why the attempts to address the climate crisis and save the future are shown as having their own dark undersides.

### ***Why did you decide to set the story in a fictional but non-specific Central European city?***

My goal was for the setting to feel strange but familiar. I wanted readers to have trouble identifying just where the story takes place; every time you feel you have a handle on it, it slips away. If the novel was set in an actual country or city, then reality would need to underpin the culture, language, history, geography and architecture detailed in the book. I'd have to do justice to a real location filled with real people, and this would crowd out the issues I wanted to explore.

Additionally, depicting an unnamed country and city allowed me to combine different elements to suit my own purposes. The proposed riverside development of one city inspired the Penthouse apartment tower, for example, while the story behind how it was built came from another city's economic history. At the same time, I was able to invent features that would reinforce the unreal effect I wanted, such as the inconsistent street addresses in the Old Town and the changing signage on the highway from the airport.

Most importantly, I wanted the political and practical aspects of the city to function in a way that would add to the novel's conflict. Things like the 'don't ask, don't tell' nature of Rachel's treatment and the society's endless need for debate and performance instead of action are there to serve the narrative rather than offer a critique of a real place.

### ***What's next for Brooke Dunnell?***

Having written two novels, I'm keen to keep going. When I was younger, the term 'novelist' excited me even more than 'author' or 'writer' (though they're great, too!), so I want to be able to stay in this category if I can. On saying that, my current project is fairly slow to get off the ground. I have to remind myself to enjoy the process because I'm so lucky to be in a position where I can talk about one recently published novel while I'm coming up with something new.

In the meantime, I'm enjoying reading and assessing fellow writers' manuscripts, judging writing competitions and presenting workshops both to adults and young writers, including as part of the 2021 Fogarty Literary Award. If I'm not writing my own stories, I'm reading, discussing or dissecting those of others! It's pretty amazing.