

"An astonishingly assured debut...the best book
I've read in a very long time. A triumph!"
—ELIZABETH LETTS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Finding Dorothy*

The Girls *in the* Stilt House



A NOVEL

KELLY MUSTIAN

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. How did you feel about Ada's return to the Natchez Trace? Why do you think she decided to come back? Do you think there were any other choices that she didn't consider?
2. Describe Matilda and Ada's relationship after their first fraught night together. Who is in charge? How are their actions shaped by Virgil's lingering presence?
3. Why do you think Matilda insists that Ada call Gertie "Miss Tuttle"? How would you characterize the relationship between Matilda and Gertie throughout the story?
4. What did you think of Peggy Creedle? Is there a difference between how she treats Matilda and how she treats Ada? How do her whims shape the story?
5. Think about Virgil Morgan and Frank Bowers. Are they

comparable villains? How does social class affect their actions and demands? What did you think of their ultimate ends?

6. Why do you think Matilda withholds so much information from Ada?
7. Teensy always looks for something beautiful in her day, even if she ends up being grateful for something very small. What do you think of that philosophy? How do Matilda's feelings toward the practice evolve throughout the book?
8. Matilda blames herself for losing Dalton and Annis to the fire. How does that guilt motivate her? Do you think she ever forgives herself fully?
9. Describe the events that lead to Ada accepting the housekeeping job from Frank. Can you imagine something similar happening today?
10. By the end of the book, how has the relationship between Ada and Matilda changed since their first meeting?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your first inspiration for *The Girls in the Stilt House*? Did you start with a particular character or scene?

One image that was in my head before the story or the characters took shape was of the cracked and buckled tomb overtaken by woods that first appears in the prologue. I have long been fascinated with old cemeteries and tombstones, and the idea of hiding a body in the way that Matilda and Ada did was irresistible from the beginning. Beyond that, I knew there would be themes of loss and struggle, and some grappling with the meanings of family and belonging. And that trees would play an important role. Landscape is often my starting point with a new project.

The landscape surrounding Ada and Matilda takes on a personality of its own, and you grew up in the same part of the state. What was most difficult about setting a novel on the Natchez Trace, especially in a historical period?

The Trace *does* have a personality of its own. Many personalities, really, as it stretches about 440 miles from Natchez, Mississippi, to

Nashville, Tennessee, once connecting Choctaw and Chickasaw lands. Several of my ancestors lived and died on the Trace. That old wilderness pathway and the surrounding landscape were influential aspects of my own coming of age and my early awareness of the displaced and oppressed people to whom the Native American ceremonial mounds, the ornate antebellum mansions, the crumbling river shacks, and the old frontier outposts testify. History haunts the Trace, and it haunted me as a child. It haunts me still.

Although Ada's swamp is not meant to represent any of Mississippi's numerous swamps, it was loosely inspired by a bald cypress/water tupelo swamp at one of the Trace mileposts. A swamp setting seemed to be a perfect metaphor for the juxtaposition of beauty and brutality in 1920s Mississippi. With such an atmospheric backdrop, I did have to rein in my tendency to ignore the forest for love of the trees (literally and figuratively).

The historical period in which this novel is set came with its own difficulties. Research was intense. I did not want to make that period seem more genteel than it was by avoiding dark truths, yet I did not want to overstep in bringing Matilda's story forward. Navigating that line in a respectful and honest way was very important to me.

What kind of research went into Gertie's remedies, recommendations, and overall role in the community? Is there anyone in your life who inspired her?

So much research! The rural midwives of the early twentieth century were astonishing medical practitioners, despite their scant resources. Although Gertie, as the oldest character in the story, did

hold some ideas that some people might view as superstitions, I wanted her nursing practices to have a genuine basis in science and herbal medicine. For instance, there is a scene in which Gertie has Teensy close a fist around a carrot, then tries to pull it out of her hand to test the strength of her grip. This came of my having researched a modern medical study about testing hand-grip strength to screen for preeclampsia, or pregnancy-related hypertension. So while some of Gertie's methods might seem unorthodox, the reasoning behind them was medically sound. There are many excellent resources about midwives in this period. And I went down many research rabbit holes learning about medicinal plants and natural remedies.

As for Gertie, she came entirely from my imagination. I wish there were a Gertie in my life!

When Ada sought Gertie's help in locating Matilda, the midwife turned her away, saying, "She saved your life. Saved your baby, too. Ain't that enough?" What was behind Gertie's response?

In the story, Gertie is a caring and tender soul. Turning away a young mother in need, especially as a midwife, would not have been easy for her. On the porch that day, Gertie was refusing to put Matilda, Stella Mae, and herself at risk to further aid Ada. But behind her words, as well, is an acknowledgment of the many generations of Black women forced into caretaking roles for White families at the expense of their own children and loved ones and their hopes for their own lives. Although it is not mentioned in the story, Gertie, an old woman in 1923, would almost certainly have been born enslaved in Mississippi. She would have been intimately acquainted with the horrors endured by enslaved mothers

and with the domestic roles that were so often the only options for Black women in later years. Providing nursing care to Ada was Gertie's choice, and in that scene on the porch, it was also her choice not to lay responsibility for Ada's well-being on Matilda's shoulders. Ada, I think, comes to understand this by the end of the book.

Did you have a hard time deciding on the “right” endings for Matilda and Ada after everything they had been through, separately and together?

Yes. I wrote several endings before settling in with one that seemed to hit the right note. I wanted a tender, poignant ending rather than a traditionally happy one, an ending that was triumphal and uplifting without minimizing all that stood between Matilda and Ada, both in their relationship, so laced with trauma, and in their world.

What advice do you have for aspiring writers, especially writers trying to wade into historical or regional fiction?

Spend more time reading than writing. Read books by authors who write better than you do, and pay attention. I've attended workshops and writing conferences and done coursework, but the most meaningful and impactful lessons I've learned about writing, by far, have come from reading.

This is your debut novel. What has surprised you most about publishing a book? How does it differ from the other types of publication you've done in the past?

Writing is a solitary endeavor, and as an introvert, I generally

enjoy that. But working with a team of book-loving professionals—my agent, my editor, and everyone at Sourcebooks involved in making this book shine—has been a wonderful experience. As for surprises, I'm guessing that most of those are yet to come.

What books are on your bedside table right now?

Some new, some old, some I set aside until after all work on this novel was finished because I knew they would be all-consuming experiences. Among them are Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive, Again*, and Michael Farris Smith's *Blackwood*. Right now, I'm reading Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*.

Any new projects in the works?

I'm working on a new novel, this one set in both Mississippi and western North Carolina. As usual, the landscape came first. And an image of a small child and a shadowy figure standing on a front porch on a rainy night in the 1930s.