

# Blame



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Michelle Huneven, Richard Russo once wrote, is "a writer of extraordinary and thrilling talent." That talent explodes with her third book, "Blame," a spellbinding novel of guilt and love, family and shame, sobriety and the lack of it, and the moral ambiguities that ensnare us all. The story: Patsy MacLemoore, a history professor in her late twenties with a brand-new Ph.D. from Berkeley and a wild streak, wakes up in jail--"yet again"--after another epic alcoholic blackout. "Okay, what'd I do?" she asks her lawyer and jailers. "I really don't remember." She adds, jokingly: "Did I kill someone?" In fact, two Jehovah's Witnesses, a mother and daughter, are dead, run over in Patsy's driveway. Patsy, who was driving with a revoked license, will spend the rest of her life--in prison, getting sober, finding a new community (and a husband) in AA--trying to atone for this unpardonable act. Then, decades later, another unimaginable piece of information turns up. For the reader, it is an electrifying moment, a joyous, fall-off-the-couch-with-surprise moment. For Patsy, it is more complicated. Blame must be reapportioned, her life reassessed. What does it mean that her life has been based on wrong assumptions? What can she cleave to? What must be relinquished? When Huneven's first novel, "Round Rock," was published, Valerie Miner, in the "Los Angeles Times Book Review," celebrated Huneven's "moral nerve, sharp wit and uncommon generosity." The same spirit electrifies "Blame." The novel crackles with life--and, like life, can leave you breathless.

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