

DARK CURRENTS

A red house with a white roof and several windows is situated on a riverbank. A large, turbulent splash of white water dominates the foreground, partially obscuring the house. The scene is dark, with the red of the house and the white of the water providing high contrast. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

DOUG BURGESS

"ELEGANT PROSE, A VERITABLE CHINESE BOX OF PUZZLES, AND
AUTHENTIC, WELL-ROUNDED CHARACTERS MAKE THIS A STANDOUT."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The paranoid delusions that David's grandmother suffers prevent the police from taking her seriously when she reports finding a body. Is it their responsibility to check every time? Would that make the rest of their work harder?
2. The Laughing Sarahs are a distinctive team. Which woman did you relate to the most?
3. Both Marcus and Alicia Rhinelander are lying about their identities. How did that complicate Marcus's disappearance?
4. David has to repeatedly come out to his grandmother to combat her Alzheimer's. How would you feel in his position? Do you think it ever gets easier?
5. As the plot thickens, David starts to doubt the Laughing Sarahs. Have you ever learned something that cast an old story in a new light? How did you adjust?

6. How did you feel when Constance finally told Teddy's whole story? Did you think the Sarahs did the right thing? Can you imagine what you might have done if you were part of the group?
7. Crystal says that "it's not so easy to keep hating someone you see every day." Do you think she's right?
8. Describe the relationship between David and Billy Dyer. Do you think they can truly stop rehashing the past?
9. David and Billy decide not to report the Sarahs' involvement with Marcus and go as far as helping them finish off the *Calliope*. Discuss whether you think this is the right choice.
10. David struggles with the realization that his grandmother might be dangerous. Why do you think Constance and Sarah defended her? Are they just deeply in the habit of covering for each other?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

David's aunts are an opinionated bunch. Do you have a group like them in your life?

Each of the Laughing Sarahs is a composite character—the gruff, blunt, and surprisingly kind Constance, for example, has elements of everyone from my eighth-grade history teacher to the lady who runs the plant nursery near my parents' house. But I would say that the closest to an actual person is Irene: she has my grandmother's name and much of her sweetness and determined optimism (often in the face of contrary evidence), which is a quality my mother also shares. The actual Laughing Sarahs are a ladies' group at my church. They are all very amused to be caught up in a murder.

It's exciting to see an LGBT lead in a mystery. How did you approach writing David? Were there any particular challenges?

I think there are always challenges when you try to see the world through someone else's eyes. In my case, I was a gay man

trying to imagine what it would be like for a transgender person to return to a place that remembered them differently. Each of us has a moment like that when we come home—especially after a long absence—but obviously the circumstances here are very different. The challenge was in portraying a member of a community who has been tragically misrepresented and misunderstood. I could only do so by being as honest to the character as I could.

David isn't a policeman or any other type of investigator. When you were developing his character, why did you choose to make him a professor?

As an academic myself, I am aware that there comes a kind of inflection point in our careers where we are out of graduate school but not quite landed in a tenure-track position. Some survive; others don't. The "adjunct hell" that David describes is a very real thing. I wanted David to be in a moment of profound flux when he arrived in Little Compton. He is a reluctant and rather diffident investigator—definitely not Hercule Poirot, as he himself says. But historians are trained to make sense of the past, and that is very much what this mystery is about.

You know the Little Compton area well. What is your favorite aspect to write about? Are there any unique challenges to writing a setting you're familiar with?

Little Compton really is a geographical freak: a spit of land that pokes out into the sea and seems cut off from everything else. It has places with names like Quicksand Pond and Dismal Swamp. Most importantly, it is a self-contained community that hasn't changed much in two hundred years, which is a rarity

even among New England towns. Anywhere else this quaint town would long since have been turned into a tourist trap, but Little Compton's isolation saved it. As the setting for a murder, it was completely perfect: a fog-bound village outside of time where almost anything could happen.

Speaking of the town, the book involves a lot of its larger history and the stories of the families who have lived there. Where did you get the inspiration for those stories? Did you do much research into regional history?

The truth is, I carry much of that research around with me. My family has been in Rhode Island since it was founded in 1636. One of my ancestors was Mary Dyer, a devout Quaker who was exiled from Massachusetts, settled in Newport, and later returned to Boston and was hanged for heresy. Rhode Island has always been a haven for heretics, dissidents, criminals, and the like. It has a contrary spirit that survives even now. And there is a wonderful layering of these stories, from the seventeenth-century pirates to Gilded Age robber barons to twentieth-century mobsters, all occupying the same tiny plot of land.

How did you balance the past and the present throughout the book? Did either ever threaten to take over?

There is a moment in the novel where David is standing in his grandmother's house and feels a moment of regret, because the house is exactly as it was even though Maggie herself is changing irrevocably. The past surrounds us always, and reckoning with it is part of what makes us human. For someone suffering from dementia like Maggie, the past is literally threatening to take over all the time. For David, whose future is so uncertain,

the past has always been a comfort. But suddenly that “truth” is ripped away from him.

You had a lot of moving pieces to keep track of in this plot. How did you stay organized? What does your writing process look like?

The idea for this novel began as a short story published in college, then became a short mystery for *Ellery Queen* many years later, and gradually evolved through countless drafts into its present form. The most difficult part of constructing a plot is that you are building a world with an infinite number of cogs and gears—change one, and all the others must be changed in consequence. Every time a new character was introduced, for example, I had to think: How does he or she know all the others? What do they think of one another? I kept remembering that Hank Azaria line in *The Birdcage*: “Good evening! May I take your purse as usual...or for the first time?”

Which character do you relate to the most? How are you similar and different?

David Hazard and I are both academics with similar ancestral histories. I gave him a number of my interests and, I suppose, some of my insecurities. He lives in the same world where I grew up. But his experience in that world could not have been more different. I had loving and supportive parents who accepted my sexuality. My coming-out was understated, to say the least. But having known many transgender people and heard their stories, I realized the process for them wasn’t even comparable. David was born out of the innumerable times when I said to myself, “What if...?”

Who are your favorite authors to read?

Ngaio Marsh, hands-down favorite. She was a contemporary of Agatha Christie and wrote for almost exactly the same span of years, but few remember her today. Christie made clockwork mysteries and put her characters inside them, but Marsh crafted wonderful lifelike characters and wove the mystery out of the interactions between them. Steven Saylor is another favorite: his Roma Sub Rosa mysteries are timeless. Beyond the mystery genre, I love and treasure the works of Glen David Gold, T. C. Boyle, and Somerset Maugham.