

-A Letter from Cate Quinn

Dear Readers,

One of the many reasons I love being a writer is you get to delve into other people's personal lives. A while back, I watched a documentary on polygamy, and I was fascinated by the idea this set up could work. Or... could it? It looked incredibly hard to me, but I was charmed by the open-hearted determination of the participants. It was some time later that the idea of a murder in this set up popped into my head. I just knew it would make a really good premise for a book. I got writing right away, and the words poured out. The dynamic of the three wives—goody-goody Rachel, wild Tina, and young Emily—seemed to appear fully formed with all the comedy and tension of their likely interactions.

In my book, those tensions between the wives drives one of them to kill the husband. One thing that was evident throughout, was how much I loved these women and what they represented. My favorite thing is to write unusual perspectives. If I can make you like someone you wouldn't usually talk to by the end of a book, I count it a huge success. It wasn't deliberate, but the nature of the topic threw up all kinds of moral questions about sex, love, relationships, and religion. What is right and wrong, and who gets to judge?

In the end, it's the reader who decides.

-Cate Quinn



Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of Blake Nelson? Did your opinion change throughout the book?
2. Do you think Rachel, Emily, and Tina are really so different from one another? What similarities do they have?
3. What do you think keeps the three women together after Blake's death? Why don't they go their own separate ways?
4. Because of their polygamy, Rachel, Emily, and Tina struggle to find acceptance. How would you feel in their place, rejected by people both within and without your religious community?
5. What did you think of Emily's outburst at the funeral? What was the final straw for her?
6. On the Homestead, in her marriage, and in her questioning by her lawyer, Rachel gets used to men making decisions about how she should behave. How does this shape her character?
7. How would you compare Officer Brewer and Detective Carlson? Who would you rather have on your case?
8. What did you make of Rachel's memories/visions?
9. Blake passed his fear of cameras and surveillance along to his wives, even though he wasn't actually being watched. Do you think surveillance is becoming more common? Would Blake's fears be justified?
10. Were you surprised by the identity of the killer? What did you think of her motivation?

An Interview with Cate Quinn

What was your starting point for *Black Widows*? What did you draw on as you developed the story?

The idea just came to me, and with it, all three characters appeared as if by magic. Once it was there, I just couldn't stop writing. It was like a book that couldn't wait to be written. I wrote a lot from Rachel's perspective but always bookmarked by what the other wives might think or feel about the same given moment. There's probably a whole other book edited out; I wrote so much.

Those women felt so real that it felt very natural to draw them out. I also did a lot of research on the LDS faith and, in particular, more fundamental branches.

How does *Black Widows* compare to your other books? Did you have to change your writing process at all?

It's a very different book. The structure is entirely new. Other books I've written have been thrillers with a very linear plot, so this one, which bounced around characters, represented a completely new process for me.

Rachel, Emily, and Tina are all very distinct. Did you have a favorite while you were writing? Which was the most challenging?

I love them all, and I think they're probably subconsciously all parts of my character. I'd probably like to identify with Tina the most, but in real life, I'm more like Rachel. They always felt like archetypes to me though. The homey wife, the adolescent, and the good-time girl. Emily was probably the most challenging in terms of dialect, in that she would fall a little less rural Utah than Rachel but still have her own unique turns of phrase that are quite provincial.

An Interview with Cate Quinn

The story surrounding Blake's death gets more and more complicated as it unravels. How did you keep all the details, motivations, and secrets straight?

Is it complicated? It doesn't feel that way to me! I actually took a couple of strands out to make it clearer. There's so much in that world that's fascinating, it's hard not to use all of it.

The areas around Salt Lake City are well characterized—the differences between the ranch and Waynard's Creek come to mind. What kind of work did you do to familiarize yourself with Utah?

I read a lot of books and watched a lot of YouTube. In particular, I love watching the kind of online clips people make that no one else ever sees. Trips to the grocery store, things like that. It gives you real insight into what people are doing in their daily lives.

How did you research radical religious movements to get *Homestead* right? Was there any interesting information that didn't make it into the final book?

Luckily for me, those kinds of radical religious movements are quite tirelessly reported, so there's plenty of news material and ex-member accounts to draw from. I come from a background of writing historical thrillers, so it felt like a real breeze to be able to access real-life statements and videos at the click of a mouse.

For all its darkness, *Black Widows* ends on a hopeful note. Do you believe in happy endings in real life?

I absolutely do. I think you do your best, be a good person, treat people well, and though the path might be winding and unpredictable, good things will come.

Meet the Characters

The First Wife:

Rachel is a devout Mormon, who was raised on a cult compound called Homestead. Her father was the Prophet in the cult...but the rest of her history is shrouded in secrecy. Could her past be a clue to Blake's murder?

The Second Wife:

Emily, the second wife, is a converted Catholic, estranged from her mother. She's the youngest of the three as she married Blake when she was nineteen. She's known for compulsively lying...but is she telling the truth about Blake's murder?

The Third Wife:

Tina, the most recent addition to the group, has been in and out of rehab for most of her life. She met Blake when he assisted with her therapy group in Las Vegas. Did her checkered past somehow lead to her husband's murder?

The Cult That Inspired the Novel

Would you believe me if I told you, truth is stranger than fiction?

With *Black Widows*, this was certainly the case. When I initially hit upon the concept of the book, I had no idea how implausible my research would be. My aim was to explore three different women with contrasting backgrounds, examining how each was drawn to an extreme, husband-sharing form of Latter-Day Sainthood (Mormonism). Part of the plan was for one of these wives to represent a darker, fundamentalist side of the very broad arc of that faith. So I began looking into that.

Those who follow the news may remember the infamous Yearning for Zion Ranch, raided in back in 2008. It was a big story at the time. Devout women in long, pastel dresses, looking like a throwback to pioneer times, were paraded in front of cameras. The leader, Warren Jeffs, was convicted on many counts, for underage marriage and statutory rape. It was surreal, tragic, and fascinating all at once.

Here's what I learned about the cult in my research:

Everything Was White

I read everything I could on the subject, including a great many victims' accounts, and watched several shakily filmed walk-throughs of the abandoned YFZ Ranch premises—a bizarre community of watchtowers and shared buildings. In my book, these formed my inspirations for Rachel's Homestead upbringing. But trust me, nothing comes close to the strangeness of those places. The size, the squalor, the sheer town-planning involved in keeping a huge and rapidly breeding population quiescent and faithful. I found it, quite simply, unbelievable. There was an obsession with white. White walls, white floors, white veiling, white drapes. "Extra white" concrete was sourced for building, and even small details like fire hydrants were duly painted in a godly hue.

The Cult That Inspired the Novel

Neglect, Violence, and Abuse Raged

Behind the facades, most families lived—packed in nine to the dozen, with rats chewing their hair while they slept. Neglect, violence, and abuse raged. Women ranged around on horses, to collect groceries. Municipal areas were designed to raise people's sights to God—or perhaps, keep them lowered to the true nature of their living conditions.

The Prophet's House Was Spectacular

There was a grand temple to rival that in Salt Lake City, an enormous whiter-than-white amphitheater for "Prophet" Warren Jeffs to preach from. And of course, the prophet's house. A spectacular home of oak and brass. In my book, there was a secret room for the "the prophet" to abuse his harem of girls. In real life, there were many rooms for this purpose. Including a private offshoot from a vestry that housed a grotesquely clinical "marriage bed" complete with plastic sheeting for his "new wives." There were pictures of "the prophet" in every room and in every home of his followers. And every hour on the hour, followers would join hands in prayer to their living saint.

The Social Dynamics Were the Most Peculiar Part

For at least ten years, only a handful of young women escaped, and most were subsequently brought or coaxed back. Most stayed by choice. By the time the cult was raided, there was a second generation, born to it. They literally knew no different.

These were people whose schoolhouse only taught information relevant to their faith, to remaining compliant, to getting to heaven. The only qualifications the women had, were to be mothers. And once they'd started having children, often before they'd even hit seventeen years old, it became impossible to leave. Not least because huge extended families and space to roam free conferred a happy childhood for many.

The Cult That Inspired the Novel

At least by the accounts of those who escaped or left and wrote about it.

Even after the cult was raided and arrests made, members never agreed their prophet was a "bad man" and took his imprisonment as a test of their faith. They continued living in shipping containers in unimaginable poverty, refusing to accept that all their sacrifices to date had been for nothing. These are the communities on which I based Rachel's secret visits to her cousin Marsha.

The Creepy Midwife from the Book Actually Existed

By all accounts, the shadowy Aunt Meg of Rachel's recollections existed (under a different name) in real life. I painted her slightly ambiguous, but factual accounts make her monstrous. This was a woman who witnessed abuse of young girls and then publicly tore apart their character when they tried to bring light to what had happened. A woman who intimidated witnesses brave enough to testify to their abuse at the hands of leader Warren Jeffs. Who enlisted these witnesses' parents to sign statements calling them liars, and attention seekers. The truth is horrific. So bad, that had I written that character based on fact, she would have appeared two-dimensional and improbably villainous.

And the Graveyard Did, Too

Several witness statements from the YFZ Ranch attest that women would secretly bring Aunt Meg babies to "take care of." There was a cemetery of tiny headstones, which still existed when the state fenced off the land. Questions were raised about the identity of the children, and with so much in-breeding, a congenital deformity resulting in serious and awful disability was rife. Members who didn't utilize the services of "Aunt Meg" took their suffering babies as yet another test of faith. You couldn't make it up, right? So, I didn't. In fact I told a kinder version of what the evidence suggested took place. As I reader, I hope you enjoyed my version of the truth.