

“Hauntingly brilliant virtuoso performance.”

—Emma Healey, author of *Elizabeth Is Missing*

THE
GIRL
FROM
RAWBLOOD

a novel

CATRIONA WARD

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *The Girl from Rawblood* jumps back and forth between many characters and time periods. How did this different method of storytelling affect your journey through the book?
2. How do the females of Rawblood provide a peephole into the struggle of women in England during these time periods, and how do they push against their limitations? Do you encounter similar themes and challenges in today's society?
3. Is there a character in *The Girl from Rawblood* that resonates more strongly with you than others? If so, why?
4. Shakes is a constant presence at Rawblood and seems to have personal connections to the family and the house. Why has he been so loyal, despite the curse?
5. Charles Danforth is clinical and aloof, even when it comes to the welfare of his sister, Meg; yet the experiments on the rabbits were

enough to disturb even him. Was it similarly hard for you to read about such cruelty, and what feelings did it incite?

6. Meg is one of the only characters gifted with sympathetic insight into the dark past of *her*. As you read the horrific consequences of the curse and discover the identity of the ghost, how was it easy or difficult to “forgive” its intentions, as Meg tries to do?
7. Have you ever had a supernatural encounter? What happened, and how did it diminish or expand your beliefs and outlooks?
8. If you had the choice of facing the curse at Rawblood or dying slowly away from Dartmoor, which would you choose and why?
9. The loss of eyesight is a theme that recurs throughout the book, including Meg’s preeclampsia and Don Villarca’s accident. What are some possible interpretations of blindness throughout the story?
10. Tom and Iris never let go of their love and find their way back to each other in the end. How would the story be different had Iris followed her father’s rules?
11. Did you guess the identity of *her* before the end of the book, and if so, what are the clues that led you to your conclusion?
12. Have you ever loved a physical place so much that something inside you felt connected (or trapped) in a way that would always lead you back or tie you down?
13. Where do you think Iris goes at the end? And what do you hope happens to Tom?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for writing *The Girl from Rawblood*?

Writing this novel was an exorcism of sorts, for me.

During my childhood and adolescence, my family moved from the United States to Kenya, to Madagascar, then to Yemen, Morocco, and back to the United States. We returned each summer to a seventeenth-century stone cottage tucked into a valley beneath the swooping heights of Hamel Down on Dartmoor. The house was surrounded by little old oak woodlands, heather, hills. After the tropics, Dartmoor was exotic, with its mists and bogs; a bleak, grand landscape.

The cottage was partly built on the foundations of an older Devon longhouse and partly on some that were even older. There is a dwelling marked on that site in the *Domesday Book*. The walls were solid granite, seven feet thick. The hearth could have comfortably accommodated an ox. In that house, I rarely lasted the length of a night in my own bedroom. My sister awoke, most mornings, to find me curled up on her floor.

I was continually troubled by something in my room. A presence.

It didn't take any recognizable form but was vaguely rhomboid and spun with color. It would hover before my face, red and seething. Occasionally, this presence would shove me out of bed with a firm hand in the small of my back. An overwhelming intent emanated from it. The dark air was alive with its will, a vast sense of purpose—but no indication of what that purpose might be, whether I was a part of it, or an obstacle to it, or irrelevant.

It was a particular kind of terror, which seemed to belong entirely to the night. I've yet to encounter its daylight counterpart. It's all-consuming while you're in the grips of it: neither a rational, intellectual fear nor an instinctive, animal one. It touches the deep roots of the soul.

This went on for six years. I never grew accustomed. Each night, the fear was as paralyzing as the first time. Eventually, we moved house. The presence didn't follow us.

It was a great relief. At that age, one is very plastic and forgets easily. I grew up, and the experience faded until I thought of it rarely, and then not at all. Until one day in my late twenties, I sat down, and I found myself writing about a girl, and a house on a sunlit moor, and something that came in the night... It possessed me, once I had started. The Villarca family had all been waiting in the wings, and they came in fully formed.

Did you grow up reading ghost stories, and if so, which were your favorites? What about ghost stories captured your imagination?

I love ghost stories and always have. You might think my early experiences would have put me off, but it's quite the opposite. Ghost stories and horror give you permission to mine the darker parts of the psyche and explore those places in safety.

The first ghost story I remember reading was "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs. The tale reaches its climax as a mother and father cower away from a pounding at the front door, which they know to be their son, risen from the grave.

I was afraid and suitably thrilled. But most of all, I recognized a mode of storytelling that gave expression to the fear I felt in the night. It is fear that cannot be explicitly described and is more awful for it. *The Girl from Rawblood* owes its heritage to the literature of the uncanny: M. R. James, Charles Dickens, Sheridan Le Fanu, Robert Aickman to Stephen King, Susan Hill, Kelly Link, Hilary Mantel, Shirley Jackson, Jeremy Dyson, and many others.

People often ask me if I believe in ghosts, and even after everything, I am not sure. I think that is the most frightening position to be in. Because a world where ghosts definitely *do* exist is a world where ghosts are normalized. That's not frightening. Nor is a world in which ghosts definitely *don't* exist. But a world where they *might* exist... *might* is terrifying. This is the uncertainty that all uncanny literature wanders through.

Many of the moments and characters are connected in some way, either distantly or intimately. Was it your intention to write a book the reader could put together like a puzzle? Did you map it out beforehand, or did the stories weave themselves together as you wrote?

It was a combination of the two. At first, I thought it was a fairly simple story about a girl and her father. But it spiraled out and out. More characters came in, more connections. I worked out the ending, the reveal of *her*, fairly early on, but how to get there? I planned each section but pretty loosely and mapped it back into the structure of the novel as I went. I was only ever a bare half step ahead of the narrative, really. I don't write much down or make notes when I'm planning. I agree with Stephen King that there's a certain Darwinian process to ideas—if you still have the thought in the morning, then it might be a go. If you've lost it, then perhaps it's for the best.

It was only as I was writing the ending, sending Iris through the rooms of Rawblood, through time and space, that I understood what

the novel had been moving toward, what *The Girl from Rawblood* wanted to be and was really about: family and love. These things light us on our way.

The women of Rawblood are wonderfully strong, but many find themselves tragically at the mercy of their environments. How did these limitations shape the journey, and would Iris's story have been different today?

Quite. The women of this novel—Iris, Mary, Hephzibah, Meg, Lottie—are resourceful and ingenious. They have to be, to negotiate the limitations of the times they live in. The women in *The Girl from Rawblood* are, to varying degrees, politically and socially powerless. Iris's story is, of necessity, the cruelest in the novel. I placed her in the most powerless situation I could contrive.

Perhaps the events of *The Girl from Rawblood* could have been different today. Perhaps Iris would never have been so wronged, so *she* would never have come to exist. I'm not sure. Fanatical belief, torture, and cruelty turn Iris into *her*. We haven't eradicated those evils from our societies by any means.

Or, again, perhaps if all the women of Rawblood had lived in different times, they could have carved out other destinies than marriage or children. They would have obeyed the prohibition, and the Villarca line would have simply ended. But deep down, I suspect that, whatever the age they lived in, Rawblood would have sung all the Villarcas back, somehow, and *she* would have had her way with them.

Dartmoor is so stunningly realized throughout the book that it's almost a character in itself. Do you still have a personal connection to that part of the United Kingdom?

I think I will always feel a connection with it. When I was growing up, wherever my family went in the world, we came back to Dartmoor

every year. It has been the single point of continuity in my life. My parents now live there permanently, and whenever inspiration is elusive, I go and visit. The landscape has made its way into my subconscious, as it has done with many other writers. It's one of Britain's last remaining wild places—but you can also see layers of human history laid out before you, half buried in the grass. The medieval village at Hound Tor, the stone circles at Scorehill, the drowned mineshaft behind Hay Tor, the airman's memorial on Hamel Down. Dartmoor breathes age and history, as well as being achingly beautiful. It's the perfect setting for uncanny happenings, a natural literary home for demonic hounds, ghosts, murder; dark, solitary acts. A fertile breeding ground for the imagination.

What research did you do to add depth to the cold and clinical scientific society of Victorian England?

Medicine is more than a shared interest, more than a profession to Charles and Alonso—it frames all their thoughts and feelings. It is a means of expression between them. So it was really important to get the medicine right in a factual sense, but also for Charles's thoughts to have authority and authenticity. I needed to know how doctors talked to one another. The *British Medical Journal* has digitized its archive from 1850 onward, and that was an invaluable resource in this respect. The letters pages of the *BMJ* became a forum for debate and indignant exchanges... “My dear sir!” You can see that medicine was a discourse of personalities, as well as of science.

The late nineteenth century is such an interesting point of intersection in scientific thought—wildly experimental, and yet retaining some very odd, almost medieval ideas. It's fascinating. W. F. Bynum's *Science and the Practice of Medicine in the Nineteenth Century* is a wonderful introduction to the period. I live in London, which holds extraordinary collections, archives, and resources on the history of medicine in Great

Britain. The Wellcome Collection has a standing exhibition on medical history. The Hunterian Museum is another gem.

Would you risk the curse for the sake of real love? Can you blame any of your characters for trying?

I think one probably would risk it. That's the tragic mechanism at the heart of this novel—death doesn't really hold any reality for us in our everyday lives. It can't, or we'd spend all our time cowering in terror. A scene that I wrote very early on is the incident where Alonso is singing a coin along the rim of a glass. No one in the bar hears the whistling—can't, until it breaks the glass. We don't hear the song of mortality, but it has been there, all along, behind the human babble. The glass always breaks.

I can't blame any of my characters for risking the curse in order to live full, emotional lives. If the head and the heart are at odds, the heart is almost sure to win in the end.

As a debut author, what was the most surprising discovery you found on your journey to becoming published?

I am still adjusting to being a published author. I spent so many long years working on *The Girl from Rawblood* in private, and it still seems unreal that it is now published all over the world. That is probably the most surprising aspect of all this!

One thing I hadn't anticipated was the number of ghost stories that I am told now, wherever I go. Everyone has one, it seems. I am now a walking almanac of hauntings... Oddly, many people preface these stories by telling me they don't believe in ghosts.

What I have really enjoyed is meeting readers, speaking at bookshops and literary festivals. It is unadulterated pleasure—to talk with like-minded people, not just about *The Girl from Rawblood*, but about books and reading.

What piece of advice would you give to aspiring writers?

I spent six years writing *The Girl from Rawblood*, and a lot of that time was spent learning how to write, which you can only do through practice and grievous error. So practice! Find readers who are honest with you and listen to them. It's impossible to judge your own work at times, and you are writing to be read, after all. You can also ignore them sometimes. You will know when.

Read! The best teacher for a novelist is another author's excellent writing. Read as many different genres, periods, and styles as you can. You will develop.

I did a creative writing master's at the University of East Anglia in the UK. The workshops gave me a much-needed forum in which to discuss work, not only my own, but that of others in the group. You learn a lot from that. So while a master's isn't possible or necessarily desirable for everyone, joining a writing group could be an invaluable experience.

Enjoy it. Writing is heartrending and laborious, and it can be very badly paid. But it is also a great pleasure. Building an imagined world until it becomes something you have wandered into, rather than created... It's wonderful. If you really must do it, put everything you have into it, and enjoy.

Besides writing, what else are you passionate about?

My father has worked in the developing world all my life, in Madagascar, the Gaza Strip, Uganda, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, and many other places, often on water scarcity and the problems of social and economic justice that crisis brings with it... My parents are people of great conscience, and they have always tried to instill that in their daughters. During the years I was writing *The Girl from Rawblood*, I was lucky enough to work for the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation in London as a writer and researcher. It was a wonderful experience that taught me a great deal.

I love my family: my mother, father, sister. And my friends. I love horse riding and cold wine on a hot night. I am a feminist.

I was lucky enough to grow up all over the world, surrounded by natural beauty. In Madagascar, we explored coral reefs teeming with life and walked in the rain forest. One of my happiest early memories is of a small island off the coast where the lemurs have russet or black fur and vivid yellow eyes. Because they have no predators on the island, they are fearless and very happy to climb all over you. Their hands are small, velvety, and cool. The landscapes and biodiversity of Madagascar are astonishing. But it is rapidly being destroyed. Already, some of the sights I grew up with have been lost to climate change and deforestation.

If there's one thing you'd like readers to take away from *The Girl from Rawblood*, what would it be?

Some people find *The Girl from Rawblood* to be a sad book. It's surprising to me, because I think it's quite a romantic novel. Whatever trouble and suffering befall the Villarcas, they always live passionately and love strongly. What more can you ask for in life?