



"An unforgettable debut."

—KRISTY WOODSON HARVEY, bestselling author of *Slightly South of Simple*

# How To Bury Your Brother

A NOVEL

LINDSEY ROGERS COOK

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Describe Alice and Rob's relationship as children. Were they different from typical siblings? In what way?
2. Put yourself in Alice's shoes. If you found a box of unopened letters from a lost loved one, would you deliver them without reading the contents? Would you open the letters first?
3. Rob spent a lot of his adult life secretly looking after Alice, but he never made direct contact with her. Do you think he should have? Why do you think he chose not to reach out, even when they lived in the same city?
4. Rob writes letters to the most important people in his life, either praising or censuring them. If you conducted a similar project, who would you write to and why?
5. Describe Alice's relationship with Maura, her mother. Now compare Alice's relationship with her own children, Caitlin and Robbie. What do these relationship dynamics look like? What are the similarities and differences?

6. After college, Alice finds herself at a crossroads: she must choose between an adventurous life or a safe one. She ultimately picks a predictable route and marries Walker. Why do you think she does this? What would you do?
7. Compare Walker and Jake. They are very different, but in which ways are they similar?
8. Do you think that Jake should have told Alice when he found Rob, or was it better to keep his promise of secrecy?
9. There are quite a few tragic moments in this book. Which one hit you the hardest? Why?
10. Walker isn't a good husband, but he is crushed when he learns that Alice never loved him. Did you feel sympathetic for him during that scene, or did you feel he deserved it? Why do you think he was so blindsided by what happened?
11. After his initial disappearance, Alice's father never tries to find Rob. Why do you think that is?
12. Jake tells Alice that he's willing to wait for her. Do you think that they will ever get back together? Why or why not?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

### **What inspired you to write *How to Bury Your Brother*?**

In 2014, just a month after graduating from the University of Georgia, I had a dream. I saw a woman visiting her parents' house after they passed away, desperate to learn more about her estranged brother. The dream stayed with me, and as I left Georgia's creeks and rivers behind for a move to Washington, DC, I kept returning to this woman, her own past in those rivers and the questions she had about her brother. What did this woman—Alice, who became my main character—want to know? Why was her brother estranged from the family?

A few years earlier, my family had lost a member to opioid addiction and overdose. When someone dies under such circumstances, there are so many questions, chief among them: Why? It's the question that propels Alice throughout the novel, and the one with which I immediately identified. As so many families impacted by the opioid epidemic know, there's no easy answer to that question.

### **The Southern landscape, particularly the outdoors, feels very important in this novel. Why did you choose it as a setting?**

I grew up in Georgia, with a childhood that looked very similar to Alice's—though thankfully, with far less family drama!

Like Alice, I spent many days playing outside with my younger brother, at the creek in our backyard and the woods around our house, which we nicknamed Stick and Snake City.

Setting the story in Georgia, where I grew up and had rarely left previously, was a comfort to me throughout the writing process. As I walked along DC's tourist-clogged streets, listening to the blaring motorcades and marveling at the grand monuments of America's forefathers, I knew Georgia waited for me on my computer. When I felt most homesick, I dove into the forests and rivers of my youth, jumping into the canoe right alongside Alice and Rob.

I also had my best friend, Breanna Crowell, for inspiration. I borrowed her career for Alice in the book. Like Meredith and Alice, we were college roommates, and her missives on water conservation, tales from measuring water foam along Georgia's beaches, and complaints about counting leaf hairs on sunflowers, as Alice does in the book, all served as inspiration to me as I typed the story at the Dupont Circle Starbucks, wishing I was soaking in the sun and salt from Georgia's shores along with her.

### **What was your creative process for this book like?**

I didn't plot the book. I had the dream, with Alice in her parents' house, the funeral scene that kicks off the first chapter, and the final letter to Alice, including the revelation inside. That was it though. I tried not to think too deeply about writing A BOOK when I first started. Instead, I thought I would write until I didn't feel like it anymore. But the story kept coming. And coming.

During my years working on the book, the story changed



drastically. During the first draft, I added and deleted characters as I was writing, changed previous plot points, added or deleted characteristics of the Tate family, all with the goal of writing to the end without editing. When I finished the book and dove into revisions, they were extensive. I would describe it as a painful process! Although I write articles often for journalism, I wasn't used to editing one piece of writing for so long. At times, I had significant parts of the manuscript memorized from reading it so many times.

For my second book, I'm hoping to make things a bit easier on myself by doing more plotting before diving in. Still, though, I find my best ideas come from "flying by the seat of my pants."

**Each letter gives Alice (and the reader) a glimpse into a different chapter of Rob's life. Was there a certain letter you enjoyed writing about the most?**

Since I didn't plot the book, each letter was just as much a surprise to me as it was to Alice. Although we don't see the exact content of Rob's letter to Dylan, that scene was my favorite to write. It's the discovery in that meeting with Dylan, that Rob was in Athens, that really tips Alice's world and shows her that her relationship with her brother wasn't what the perhaps more pessimistic side of her thought. Writing that scene and the secret included in it also showed me that I wanted to keep going, to keep following Alice and see what she would find about Rob.

**This book takes a very realistic stance on grief—you don't avoid confronting the damage inflicted by abuse and loss. Was**

**it a challenge to get yourself in the right headspace to write the more heartrending parts of the story?**

Honestly, no. I tend to feel things very deeply and be empathetic, which is probably true of most writers. I summoned my own experiences with grief throughout my writing of the book and could put myself in Alice's headspace pretty easily. While editing the scene where Alice gets her final letter, I almost always started tearing up right along with her. The challenge bigger than getting in the headspace was getting out of it. I would try to skip around in the manuscript so I wasn't concentrating for long periods of time on the book's saddest sections, and several times, my husband (thankfully) encouraged me to step away from the computer and back into the real world for a few hours.

**A lot of these characters must live with the consequences of their elders' choices. What drew you to the idea of generational trauma?**

In Southern families in particular, I believe the stories you inherit mean more than many other things you may inherit from your family tree. My own family trafficked in stories, and they were the most valuable currency around the dinner table or at family celebrations. After the food had been eaten and the dishes done, everyone would gather over the evening's empty wine bottles to tell stories. Many, the kids heard so many times we could recite them ourselves (those were the favorites), but as we aged, the stories went back further and spanned out more completely, even the tragic ones told in the uniquely Southern tongue-in-cheek way that sneaks laughter into the painful parts.

Real or fake, the stories Alice has heard throughout her life, the

stories the family members have told themselves and one another, have devastating consequences. More so than the trauma, it's those that travel with Alice into the future, even without the storytellers there to tell them.

**What are you working on next?**

I'm working on my next novel, which is slated to come out in summer 2021.