

"Lise Haines...is an astute  
psychologist, a cool, unsentimental  
investigator of humans."

—RICK MOODY, author of  
*The Ice Storm* and *Hotels of North America*



Book  
of  
Knives

a novel

Lise Haines

# Reading Group Guide

1. How is Nora and Paul's relationship shaped by her recent loss of Takeo? Does that loss change as they commit to each other further?
2. When the bowie knife cuts Nora's leg on the drive to Hidden Lake, she worries that the trip will be about wounds. What themes do you think that incident actually set for the trip? How is it borne out in the other events of the book?
3. What was your first impression of Salish? Why do you think Nora struggles so much to connect with her?
4. When did you notice Paul's attentiveness and care falling away? How does his increasing self-isolation affect him? How does it affect Nora?
5. Compare Paul and Gabe. How do they each cope with the memories that surface at Hidden Lake? How do they reflect their parents?
6. Catherine is the big spiritual presence at Hidden Lake. How does her relationship with Walter parallel Nora and Takeo's?

7. What did you think of Nora's protective impulses towards Lily? Do you think she considers Salish an unfit mother?
8. When Nora finds Salish's paring knife and cleaver, why does she hide them instead of returning them? Do you have a final thought on who was stealing the knives?
9. What draws Paul to Hidden Lake? Why is he interested in staying long-term and running it as a camp again?
10. What is the role of grief in *Book of Knives*? What convinces Nora that "we leave our bodies as the dead leave theirs"?

# A Conversation with the Author

**What was your inspiration for *Book of Knives*? How do you begin writing a new book?**

I was eager to write a ghost story. Each novel begins with an image, a line of dialogue, or a phrase. I don't plot out a book in advance. Sometimes this means I need to move things around later in the process, but it keeps me as excited to learn what will happen as I hope my readers will be.

**The abandoned camp is unnervingly isolated and traps the characters with their grievances against one another. How long do you think you could keep it together in an environment like that?**

I've lived alone during the pandemic, and so far, I've managed to keep it together despite needing a good cry now and then. Like Nora, I'm sure I would place the children first. And I'm sure I would love the quiet beauty and a chance to swim each day. Relationships can make us feel trapped whether we're in a city or isolated in nature. I'll get back to you if Salish or Paul knock at my door.

**Nora describes filmmaking as medicine when things get especially tense. Do you feel the same way about the writing process?**

I feel so many things about writing since I've been at it my entire life. No matter how challenging a novel or story can be, I live for the process. The closest analogy is "runner's high" or "swimmer's high." It's about getting into a rhythm and dropping into another state. Another way to put it is conscious and fluid daydreaming.

**How would you describe the purpose of ghost stories? Do you think of *Book of Knives* as a ghost story?**

I absolutely think of it as a ghost story, and I hope it conveys a good deal more in its reflections. I will leave the question about the purpose to the scholars who read widely in the gothic world. But I do see the relationship between some ghost stories and coming to terms with grief, unless one is writing to terrify as a primary objective, which I was not. I do know, however, that it's a scary read.

**What are your writing routines? Do you have time set aside to write each day or squeeze in work wherever you can?**

I write whenever I'm able. When my daughter was growing up, I learned to start and stop on a dime so that I could focus on her needs and be a good provider. Somehow, the balancing act has worked out, though I wouldn't have turned down a trust fund.

**What are you reading now?**

Mostly student work as I head into the last quarter of my teaching year. There are so many books on my must-read list, including the work of many friends. At the top of my stack is Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle*. I also teach from *The Best American Short Stories* and *Best Debut Short Stories*, which are marvelous collections.