

"Haunting and hopeful...a magic so vivid it feels more like a memory than a work of fiction." —ALIX E. HARROW, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Once and Future Witches*

Where *I Can't* Follow

A NOVEL

ASHLEY BLOOMS

Reading Group Guide

1. If a little door presented itself to you, what would it look like? Where do you think it would lead? Would you take it?
2. Money is an obvious obstacle to Maren's continuing education, but are there other things holding her back? How does she handle those other obstacles?
3. When they first start discussing their feelings for each other, Maren tells Carver that what she wants doesn't matter when she compares it to things she must do to survive. How does Carver argue otherwise, during that conversation and throughout the book?
4. Describe Julie and Maren's relationship. Are they on equal footing? How do they negotiate the boundaries of their friendship throughout the book?
5. John Edward's task force strains the Blackdamp community. Do you think raids and arrests are the best way to address issues of addiction? Can you think of an alternative approach?

6. Maren doesn't always love her hometown, but she can't imagine belonging anywhere else. How do you define home? Where do you think you belong?
7. Why does Maren struggle to ask for help, even when she badly needs it? Have you ever been in a similar position? How did you handle it?
8. How would you describe the relationship between Nell and Granny before Nell took her door? What were the unintended consequences of Granny's involvement in raising Maren? How would you support your daughter and granddaughter in Granny's position?
9. What was your impression of the Reverend? Did you change your mind about her at all throughout the book?
10. Compare Maren's experience with her door to Nell's. What do you think was the biggest factor in Nell's decision to take her door? Why didn't Maren do the same?

A Conversation with the Author

What inspired *Where I Can't Follow*? How did you come up with the little doors?

I've found that the speculative elements in my work are often tied to theme. So I knew I wanted to write a book that dealt with addiction primarily and then a ripple effect of issues surrounding addiction, such as grief, mental illness, choice, and autonomy. The last two were some of my primary focuses, so the speculative element needed to work with that. Doorways or portals offered the ability to explore the relationship between addiction, grief, mental illness, and escape. As I wrote the book, I discovered that even more than escape, the doors present their chosen people with opportunity. A chance. A choice. And so the doors allowed me to deepen that meditation on what happens when we feel like we've lost control of our lives, when we no longer believe that we have autonomy over our futures, when all the choices we have feel like shackles. Then, even in the midst of these difficulties, how do we allow room for change and growth? What helps us to see and act on the choices we *do* have, to break cycles, to stumble forward even when we feel lost?

Nell's support network was very different from the network we see Maren slowly build. How are we shaped by the people who encourage and protect us?

One of the commonalities I see in both of my novels is the necessity of community. I don't think anyone really becomes who they are on their own—we're shaped by so much, including the people around us. That's definitely true for Maren. She has folks in her life who challenge her and are willing to call her out on the behaviors she has that are harmful to herself or others, like Julie and Carver. She knows people who are fighting for her community, like Amanda and Ace. She's able to see people in her life change, like the Reverend and Karen. Everywhere she turns she's being influenced by these people, and in seeing their choices she's reminded of her own. One thing Maren realizes at the end of the novel is that she also lives in a very different time than her mother. She has a few more opportunities, a few less obstacles. That, combined with the support in her life, is enough to help her overcome the challenges she's facing.

Maren and Carver disagree frequently, but their relationship still comes across as incredibly tender. How did you balance their conflicts and their care for each other?

We meet Maren and Carver at an interesting point in their development. I feel like they're at a place where they're almost ready for each other but not quite, so we get that friction as they try to outgrow old ways of being and relating to each other and step into a new chapter. I think they have to outgrow old expectations, which is hard to do when you've known someone for so long. They end up making room for each other—Carver's tenderness allows Maren to soften some of her edges and begin to rely on him, and Maren's faith in Carver and her desire to see him set boundaries helps Carver believe in himself enough to reach for something he wants. To me, those two go hand in hand. The conflict they have is part of their

caring, how they treat each other when they're annoyed or tired or stressed out, how they come back from feeling hurt or betrayed, how they offer and receive forgiveness—those things can make or break a relationship. And so does their willingness to love each other through the good and bad, to believe they're both trying. Those are the kind of relationships I'm drawn to—two imperfect people trying their damndest to love each other—and I think that's what Maren and Carver build throughout the book.

Karen warns Maren that you can lose your whole life trying to make sense of the past. How can we learn from the past without losing sight of the future?

I think that's one of the driving questions of this book: How do we honor our past without feeling as though we're trapped within it? I'm especially motivated by a generational perspective because I think part of the way we imagine our future is based on the adults in our lives—we know what's possible for us based on what was possible for them. So when Maren sees so many of the women in her life struggling just to feel like they have autonomy, it makes her doubt her own future. It's hard to forge your own path when you don't feel like you have guideposts to help you, and with Maren, there's also guilt, because pushing forward into a new life feels like leaving the people she loves behind. Even though that's supposed to be the dream—for each generation to improve on the one before—there can also be a feeling of loss that comes with going where no one else in your family could go because of their struggles. I'm not sure I have a single answer for this question, but I think Julie touches on it when she tells Maren that she wants to go where her mom couldn't and, in doing so, carry her mom there in her heart. So it's not just about

the loss of the past; it's about acknowledging how the people before us helped carry us, too, even if they didn't get as far as they wanted. And it's how we pick up where they left off, how we make sense of ourselves as part of a whole, and how we draw strength from that lineage in moments of doubt.

Despite all she dislikes about Blackdamp, Maren feels like she's perfectly suited to it. Do you feel that way about your hometown or where you live now? Do you think there's a difference between loving where you live and *belonging* there?

I've definitely felt like one of Darwin's finches when it comes to my home, and it's a feeling I've heard echoed from a lot of my friends who have moved away from Appalachia without ever really leaving it behind. There can be this sense of not fully belonging anywhere—when I leave home I'm marked by the accent, the habits, the perspective of my home, but when I return now, I'm also marked by the ways I've changed so I don't feel I fully belong there, either. It can be a lonely kind of in-between. I think the difference between love and belonging is part of coping with that in-between feeling: knowing that you can love your home without living there, that you can honor its place in your life and what it's given you even from somewhere else.

You write about addiction and mental health with great empathy. What do you want readers to take away from your characters' struggles with these complicated topics?

I think empathy is probably my greatest goal—to make a space where readers can consider these issues from a different perspective. There are a lot of narratives around addiction and mental illness

that I believe are harmful, like the idea that mentally ill people are dangerous when, statistically, they're actually more likely to be the victim of a crime, not the perpetrator, or the idea that addiction is a choice people make, an act of pure selfishness, which seems a very simple view of a very complicated issue. I want, more than anything, for people to sit in a space of empathy, which I think is a space of curiosity: to wonder what influences in a person's history—their family, their community, their society—might lead them down certain paths and how even if we disagree with someone's choices or don't understand them, especially in the case of addiction or mental illness, that we can still treat them with compassion and respect.

If you had a little door of your own, what would it look like? Do you think you could easily decide whether to take it?

I'd like to think that, at this point in my life, my door might look like the opposite of Maren's. Maren's door is based on a black hole, which comes after the death of a massive star, so I'd like to think my door would be a living star instead. And if the door plucked the image from my mind, then I think my door would look like Betelgeuse, a red supergiant, part of the constellation Orion, and my favorite star. We know Betelgeuse will die, or go supernova, sooner rather than later. "Soon" is in astronomical terms, so that could be a hundred thousand years from now or more, but it's possible this will happen in our lifetime. There's something about Betelgeuse that just makes my heart break—the thought of this star existing out in the dark of space, bigger and older than my mind can possibly comprehend, its death imminent, and in its death, its final act, it will seed new life, new stars. I'd like to think my door would let me carry Betelgeuse with me for a while, and as much as I'd be tempted to

touch the star, I wouldn't. There have been many points in my life when I would have taken a door—any door—to leave this world. But I have worked very hard to build a life I don't want to leave. So as beautiful as my door might be, and as curious as I might feel about what lay on the other side, I know I could let it go without regret.

How did writing *Where I Can't Follow* compare to your last book, *Every Bone a Prayer*? Were you surprised by any similarities or differences between the two stories?

I'm not sure the writing process could have been more different between these two books. I didn't use an outline for my debut, but I did for this novel. I drafted my debut very slowly over a few years, while I drafted this novel on a much shorter timeline during a global pandemic that kept me indoors most of the year. Even the craft elements I focused on were different and the goals for each book felt very distinct. Although even with all those differences, I can still see so many of my obsessions in each: the impact of trauma on our lives and our core beliefs, the importance of support networks, the struggles of poverty, and the same mix of darkness and light, difficulty and hope.