

AND

A NOVEL

THERE

HE

“Compulsively readable...  
A dark and complex mystery  
that will consume you”  
—JULIE CLARK,  
*New York Times* bestselling author

KEPT

HER

JOSHUA MOEHLING

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Despite a family connection to Sandy Lake, Packard wonders whether the decision to move there was the right one. Why is he conflicted? How does his reasoning about his motivation evolve over the course of the book?
2. Characterize the feud between Gary and Cora. How do they each feel about the other at the beginning of the book? Has anything changed by the end of it?
3. Though they were together for over a year, Packard and Marcus never openly discussed their relationship. Why do you think that is? After Marcus dies, how does Packard feel about the relationship?
4. Why did Emmett kidnap Wanda and the jogger? What did he want from them? Do you think he's being honest about his intentions or his recall of what happened?

5. Describe Packard's relationship with the locals (Gary, Cora, the sheriff, Susan). Do any of them really know him?
6. Emmett is a morally complex character: he somehow manages to play both the role of perpetrator and victim. Did you ever feel sympathy for him? Why or why not?
7. While he's not ashamed of his identity, Packard assumes that his sexuality could complicate his job. How does Shannon's revelation that the whole town already knows he's gay confirm or contradict those assumptions?
8. Emmett and Carl have been begrudging allies for years. Outline their similarities and differences.
9. The bond that Emmett starts to feel for Jenny is a strange one. Describe his feelings. How does his opinion of her change, and why?
10. What do you think happened to Packard's brother?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**Ben Packard was a long time in the making. When did you first develop him as a character, and why did you decide to give him his own series?**

I wrote a novel before *And There He Kept Her* with the same setting of Sandy Lake. Packard was an insignificant character in that book—a deputy another character describes in crude terms as being gay. Why I made the deputy gay when he only appeared on two pages and was in no way central to the plot is still a mystery. That book was good enough to get several agents to read the whole thing, but they all had issues with the plot. I was so tired of the story that I couldn't find a solution to the book's structural problems. I set it aside, but Ben Packard stuck with me. I wanted to know how he ended up in Sandy Lake and what it was like to be a gay man in a small town and in a position of authority. I wrote *And There He Kept Her* to find out.

**Turning the victim of a robbery into a retired serial killer flips the script on readers' expectations of victimhood. What made you think of a twist like that?**

I started with the idea of a man being victimized in his own home and the reasons why he might have to fend for himself. What secrets did he have that he couldn't call the police for help? I started thinking about a killer who had never

been caught, who was old and weak and vulnerable to being preyed upon, just like the women he used to target. There had to be evidence of his past crimes and that's when I imagined the room in the basement, the chains on the wall, and the door with no handle on the inside.

**The landscape of Minnesota and the culture of the small town play a huge role in this story. As a Minnesotan yourself, it seems natural you'd be drawn to the setting. But were there any other reasons you chose Sandy Lake as a backdrop?**

I was an Army brat as a kid. My mom was in the military, and we moved every three or four years with no permanent place that felt like home. My dad, on the other hand, has spent most of his life in the same small South Dakota town (population 1,300) where he grew up. We spent summers there as kids.

I've always been fascinated by life in small towns—the options for creating community, finding love and meaningful work, the reasons why people stay or come back to small towns, and how the things that we need to consider a place *home* change over time.

**Some authors need a regimented writing schedule, while others work best in marathon writing sessions. Can you talk a little bit about your process?**

This is the third novel I've written. There were times when I'd put away the book I was working on and not write for months. Eventually I realized if I ever had hopes of publication I needed to be more diligent. I have a day job, so most of my writing is done in the evenings and on weekends. I'm a slow and steady grinder from the first word to the last, and then a heavy reviser. This book took many, many revisions because I had no plan, no outline, and often couldn't see more than a chapter or two ahead. I don't recommend it.

**Strangely, the reader finds themselves rooting for Emmett when Carl enters the scene. Did you expect this reaction? What were you thinking when you came up with their dynamic?**

The same things that made Emmett vulnerable to being preyed upon by

Jesse and Jenny also weakened him as a villain. At some point, I realized the story needed an even bigger threat than Emmett. Once I introduced Carl, I wanted there to be a dynamic between him and Emmett where the one with the power over the other kept shifting. Adding Carl also changed the dynamic between Emmett and Jenny. At different points in the story, Emmett is a kidnapper, a murderer, an elderly victim, and a protector all in one. I didn't assume readers would feel sympathy for Emmett (he's still a horrible person), but I wanted to challenge their perception of him as the story evolved.

**Sometimes authors must put themselves in the headspace of their characters when they write. Did it feel different writing Packard's perspective versus Emmett's? Did you find one to be more difficult?**

Emmett's headspace sounds like a radio tuned to static. He has very base instincts—eat, drink, smoke—that drive him. In the background is the constant hum of his pain. I needed his actions and the basic need for self-preservation to propel his chapters rather than rely on a lot of internal thoughts to justify his motivations. It was definitely more fun getting to know Packard. He's got a backstory and unresolved issues that will carry into the next book. He's pretty uptight, but I'm hoping he learns how to relax and live a little more as his adventures continue.

**What books are on your bedside table right now?**

I've followed Hanif Abdurraqib on Instagram for a while, read a book of his poems, and just started reading *A Little Devil in America*. My friend Lisa said reading George Saunders's *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* was life-changing, so that's also on deck. She gave me a copy of Haruki Murakami's new collection of short stories, *First Person Singular*, that I will get to sooner than later.

**In thinking about a character like Jesse or Sam, who steals medication from the elderly, or a character like Emmett, who kidnaps women but wants to**

**protect Jenny, it seems like most of these characters aren't *entirely* bad. Can you talk a little bit about the moral ambiguity that comes up in this story?**

All-good or all-bad characters aren't interesting. They can't surprise us when they have only one way of reacting. It helped me as the author to instill them with moral ambiguity by seeing them beyond their primary function in the story. Emmett is a kidnapper, but he was also someone's son, someone's husband. Sam is a small-time drug dealer, but he's also from a wealthy family and the sheriff's grandson. Giving them a backstory and knowing something about the other forces in their lives helped create that push-pull that I hoped would make them multi-dimensional characters.

**Do you have any advice for aspiring authors?**

I'm going to be older than the average debut novelist by the time this book comes out. So what? It takes as long as it takes. After a lot of years working as a project manager, I realized I could manage my writing goals like a project by defining what success looked like, identifying the deliverables I needed to create, and devising a schedule for completing them. I know how contrived that sounds, but it worked for me. When life threw me curves, I adjusted the plan. The important thing was having a strategy for completing what I wanted to do, which was publish a novel.

Even more important than the plan was finding a writing community. The feedback I got from other writers helped keep me motivated and ultimately made this book what it is. Thinking and talking about other people's work helped me see my own writing in a new light. Find a thoughtful reader or another writer whose opinion you respect, and trust them when they tell you what is and isn't working. Keep writing. Keep dreaming. Follow the plan.