

Reading Group Guide

SUCH A FUN AGE

KILEY REID



IN BRIEF

A striking and surprising debut novel from an exhilarating new voice, *Such a Fun Age* is a page-turning and big-hearted story about race and privilege, set around a young black babysitter, her well-intentioned employer, and a surprising connection between them that threatens to undo them both.

IN DETAIL

Alix Chamberlain is a woman who gets what she wants and has made a living showing other women how to do the same. So she is shocked when her young black babysitter, Emira Tucker, is accused by a security guard of kidnapping the Chamberlains' toddler at the supermarket one night. A small crowd gathers, a bystander films everything, and Emira is furious and humiliated. Alix resolves to make it right.

But Emira herself is aimless, broke and wary of Alix's desire to help. When the video of Emira unearths someone from Alix's past, both women find themselves on a crash course that will upend everything they think they know about themselves, and each other.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kiley Reid is currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was awarded the Truman Capote Fellowship. Her short stories have been featured and are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*, *December*, *New South* and *Lumina*. Before becoming a writer, she worked as a babysitter for six years.

FURTHER READING

Queenie – Candice Carty Williams

Little Fires Everywhere – Celeste Ng

The Farm – Joanne Ramos

Girl, Woman, Other – Bernardine Evaristo

Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race – Reni Eddo-Lodge

Normal People – Sally Rooney

Ordinary People – Diana Evans

An American Marriage – Tayari Jones

The Sellout – Paul Beatty

'So good! So witty, so apposite to basically EVERYTHING going on right now, so touching and humane, just utterly phenomenal'

Jessie Burton

QUESTIONS

1. “*Emira,*” he said. “*Don’t tell me she makes you wear a uniform.*”
“*Well, she doesn’t make me do anything.*”
What does the novel have to say about the transactional nature of domestic work? Why do you think Emira and Kelley disagree on the significance of the polo shirt?
2. After the revelation at the Thanksgiving dinner, Kelley wants Emira to stop working for Alix. Do you think there was a *right* way for Emira, Kelley and Alix to react to their discovery? Is there always a right way to respond?
3. Over the course of the novel, we learn about events in Alix’s adolescence, including her encounter with Kelley. How does Alix’s adolescence continue to shape her as an adult? Why do you think she changed the spelling of her name from Alex to Alix?
4. Much of the plot is facilitated by technology and the hyper-connected nature of modern society: Emira’s encounter at the supermarket was filmed and could be shared, and Alix is able to leave New York and work remotely. Discuss the effect of modern technology in the novel. Does it cause more problems than it solves?
5. How does Shaunie’s new job effect Emira’s concerns about her own career? Do you think it is fair to say that Emira suffers from a lack of ambition? What other factors are holding her back?
6. Emira continues to work for the Chamberlains through difficult circumstances, largely because of her attachment to Briar. How does their relationship compare to Alix’s relationship with Briar? Why do you think Briar means so much to Emira?
7. Towards the end of the novel, Alix tells Emira: “*We’re so impressed with how you reacted that evening, and so grateful that you came into our lives*”. How does this square with Alix’s treatment of Emira? What, if anything, have Alix and Emira learned from each other?
8. ‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions’. Discuss this proverb in light of Alix’s decision to share the video. Can her good intentions excuse the damage done? Do you believe her intentions really were good?
9. White privilege is a recurrent theme in the novel, especially where it goes unrecognised. Do you think fiction is a useful medium for raising awareness of this issue? In what ways might fiction be more successful than non-fiction at starting these conversations?
10. *Such A Fun Age* tackles very serious themes, and throws its characters into some incredibly stressful moral dilemmas. In light of this, what do you make of the word ‘fun’ in the title?

THOUGHT-STARTER QUOTES

“I’ll call her father and he can come down here. He’s an old white guy so I’m sure everyone will feel better.” (14)

“Okay, that guy was a dick to you. Don’t you wanna get him fired?”
Emira laughed and said, “For what?” She shifted in her heels and put her phone back in her purse.
“So he can go to another grocery store and get some other nine-dollar-an-hour bullshit job? Please.”
(17)

They talked once on the phone before Emira came to the house. And when Alix opened the door and saw Emira for the first time, she found herself once again thinking, *Huh*. (31)

But more than the racial bias, the night at Market Depot came back to her with a nauseating surge and a resounding declaration that hissed, *You don’t have a real job*.
This wouldn’t have happened if you had a real fucking job, Emira told herself on the train ride home, her legs and arms crossed on top of each other. *You wouldn’t leave a party to babysit. You’d have your own health insurance. You wouldn’t be paid in cash. You’d be a real fucking person*. (39)

Two weeks after the night at Market Depot, this envelope felt particularly fat. On the front porch, underneath a flushed sunset, Emira peeked inside the envelope flap to reveal twelve hundred dollars in cash. (58)

At the basketball game, a group of black teens saw Kelley hand Emira her ticket, and one, very much wanting to be heard, said, “That’s a damn shame.” Kelley did a very cute half salute and said, “Okay . . . thank you, sir. Thank you for your service.” (92)

“It’s a legitimate question. Would your parents be mad if you brought home a . . . tall guy?” (92)

Emira had dated one white guy before, and repeatedly hooked up with another during the summer after college. They both loved brining her to parties, and told her she should try wearing her hair naturally. (93)

And suddenly, in a way they hadn’t in the first few interactions, these white men had a lot to say about government-funded housing, minimum wage, and the quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. about moderates, the ones that “people don’t want to hear.” (93)

Kelley Copeland . . . could apparently acknowledge that he was dating a black woman, and that she could appreciate a good story over the need for decorum, but still . . . shouldn’t he have said “the N-word” instead? (93)

Alix fantasised about Emira discovering things about her that shaped what Alix saw as the truest version of herself. Like the fact that one of Alix’s closest friends was also black . . . That Alix had read everything that Toni Morrison had ever written. (139)

Five months ago, Emira watched Mrs. Chamberlain swing her door open to reveal a person she’d created in her head, and *surprise!*, it was someone much darker. Mrs Chamberlain was so graciously

confused at the sight of Emira that she even apologised for herself (“Sorry, hi. You’re so pretty! Come on in”) (162)

Tamra reached over and gently tugged the bottom of Emira’s braid. “So what’s up underneath here, huh? I’m guessing you’re afraid to go natural.” (164)

“Okay . . . that was another mistake. But if it makes a difference I’ve been there twice before, and I wouldn’t have taken you somewhere uncomfortable on purpose.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s the point. You might think it’s comfortable because it’s always been that way for *you*.” (193-4)

“Emira, you’re so smart,” Alix went on, “and I know that you know what you want out of a relationship more than anyone else, and I also know that people can change. I just . . . I wouldn’t feel right not letting you know about my experience with Kelley, especially when I think the same issues may come up in yours” (217)

For possibly the first time, Emira felt truly judged by her friends. She didn’t doubt Kelley because, why should she? Instead, she felt her friends doubted her. And there were plenty of reasons to doubt her – she was terrible with money and she’d never had a real job and her life was stuck in a postcollege mess – but Kelley was different. (243)

As Zara and Emira quietly jumped up and down, Emira suddenly realised that there would be a day, probably quite soon, when Briar would no longer remember her. (275)

But the reference and implication that yes, Emira and Kelley sat around laughing at new-money-trash Alex Murphy, that she was still a person that existed – it felt like the plot twist of a horror movie. (287)

Deep into her thirties, Emira would wrestle with what to take from her time at the Chamberlain house. Some days she carried the sweet relief that Briar would learn to become a self-sufficient person. And some days, Emira would carry the dread that if Briar ever struggled to find herself, she’d probably just hire someone to do it for her. (305)