



**"Milchman is the Swiss
Army knife of thriller writers."**

—LEE CHILD,

New York Times bestselling
author of the Jack Reacher series

WICKED RIVER

A
NOVEL

JENNY MILCHMAN

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. On the day of her wedding, Natalie witnesses her soon-to-be husband, Doug, arguing with two strange men. If you were Nat, how would you handle the situation? Would you try to get to the truth, or let it go to enjoy the day?
2. Natalie and Mia are extremely close. What do you think draws them together? Do you have an older family member or friend with whom you have a special connection?
3. Natalie agrees to a backcountry honeymoon in the isolated Adirondack region, even though Doug is the avid outdoorsman of the two. If you were Natalie, would you agree to Doug's honeymoon plans? If so, why? If not, what would you want to do instead?
4. Describe Nat and Doug's relationship at the beginning of their honeymoon. What do you make of their dynamics? How does their relationship change over the course of the novel?
5. Doug puts both himself and Natalie in danger out of loyalty to

his friend, Craig, who is in financial trouble. Do you think this is a good enough excuse? Do you have any friends for whom you would risk anything?

6. Natalie and Doug must battle the elements, which ends up being almost as dangerous as the man stalking them in the woods. If you were in their situation, what would you do to survive? Do you have any basic outdoor survival skills? How did you feel while reading about Nat and Doug's struggle?
7. Describe Kurt. What makes him so dangerous? Why do you think he is fixated on Natalie and Doug?
8. Compare and contrast Natalie and Kurt. Do you see any similarities between them?
9. If you had to choose, which would you prefer to face: Kurt and his booby traps or the natural elements of the Adirondack region without any supplies or directions?
10. How does Natalie change over the course of the novel? What about Doug? Do you think their relationship will succeed once the story ends? Why?
11. Describe Mia. Why do you think she sets off on her own to find Natalie and Doug? If you were Mia and you knew a family member was in danger, what would you do?
12. Who do you think is the hero of the story: Natalie, Mia, the search-and-rescue team, or a combination of the three? How did you feel reading about Nat and Doug's rescue? Does any moment particularly stick out?
13. Why do you think, after the rescue, Natalie and Doug decide to change careers and move out to the Adirondack region? If you were in their situation, would you do the same?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for *Wicked River*?

For me, the wilderness is like a siren's call, beckoning with a whisper to write. What darkness hides in the woods? What secrets lurk there? That said, the first inspiration for *Wicked River* had to be my own back-country honeymoon, which, uh, didn't go so well but didn't go *nearly* as bad as Natalie and Doug's journey did. My husband and I came home after one day of canoeing and promptly hightailed it to France, paying (or not paying) for the trip with the first credit card either of us had ever owned. I never stopped asking myself "What if we hadn't turned back when we did? How much worse could things have gotten?" The answer to those questions became *Wicked River*.

Your novel brings to life the dense, beautiful, and dangerous Adirondack region. Why did you decide to set Nat and Doug's story there?

The Adirondack Park consists of more than six million acres, and there's just something about that kind of vastness, that kind of space.

So many things can go wrong there. As I write this response, there is a seventy-seven-year-old hunter who's gone missing south of the park. A twenty-six-year-old ice fisherman just plunged through the ice on a pond near Lake George and died. I feel such sorrow for the missing and the families of the lost. These stories are so tragic and so untimely. People perish while trying to feed themselves or enjoying a little recreation. At the same time, the land we're talking about has to be some of the most majestic in the world. Jagged peaks and crystalline streams and alpine meadows. Each season of the year is beautiful in some way—wildflowers with petals soft as baby skin in the springtime, the green and blue and yellow of a brief Adirondack summer, the kaleidoscope burst of fall foliage, the hushed quiet of a land swathed in snow. Somewhere within those two poles, danger and beauty, lived Nat and Doug's story.

Are you an avid outdoorsperson yourself?

Oh gosh. See my first response. I am an *aspiring* outdoorsperson. I wish to greater skills than I have. I love the idea of a starlit night and a trip devoid of civilization. But when I actually get any distance away, or even begin planning such a trip realistically, I become aware of all the dangers and think, *Hey, what's so wrong with a real bed and air-conditioning anyway?* In some ways, I think that being able to write a book like *Wicked River* is mutually exclusive with being a true outdoorsperson. For me, the stories are all too real.

The story unfolds from three different points of view: Natalie, Mia, and Kurt. Which character did you relate to the most? Which was the most fun to write?

There's a theory of fiction that says every character has a piece of the author inside him or her. But I find it works in the opposite way for me. In order to write a character, I have to take a piece of him or her and let it live inside me until I become that person for a while. It's very method. So

I related to all three characters—Natalie, Mia, and Kurt—though none of them are really like me. They were all deeply gratifying to write. Not *fun* precisely—but it was exhilarating to become a young bride again, a teenage girl, both living in a world staggeringly different from the one I inhabited during those stages of life. Cell phones and GPS and texting, oh my! And learning where Kurt's hurt, hidden places were, why, despite the abhorrent things he did, he was really weak and wounded himself, was a revelation I felt privileged to observe.

Kurt is a psychologically complex and layered character. What kind of research did you do to bring him to life?

Here's a little secret about my writing: I do almost no research at all. I hate to admit this, because it seems like to be a Real Writer, you must do research, right? Yet many of the writers I admire most—Lee Child, Stephen King—don't do a lot of it, or warn against its hazards. In terms of Kurt specifically, he suffers from a narcissistic personality disorder, with grandiose features, and having worked as a psychotherapist, I gained at least a passing knowledge of how that diagnosis will manifest. But for the most part, he, like all my characters, arose organically, came to life on the page, and I sat back and watched him move. He told me about his parents and how their behavior shaped him into the man who terrorized Natalie and Doug, which was not his intent. Kurt worked against himself; he brought down on himself his deepest fear—solitude—by alienating everyone in his life until the only place left for him was in isolation.

What draws you to the thriller genre?

Time for another secret—I don't actually consider myself a thriller writer, although I love thrillers. In a way, I think the fast pacing of my stories, the fear and the stakes, serve to camouflage what's also there. The first elements to register in my work do bespeak *thriller*. And fear

certainly drives many aspects of my life—the awareness that just a subtle twist of the knob could change it all, rid a person of everything, plunge her into a horrifying scenario she might not have the ability to survive. But what drives me in my writing is the potential and promise of triumph, the chance for a weak and flawed character to overcome her deficits and emerge victorious. More than anything, I would say I am a fairy-tale writer.

What do you ultimately want readers to take away from *Wicked River*?

A bookseller in Olympia, WA, once told me: “I feel a little stronger as a person myself when I am reading one of your books.” That’s what I hope every reader of *Wicked River* takes away—that in each of us lies the potential for strength we never knew we had.