WHAT WAITS FOR YOU

A NOVEL

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Jarsdel isn't very popular with his coworkers in Hollywood. Do you think this comes from jealousy or something else? Why?

2. One of the reasons Jarsdel tries to classify the killer is to "demystify" him and make him less frightening. Can you think of anything you were afraid of until you learned more about it?

3. Early in the book, reporters call for the Eastside Creeper to be "deleted," saying "we don't need to understand it, and we don't need to reason with it. We just need to get rid of it." Should we classify killers as "inhuman" and refuse to understand their motives? What problems could this type of thinking cause?

4. Jarsdel is asked what one thing he would change to improve the world. How would you answer that question?

5. Did you agree with Jarsdel's decision to avoid filing a report on the car door incident?

6.   Varma says that both ugliness and beauty are contagious. How is this demonstrated throughout the book? Can you think of any examples from your own life?

7.   Father Ruben Duong protests Varma's crime deterrent measures, such as PuraLux and the ReliaBench, saying, "Treat a man like a criminal and he behaves as criminals do." Do you think Varma's measures would make you feel like a criminal? Would that change your behavior?

8.   Jarsdel barely gets to work with Oscar Morales in this book. Do you think his process suffers? How?

9.   Jarsdel seriously questions his own motivations for leaving academia. Do you think he was originally looking for an ego boost? Did you think he might leave the police force?

10.   What do you make of Ed Sponholz? How does he compare to the Creeper?

A CONVERSATION
WITH THE AUTHOR

You discuss weapons in great specificity. How do you research them and choose the ones that make the most sense for the book?

Law enforcement agencies publish lists of firearms their officers are approved to carry, so much of that information is public. You can also search in reverse—looking up the gun manufacturer and seeing which agencies contract with them. If I have a specific scenario I'm unsure about, I'll always ask a technical consultant.

What kinds of resources did you use to learn about behavioral science? Was there anything interesting that you learned but couldn't include in the book?

This is a subject that has always captivated me. In my parallel life as a magician, its understanding is a matter of practical importance, as flashy effects and clever methods carry no substance without some grasp of behavioral science. A few gifted practitioners have dedicated their careers to maximizing the impact of performance through applied psychology, and those whose ideas have influenced me the most have been Juan Tamariz, Derren Brown, Pop Haydn, Eugene Berger, Richard Osterlind, and Kenton Knepper. Their work

is so beautiful and mystifying as to practically blur the line between reality and true wizardry, and the world would be a less wondrous place without them.

Many of Alisha Varma's ideas are perversions of principles illustrated by Prof. Don Norman in his extraordinary book, *The Design of Everyday Things*. Also crucial to my understanding of affordances was *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, by Prof. James J. Gibson. One of my academic heroes is professor and polymath Michael D. C. Drout. His lecture, "A Way with Words: Writing, Rhetoric, and the Art of Persuasion," stands as one of the greatest contributions to the relationship between language and behavior.

There was definitely a lot I had to leave out, lest it go from seasoning to becoming the main course. For example, magician John Szeles (aka The Amazing Johnathan) gives a terrific example of a technique we can call "framing." You ask someone what's the proper way to pronounce the capital of Kentucky—is it *LOOEY-ville* or *LEWIS-ville*? If they're like most folks (particularly non-Kentuckians, of course), they'll probably say, "LOOEY-ville." The correct answer, however, is Frankfort. By creating a false dichotomy, the question is framed in such a way as to guide the response.

If you find this sort of thing interesting, or you simply want to be less susceptible to bad logic, cognitive biases, and other neurological glitches, you might enjoy the following: *Your Deceptive Mind: A Scientific Guide to Critical Thinking Skills* by Steven Novella, *The Like Switch* by Jack Schafer and Marvin Karlins, *Thinking Fast & Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* by Leonard Mlodinow, *Sleights of Mind* by Stephen Macknik & Susana Martinez-Conde, and *Understanding the Mysteries of Human Behavior* by Mark Leary.

Do you find it difficult to write characters like the Eastside Creeper, who kill with such brutality? How do you work with those characters?

The first house I grew up in was on Waverly Drive, just down the street from where the Manson Family killed Leno and Rosemary La Bianca. It happened a dozen years before I was born, but it made an impression on me when I eventually found out about it—that something so dark and terrible could swoop into your ordinary world, something with motives and desires you could never understand, and that it could destroy you.

I'm not sure to what extent that influenced what I think of as my "terrible fascination," but it's a way of saying that murder has long been a haunting thing for me. I think my readers understand what I mean—that need to see, to try to understand, even in the midst of our fear and dread. And the genre that deals with fear and dread isn't mystery—it's horror.

I've never experienced horror so deeply as when researching material for my books. Some of the crimes you come across don't ever let go of you—so astonishing is their cruelty and depravity, and you can't help but start asking yourself those big questions about life and God and all the rest of it. In *What Waits for You*, I wanted to write a murder mystery that was just as much a horror story, to really explore the fallout of pain and fear and misery following a brutal crime.

In practical terms, the Eastside Creeper is a composite of several killers; some of the more obvious ones—like the Night Stalker, who terrorized LA when I was a little boy—I mention in the book. Others are less well-known. But as to whether or not he was difficult to write? No. And the reason is—apart from that moment Officer Banning sees his silhouette—he isn't actually in the book. You never see his crimes as they're happening, and most of the details I left to the imagination. If you read back, you'll see I was generally unspecific. That wasn't just to avoid sensationalizing the violence; mostly I didn't want to witness those murders in my own head.

That doesn't mean the result is any less easy to read, I imagine, because there's enough in there for readers to do a lot of the work themselves. *Seven* will always be one of my favorite horror films—and

murder mysteries—for the same reason. You're given enough images and information to let your mind go wild. There's an elegance to that approach to horror, a restraint that in the end creates a much more devastating work of art.

L.A. remains an important character in this book, especially in response to Varma's anti-affordances. What parts of the city did you want to come across most vividly?

The star location in this book is Watts Towers. I'm embarrassed to admit that even though I grew up in Los Angeles, I didn't visit the site until I conducted my research. I know lots of folks who've similarly spent decades in the city without experiencing Rodia's masterpiece, and I hope some of my readers will take interest in what's certainly one of the great artistic jewels in the US.

Alisha Varma acts as a divisive character. What kind of people inspired you to write a character like her? Where did her belief that "people behave better when they're being observed" come from?

A month or so before I began work on *What Waits for You*, I came across an archived piece on *99% Invisible*, which is this terrific podcast that details the stories behind all the stuff around us that we don't usually bother to notice or think about. The feature story was on something called the Camden Bench, this hulking slab of concrete that Camden Town commissioned to replace its normal bus stop benches. It's designed to discourage undesirable behavior—littering, leafletting, skateboarding, sleeping, graffiti—the list goes on.

I remember being impressed at how many highly intelligent people were behind the design and implementation of this bench, and how just as many highly intelligent people called it out as anathema. Tech writer Frank Swain pointed out that it's "defined far more by what it *is not* than what it *is*," and Selena Savić dubbed it "a

masterpiece of unpleasant design"—which remains one of the funniest insults I've ever heard.

The Camden Bench was my introduction to a term I hadn't heard before: "hostile architecture." I'd had no idea that was a thing. I mean, we've all been annoyed when we can't get comfortable in public spaces because of some physical deterrent, but I'd never thought of it conceptually before. When you can't lean against a ledge because of some funny steel protrusions, or you can't lie on a bench because of an armrest installed in the middle, your behavior is being modified. By denying you the opportunity to engage in an "undesirable" act, the designer or civic planner is shaping the social dynamics of the environment.

How interesting, right? I love it as a subject because it's complex, and there aren't easy answers as to where the ethical lines should be drawn. For Alisha Varma, those ethical lines don't exist; an environment should be as engineered as possible. Every aspect of design should be taken into consideration to maximize harmony and flow and to minimize disruption. Don't give people the opportunity to do bad things, she reasons, and bad things won't happen. She's not altogether wrong, which is why I think she makes a good villain, but she wants to remove all human interaction in dealing with a human problem. I don't think this is a compassionate or ultimately effective approach, because you'll have lots of people who feel unwanted and discarded.

Varma's not based on anyone in particular; rather, she's my little dig at bad science. It's remarkable how many brilliant, well-intentioned scientists—the Fritz Habers and Thomas Midgleys—blundered so confidently and disastrously onward, and at the expense of us all.

As far as Varma's hypothesis goes that we behave better when we're being observed, there's actually a lot of solid data indicating that's the case. I think foremost in my mind when I wrote that was the 2006 study by Newcastle University, which demonstrated people were much more likely to contribute to their office's coffee fund when a picture of a pair of human eyes were taped to the wall nearby.

At what point in your writing process do you decide what clues to include? Do you decide the conclusion and add details that support it? How difficult is it to add hints without giving yourself away?

I'm always looking for opportunities to drop in clues; the tricky part is keeping track of them all and making sure they're placed at appropriate intervals. Too often, and the mystery's obvious; too infrequent, and the reader rightly feels cheated. So when I write, I have two documents open side by side: the main manuscript, of course, and a beat sheet listing all the plot points I want to make sure to thread in along the way.

Jarsdel and his colleagues rely on police procedure rather than instinct. What are the challenges of writing characters who work this way? Do you prefer reading procedurals?

Police procedure is the process and science of investigation, whereas instinct is the art. A good detective can make reasonable jumps and connections, and the reading audience won't usually call bullshit if it's established that he or she has good instincts. But I tend to emphasize procedure because detectives are part of our highly codified law enforcement system, and procedure is the vehicle by which they successfully apprehend criminals. The challenge is twofold: to maintain verisimilitude while keeping the story moving. Real life murder investigations are slow and painstaking and would rarely sustain a reader's interest if rendered in real time, so I do my best to indicate the passage of time while maintaining a good pace. And in the end I think an emphasis on procedure helps me write better stories, because I have to really think everything through carefully. No one can suddenly have a revelation as to who did what. It all has to be earned logically.

And yes, I love reading procedurals. One of my all-time favorites is Frederick Forsythe's *The Day of the Jackal*. It's incredibly dense in detail yet absolutely riveting, and every action in the plot turns on

a piece of evidence. One of the most beautifully structured thrillers ever written.

What's on your to-read list these days?

Earlier this year I read the late Thomas Thompson's *Serpentine*, which is without a doubt one of the greatest true crime books I've ever read. I was amazed I hadn't read this author before, so now I'm halfway through his masterful *Blood & Money*, for which he won an Edgar.

How has your writing process changed since your first book?

The first book was written over about three years and was full of false starts, dead ends, and lots of cuts. I didn't have that kind of time for the second one, so I worked much more efficiently. I treated it like a movie, writing up a beat sheet and a character manifest. Mostly I did more thinking before I wrote, which saved me time later on (and spared me the grief of major cuts). Using my improved method, I was able to generate a solid first draft in nine months.