


"A stunning, disturbing thriller that had me gasping for air."

—SAMANTHA DOWNING



THE LAST HOUSEWIFE

a novel

ASHLEY WINSTEAD

AUTHOR OF *IN MY DREAMS I HOLD A KNIFE*

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What do you think of true-crime podcasts? What effect do they have on the investigation and development of real-life cases?
2. Shay is not always sure how to navigate her own beauty. How would you describe her relationship to her appearance? How does society punish women who don't conform to beauty standard but also those who do?
3. Shay references the constant anxiety of being a woman in public. Are you familiar with the feeling? Can you think of anything that would make that fear go away without requiring women to change their behavior?
4. How does Don co-opt the idea of feminism to first introduce his ideas about the roles of men and women to Shay, Clem, and Laurel? Why do you think that tactic is so effective?

5. How do Jamie and Shay differ in their definitions of consent? How would you personally define consent?
6. What is Jamie's primary motivation throughout the book? How would you characterize his relationship with Shay?
7. Nicole argues that loving pain is the only autonomy she can get. Where is she coming from? Would you argue with her?
8. Jamie and Shay almost lose hope when they realize the governor is within the Pater Society's realm of influence. How does their emergency podcast broadcast circumvent this problem? Who can we trust when our highest authorities are corrupt?
9. Shay persists in viewing Laurel as a victim. Do you agree? What do Shay's expectations for Laurel prevent Shay from seeing?
10. Why does Shay decide to take Don's punishment into her own hands? Can you imagine what choice you would make in her position? What will happen to Shay now?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

The concept of beauty carries danger throughout the book, but it doesn't seem to be within Shay's control. Do you think it's possible to truly weaponize beauty? Could Shay accomplish such a thing?

On the one hand, of course beauty holds power. While what's considered beautiful is culturally dependent, being perceived as beautiful tends to be an advantage universally. Look at any number of psychological studies on attractiveness and it's easy to see that those who are considered attractive have innate social advantages. Speaking from within a white Western historical context, beauty has historically mattered more for women, because it's been one of the few advantages at women's disposal. When power is scarce, you'll snap up anything. Think about when women weren't allowed to work or control their own finances, and their fate rested on who they married—in those circumstances, beauty was at least somewhat of a power you could wield to have some measure of control over your life. Of course, you can already see in this example the double-edged sword of beauty: not only its limits compared to other

forms of power (money, positions of influence, etc.), but the fact that it requires a beholder to grant power in the first place. Beauty's power is a precarious and contingent one.

A lot of scholars have written fascinatingly about beauty, so I won't retread territory, but I will say that in modern Western society, even as women accumulate more hard power—jobs, influence, capital—beauty remains something women cling to disproportionately. In one sense, it's natural: we all want to be capable of attracting others. That's nothing to sneer at. But on the larger whole, I wonder if our obsession with beauty is a vestigial instinct, one that shows women haven't made the kinds of gains in hard power we should have, so we still need the assist.

If a beautiful woman is the last person left on earth, does her beauty matter? Maybe in some abstract sense, but pragmatically, no. Beauty is always a two-way street. So who holds the true power: the beautiful person or the person looking? If you've read anything about the male gaze, you're probably yelling *The looker!* But this is the tension Shay struggles with throughout the book, especially in her adolescence. Because she has so little power otherwise—no financial security, little in the way of emotional support, teachers who don't give her brain the same credit they give Jamie's—beauty comes to seem like this incredible boon, the one thing she has. Which is especially complicated given that from the moment Shay hits puberty and starts to get noticed by men, she understands this sort of attention is also dangerous and uncomfortable.

But what else does she have to lean on? She uses her beauty in the pageants to get out of Heller; she uses it in her dalliances with boys and men to bolster her social power. The problem is, as we discussed, it can be hard to discern who's really in charge. Shay misunderstands the power dynamics with Anderson Thomas in high school and with Don in college to great and tragic consequence. While of course Shay has more opportunities than women 150 years ago, in some uncomfortable ways, her life looks similar to the life of the woman I described earlier, whose

beauty afforded her the only measure of control over her life. This is the great irony of the Paters: they're obsessed with returning to the good old days when men "rightfully" held all the hard power and women were reliant on them, but as Nicole points out, for a lot of women, particularly those not born into economic privilege, there's no need to return—life still looks like that.

Why did you decide to include Cal in Shay's life? How did her marriage change the way the story developed?

Cal is the bridge that connects the extraordinary misogyny of the Paters to the ordinary misogyny of everyday life. To back up, he's part of the life Shay's built for herself that she thinks proves she's moved on and put the horrible tragedy of what happened in college behind her. Her job writing for *The Slice*, her nice home, her ability to write full-time, her marriage: these are all markers of success. She's living the life of privilege her mother could only dream of, and she should be happy. But of course Shay's not happy, and all of it, including her marriage, is a shield, a way of saying *Look at me, a normal woman with a normal life; nothing to see here*. It's a long, protracted performance.

The moment the reality of her past crashes into her safe new life with the news of Laurel's death, Shay begins a process of awakening that starts with looking around her house and thinking about her marriage to Cal and realizing it all feels suffocating, though she can't put her finger on why. Throughout the story, as Shay comes to understand herself better and confront what drove her to Don, she starts to see with horror that Don and Cal exist on a spectrum, and in many ways she's only repeated her past in building her life with Cal. With both Don and Cal, Shay is initially drawn to them because they are important men who, if conquered, will prove her power. The fact that this is a fantasy is revealed when both relationships pretty quickly show themselves for what they are: with Don, a tyrant-subject relationship; with

Cal, an imbalanced marriage where he, the husband, holds the hard power. Both men dissemble to justify themselves and keep this status quo: Don through his teachings, Cal through his insistence that what he's doing with their credit cards and acting as Shay's social director are normal and there's no such thing as a power hierarchy between a married couple.

For Shay, just like Don and Cal exist on the same spectrum, so too does the Pater-Daughter relationship and marriage. Once she begins confronting uncomfortable truths and her eyes open, she can't help but feel all the ways being married to Cal is too close to being yoked to Don. I hope when readers encounter Cal they think he's normal and horrible at the same time, because in a sly way I wanted to shine a light on the gendered power dynamics still baked into the institution of heterosexual marriage. While there may not be a lot of Dons out there, I think there are a lot of Cals, and that's almost as upsetting.

Shay has a hard time identifying the feeling of power, because for most of her life it's been blurred into one kind of submission or another. If you had to pick a moment in the book where Shay was most powerful, what would it be?

This may be the obvious answer, but I wrote the scene where she beheads Don as the moment when she is the most untethered by anything she should do and instead does the thing her heart and gut tell her she needs to do to feel safe, at peace, and like she has achieved some semblance of justice. Shay doesn't listen to the FBI (authority figures) or Jamie (a person she loves) or the law (what society demands of her) or morality (what she knows people expect from a good person). She chooses herself above it all, come what may. And that action represents both an old definition of power in the sense that it's the power sovereigns have historically wielded—they are the one person above the law and the one entitled to mete out executions—and a personally meaningful

kind of power, as Shay is a woman whose life has always been shaped by other people's power over her.

Is it tragic that Shay believes her only avenue for true freedom and power is through this act of violence? Absolutely. Is she right? I think readers should decide for themselves, but for me, yes. Of course, right or wrong, Shay's power is short-lived. After she kills Don, she's arrested and exists at the mercy of her forthcoming judge and jury, as well as the public. Where once she was performing the story of herself for men, now she performs for a public who holds her fate in their hands. Just like she says to Jamie during one of her interviews, she's always taking one step forward, then two back. But, as Jamie points out, what else can we as human beings do other than try our best again and again, hoping it won't turn out to be a Sisyphean exercise.

Throughout the book, you complicate the definition of *victim*. Why doesn't Shay consider herself a victim, even though she views Laurel within that archetype up to the very end?

Shay has access to her own interiority, her thoughts and feelings, which means she has a damning record of every time she had a complicated reaction: when she *wanted* Don to do to her what others might consider something bad or *wanted* to see violence enacted against Laurel or felt like something Don did to Clem was justified. It's that old adage: examine anyone too closely and you'll find a sinner. Well, Shay has the misfortune of being very self-aware, which means she sees her flaws with great clarity.

For a long time, her agonizing awareness of her own complicity prevents her from feeling like she can be called a victim. But as she works with Jamie to stitch her life story together, she learns to view her decisions and reactions in context, see how things are connected, and that context opens the possibility for empathy for herself. Not only that, but she begins to see that by being radically honest about her thoughts

and feelings, she opens space for other people to have empathy for her as well. For example, Shay's crime of murdering Don sounds unforgivable on paper; the same crime told within the context of her life becomes understandable (or so she hopes, which is why she tells her story through the podcast).

As for Laurel, Shay has always given other people more grace and empathy than she's given herself. I think that's a very human trait, to forgive and understand things in other people that we can't forgive about ourselves. And so she's able to contextualize Laurel's decisions, see the extenuating circumstances, from the beginning. That's what drives her relentless attempts to pull Laurel out of the Pater Society. Shay and Laurel in some respects have opposite arcs: while Shay learns to view herself as more the victim of circumstances, she learns to view Laurel as less so. By the end of the book, I think Shay has let go of the idea that Laurel is a victim. *And yet* she still believes she's worth saving.

While some readers might look at Shay's refusal to give up on Laurel as naive or the result of Shay's savior complex (and they might be right!), I also see it as an outgrowth of the fact that Shay believes she knows the real Laurel, that Shay understands that sometimes life puts us in the position to make bad choices that then become life- and identity-defining, and given all of that, she cannot abandon her friend. To do so would condemn Laurel to harm or death. And when it comes to Laurel, Shay simply will not abandon empathy. A provocative question is why Shay can forgive Laurel's evils but not Don's? That question may seem obvious or even offensive, but there's been a lot of work in the justice reform world around radical forgiveness as a form of healing, and some argue forgiveness—even of people who have committed the very worst crimes—is more powerful than the kind of retribution Shay shows Don. The concept of justice continues to fascinate me because there are no easy answers.

The story of Scheherazade is a resonant frame for *The Last Housewife*. What attracted you to that myth? How does Shay differ from Scheherazade?

As readers might know, the story of Scheherazade is a frame narrative for *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of stories whose origins can be traced to India and Iran. The gender dynamics of the Scheherazade story are stark: It begins with a king whose ego has been wrecked by his unfaithful wife, and so he has her beheaded. Then, in a long, protracted revenge against women writ large (so it seems), he continues to wed a new bride every day and has her beheaded the following dawn. One by one, the kingdom empties of women until Scheherazade, whose father is in the king's service as the executioner, steps in and volunteers to be the next bride. In some versions of the story, her sister aids her, but in all versions, Scheherazade essentially compels the king into sparing her life anew each night by hooking him with an unfinished story. This is obviously supposed to demonstrate both the power of stories and Scheherazade's cleverness. But it's always struck me that her victory—after one thousand and one nights, the king comes to love her and makes her his permanent bride—is such a horrible one. A life sentence, married to a misogynist murderer.

The myth of Scheherazade the storyteller has taken up a lot of my mental real estate over the years. I find it so powerful and gutting, the idea of having to tell a story every night with your life on the line. In a way, it's what we all do. We live and die by the stories we tell about who we are, who our families are, what kind of community or country we live in, how the world is supposed to work. In the myth, Scheherazade is presented as a very clever woman who always seems to be one step ahead, but I envision this storytelling as frantic, constant, feverish work. I liken it to the work of weaving yourself together, the burden of having to keep yourself cohesive and legible.

The myth seems such an obvious parallel to not only individual

identity construction but the contortions women have historically had to perform to be acceptable to men. To be intriguing and endlessly alluring but never threatening. There are so many stories that have been told—and that women have participated in telling—about what defines womanhood, what comes naturally to women. And this very need for constant storytelling, this feverish stitching together, this performance, reveals the fact that at its center is empty air. There is nothing that defines a woman, just like there's nothing that defines a man—"essential" gender truths are in reality arbitrary stories repeated over time until they've concretized. The more I thought about Scheherazade, the more I became obsessed with the idea of a different ending: Scheherazade not just tricking the king into marrying her, but taking a more radical—if more violent—freedom and power for herself.

Don twists feminist principles to his own advantage as he courts Shay, Clem, and Laurel. How did their upbringings make this possible?

What makes Don good at being a cult leader is that he can ferret out people's vulnerabilities and use them to manipulate people into doing what he wants. And so he's able to home in on each of the girls' needs, fears, and desires and hooks them in tailored ways. For Laurel, who grieves the loss of her father specifically and a parental authority figure more broadly (her mom abandons this role as a consequence of her own grief), Don offers himself as a father figure. He gives her comfort and attention, but also acts as the disciplinarian, playing on her trauma and fears about the world, and especially her guilt, offering her punishments in exchange for redemption. He also understands Laurel feels inadequate compared to Shay and Clem, and so by giving her a leg up and preferential treatment, he makes her indebted to him.

With Clem, he attacks her autonomy and iconoclastic instincts—the very things that make her a powerful force of resistance to him in the

beginning—by twisting them into flaws. He plays on Clem's pain over being so different from her family growing up, and her residual fear of being ostracized, to manipulate and bully her into submission. For Shay, Don uses the fact that she's high on her own beauty and influence, her own sense of power, to make her think she's in control of their relationship, that he's in thrall to her. And by the time he pulls back the curtain to show it's the opposite, that he's been pulling the strings the whole time, it's too late. Shay's already done things she can't take back, and he's already wedged himself into her brain. But of course Don couldn't have even gotten that far if he hadn't been so successful in the beginning, luring them in by exploiting tensions within feminism over what makes good and bad feminists. Ironically, attending a progressive school like Whitney, where they were taught to think about such things, made them primed to be hooked.

Which character surprised you the most as you wrote *The Last Housewife*?

Two characters: Nicole and Don. Don ended up being cleverer and more in tune with current conversations than I originally imagined him. When I started writing Don, I envisioned this man who exulted in antiquated worldviews and mannerisms and social dynamics. But as I started to write him, I discovered how clever he actually was, the ways he and his Paters could twist contemporary feminism and debates over ideology and community—concerns about alienation and rising rates of depression and identity politics and safety and new forms of “us vs. them” debates—to their advantage. And of course this is what so many skilled cult leaders are able to do: they meet people where they're at.

Nicole surprised me by how sharp-tongued she is, and how funny—in essence, how self-aware. It took me several rewrites to really understand that what keeps her attached to the Paters isn't that she's brainwashed or not seeing clearly but actually that she sees all too well. Because of the

experiences she's had being taken advantage of and mistreated in every aspect of her life—from family to religion to romantic relationships and on—she's jaded. She sees through the layers of bullshit coating everyday life and polite society and decides “normal life” is so similar to life with the Paters that she might as well try her hand with them. She thinks at least the Paters are honest and there's some possibility of elevating her position, creating the kind of comfortable, cared-for life she doesn't believe she could have access to otherwise.

Your stories are deliciously chilling. Do you ever scare yourself when you write? Would readers be surprised by the parts that scare you most?

This is the first book I've ever scared myself writing! I don't often get spooked writing scary scenes—creepy chases or even murders—because my mind is so wrapped up in orchestrating the mechanics. When I scare myself, it's usually in more existential moments: when a line about the way the world works just appears from my subconscious, or when I think of just the right way to take a character's darkness to another level. I'll write it in a flow state, then step back, look at it, and think, *Wow, that is dark*. And then I'll get the chills. Maybe what I'm really scared of is myself.