As a teenager at the prestigious Bradley School, Ani FaNelli endured a shocking, public humiliation that left her desperate to reinvent herself. Now, with a glamorous job, expensive wardrobe, and handsome blue blood fiancé, she’s *this close* to living the perfect life she’s worked so hard to achieve.

But Ani has a secret.

There’s something else buried in her past that still haunts her, something private and painful that threatens to bubble to the surface and ruin everything.

With a singular voice and twists you won’t see coming, *Luckiest Girl Alive* explores the unbearable pressure that so many women feel to “have it all” and introduces a heroine whose sharp edges and cutthroat ambition have been protecting a scandalous truth, and a heart that’s bigger than it first appears.

The question remains: will breaking her silence destroy all that she has worked for — or, will it, at long last, set Ani free?
TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ani tells the reader “I’m no plucky heroine.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Did your opinion of Ani change as you learned more about her past? If so, why?

2. During the course of the book, the way that Ani is identified changes. At varying times, she is TifAni FaNelli, Tif, Finny, and Ani Harrison. What do these names indicate about her and how she relates to herself and others?

3. Why do you think Ani agrees to participate in the documentary about the Five? What was her role in the tragedy? How has it shaped her as an adult?

4. When describing Arthur for the documentary, Ani remembers how “he was the only one who stood up for me when a lot of people turned on me.” Why is it so important that she shares something positive about him? Discuss Ani’s friendship with Arthur. Why do you think he defended her? What was your first impression of Arthur? Did your feelings about him change? If so, why?

5. Ani says the word “fiancé” does not “bother me so much as the one that came after it. Husband. That word laced the corset tighter, crushing organs, sending panic into my throat with the bright beat of a distress signal.” Discuss why it is so important to Ani to be married before the documentary airs. Do you think, as Ani does, that her engagement ring is a symbol of status and legitimacy? What compromises, if any, must Ani make for the sake of her engagement? Do you think the compromises are worth it? Explain your answer.

6. What were your initial impressions of Dina FaNelli? After learning what happened to Ani at Dean’s party, Dina “told me I was not the daughter she raised.” What values did Dina impart? Do you think she was a good mother? Why or why not?

7. During Ani’s junior year of high school, she takes a trip to New York City with her classmates. How is this trip a watershed moment for her? Contrast the reality of her life in New York City with the vision of her future that she had then. Has she achieved the success she dreamed of? How does Ani measure success? Does this change by the novel’s conclusion? In what ways?

8. Although Ani initially distrusts the documentary director, Aaron, she begins to think of him as “kind, rather than leering.” What causes Ani to change her mind? Do you think Aaron has her best interests at heart? Ani’s burgeoning trust of Aaron ultimately leads her to wonder “if that had been the reality all along, and, if it was, what else I’d read wrong.” Many of the characters in this book struggle to distinguish their perceptions from reality. Are there any who are particularly adept at it? If so, who are they? Discuss how they manage to do it.
9. Explain the significance of the title of the book. When Ani is called the “luckiest girl alive,” the phrase is used derisively. Who describes her as such and why? By the conclusion of the book, did you think Ani was lucky? If so, in what way?

10. What do you think led to the tragedy at Bradley? Could it have been prevented, and, if so, how? What role, if any, does Ani play in the tragedy?

11. After Luke meets Ani’s parents, he says “I can’t believe I’m the one who got to save you.” Discuss Luke’s relationship with Ani. Do you think he did save her from her past? Why is he so reluctant to speak with Ani about it? Did you think Luke and Ani were well suited?

12. Discuss the structure of the book. What’s the effect of alternating between Ani’s current life and her freshman year at Bradley? Did learning about Ani’s past help you better understand her current actions? Did your feelings about Ani change as you learned more about her? If so, how?

13. Ani tells Andrew Larson that she is wary of participating in the documentary because “I don’t know what the bent is. I know what the editing process can do.” Are Ani’s reservations justified? Many of the characters edit their versions of events, often to fit self-serving narratives. When Ani is interviewed by Dr. Anita Perkins, Ani “had to guide everyone in my direction with swift surety, otherwise they would dig, dig, dig.” What effect does Ani’s distortion of the truth have on her life and the lives of those around her? Are there other characters who are lying by omission? Who are they and what are their motivations?

14. Why is Ani desperate to be friends with Hilary and Olivia. What sacrifices is she willing to make to keep their friendship? Contrast Ani’s friendship with Hilary and Olivia with her friendship with Nell. Do you think that Nell is a good friend? In what ways?
A CONVERSATION WITH JESSICA KNOLL

1. How much did your own experiences as an editor at Cosmopolitan influence the story in Luckiest Girl Alive?

The magazine world is a lot like Ani in that it appears one way – cutthroat and a little superficial – but there’s a lot more going on beneath the surface than meets the eye. If you can get through those doors, and prove yourself, you’re granted access to this secret club of awesome, supportive, smart, talented, and ambitious women (and the odd man!). Books, TV, and film have long had a fascination with glossy life, but I sometimes feel as though their depiction is very one-dimensional. Like any job, Ani’s is not all sunshine and roses, but it was very important to me that Ani’s work be a source of strength and pride for her, as mine has been for me.

2. The novel seamlessly moves between past and present. Was this always your plan? Or did this evolve during the writing process?

The oscillation happened naturally. It was incredibly gratifying to write the scene that revealed the story’s biggest twist, which takes place in Ani’s past, and it just so happened to perfectly dovetail with a moment in Ani’s present. Admittedly, I took a few stabs at this story, and at Ani, before I really found my footing. But once that happened, the story poured out of me in the exact order as it appears in the book. After I wrote the first chapter, there was no question that the next would have to delve into Ani’s past, because it explains so much of why Ani is as ruthless and prickly as she is today.

3. There are two particularly chilling and violent episodes in the novel. Were both incidents part of your plan for the novel, or did they develop organically as the Luckiest Girl Alive came together?

They were always planned. The second occurrence, which is really the one that is throwing readers for a loop, was a scene I was always writing toward. The incident is based on a real life crime that had always haunted me, and I researched it extensively in order to fully understand the psychological motivations of those involved. I once read that the best twists are wholly surprising but also make sense, and that the reader should be able to go back and pick up on all the little hints the author dropped along the way. It was really important to me that I understand the psyche of my characters so that I could dole out subtle hints of something more insidious to come.
4. **There are so many powerful personalities in the novel. Are these somewhat terrifying characters inspired by the people you've come across in your own life?**

I once went to a reading with Wally Lamb and he said that every character is like a stained glass window that’s had a baseball bat taken to it. The idea is that you can try to reassemble the window exactly as it was, but the pieces will never perfectly match up. Most of my characters are an amalgam of the people I’ve come across in my life, with little shards of myself woven in as well.

5. **To what extent do you empathise with the pressures Ani places upon herself during her school years?**

Fully! I attended a prestigious high school in a tiny suburb of Philadelphia, and my family, while comfortable financially, certainly didn’t come from storied old Main Line money like so many of my peers. I think when you grow up not really belonging, you are more acutely attuned to all the ways in which you present as “The Other”, and in order to fit in, you have to become a little bit of a hustler. You learn to read people and identify what they need or want from you. Ani understands the different roles different people expect her to play, and she’s a brilliant performer. But you meet her at a point when she is starting to buckle and crack under the pressure of this perfect veneer.

6. **If you had one piece of advice for the younger generation what would it be?**

It. Gets. Better. I can’t emphasise this enough. There were times in high school when I hurt so much I didn’t think I could go on, but there was a small part of me that was always confident that once I was out in the real world, I would make something of myself, and that kept me going. But this promise comes with a caveat, and that is this: It only gets better if you’re willing to work for it to get better. You need to have dreams and goals, and to work hard. Work ethic and pluck are invaluable qualities because no one can take them from you. Your friends can betray you, the love of your life can break your heart, mean commenters on the Internet can attack your appearance, but working hard is something you and you alone control, and if you do that, you will always feel proud of yourself.
7. **Do you empathise with Ani? Or as an author did you remove yourself from such emotions?**

I absolutely empathise with Ani. I couldn’t have written her if I didn’t. Ani is a product of a culture that tells women they aren’t valuable unless they’re thin, pretty, and engaged by a certain age. Ani finally achieves all that and more, and she’s furious to discover that there’s no happiness to be had in such a life. Women are under an enormous amount of pressure to keep up appearances, and the inner workings of Ani’s mind are the equivalent of seeing how the sausage gets made—and it ain’t pretty. To that end, I’ve heard a range of reactions to Ani—from “bitter”, “ruthless”, “cold and calculating”, to “vulnerable”, “brave”, and “good-hearted at her core”. I love this gamut, because it indicates that Ani is flawed, sympathetic, and deeply human, and to me, that’s what makes the best, most compelling characters.
1. *Luckiest Girl Alive* has been compared to *Gone Girl*: Megan Abbot praised Knoll’s writing, saying “With the cunning and verve of Gillian Flynn but with an intensity all its own, Jessica Knoll’s *Luckiest Girl Alive* is a debut you won’t want to miss.” Read both books, then compare and contrast Ani FaNelli and Amy Dunne.

2. Jessica Knoll has worked as a senior editor at *Cosmopolitan*. You can read some of her articles at [http://www.cosmopolitan.com/author/10la00/jessica-knoll/](http://www.cosmopolitan.com/author/10la00/jessica-knoll/). Do you think that job helped her create Ani? If so, how?

3. Ani’s assigned summer reading for Mr. Larson’s English class is *The Catcher in the Rye*. Read that novel with your book club and discuss how Ani and Arthur both react to it. Do you agree with their interpretations? Why or why not? Have your book club discuss if there are any parallels between Ani and Arthur and Holden Caulfield.

4. After the tragedy at Bradley, Dina does not want Ani to watch the news reports about it. Discuss how the media portrays tragedies. Are Knoll’s descriptions accurate? Does the media’s portrayal of the events affect Ani? In what ways?