



IN MY
DREAMS

"An addictive and riveting psychological thriller."
—LIV CONSTANTINE, international bestselling author

I HOLD

A novel

A KNIFE

ASHLEY WINSTEAD

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Jessica is very determined to prove herself the *most successful* member of the class during Homecoming. Why does she need to prove herself? How do you navigate the dangers of comparing yourself to others, especially people in your graduating class or distant social media friends?
2. Jessica describes Jack as “undeniably *good*” and struggles to think she could ever be good. Do you think there is such thing as a truly good person? Do any of the characters in this book qualify?
3. Jessica’s father is not alone in wanting his child to be extraordinary. What are the consequences of placing those kinds of demands on kids? Do you think Jessica is an outlier, or do a lot of otherwise-successful students worry about managing their parents’ expectations?

4. Jessica and Coop bond over lacking the privilege their friends all share. Compare their strategies for fitting in without that privilege.
5. The Phi Delta Fraternity of 2008 and the NFL of Frankie's expectations are not supportive places for LGBTQIA+ members. What was your impression of his attempts to navigate those attitudes? What would you do in his position?
6. Jessica and Caro argue about the "girl code" when it comes to leaking the sex tape. How do you feel about the girl code? Do you think they violated it? When?
7. Courtney thinks disdainfully that the East House Seven are all so obsessed with each other that they're practically in love. How does that level of friendship develop throughout the book? Is it healthy?
8. How is the phrase "supposed to be" used as a weapon throughout the book? Whom does it hurt?
9. What consequences would you expect for Dr. Garvey when his affairs came to light? How does tenure work against students in cases like Garvey's?
10. Describe the development of Mint's anger. Was there ever a moment when someone could have intervened? How could he have channeled his anger in a healthier way?
11. Each of the East House Seven carries some form of guilt over Heather's death. Compare the ways they manage that guilt.

IN MY DREAMS I HOLD A KNIFE

Besides the murderer, do you think any of them should be blamed?

12. How did you view Jessica's choice at the end of the book? Where do you see her going?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Jessica's overachieving attitude is so familiar. Do you have any personal strategies for maintaining balance while working toward your goals?

Balance is not something I'm known for, actually. I could probably use some advice from my dear readers on how to reach it. I tend to become consumed by ideas or goals; I expect a lot from myself, and I'm very impatient about next steps, achievements. But I've made peace with this. I am an intense, ambitious woman.

My trick is to allow my obsessions to exist as a hum in the back of my mind, a thing I return to throughout the day when work meetings get dull. It becomes something that pushes me, a fire that fuels me day in and day out, keeping me from burning out. So maybe that means I do have balance, if I've reduced that big, hungry wanting we all feel to a constant hum in my mind? I'm certainly not running around like Jessica, going to wild, destructive lengths to secure the things I want. Even though clearly, I'm capable of imagining those things! I guess my

advice is to nurture the flame of your desire, tend to it daily, and become friends with it, so neither of you undermines the other.

Speaking of goals, throughout the book there are many cases of “success” coinciding with “failure.” For example, Jessica feels very successful in her consulting career, while knowing that she failed all her specific post-graduate goals. Do you have any examples of failures that ultimately led you to a different kind of success?

I am going to say something bold: I’ve failed at almost everything I’ve attempted in my life. At the very least, I’ve failed to do things the way I expected. In fact, I started writing this book after being crushed by my failure to achieve something I really wanted. This book was born out of failure.

Stewing in grief and anger, I thought to myself, *Why do I feel so frenzied by this disappointment, so desperate?* And what if there was a woman who didn’t tamp down those feelings but explored them to their dark ends? And so a villain was born.

The thing about Jessica is, on one hand, she’s a privileged woman most people would look at and say, you have so much. You’re successful. Part of her recognizes that (and would polish those words like trophies if she heard them). But on the other hand, she’s not successful in the ways that are personally meaningful to her. I don’t think she’s capable of recognizing, at the start of the book, what meaningful success looks like to *her*—not to her dad, or Mint, or the world writ large. It will take her the whole book to do battle with other people’s versions of success and discover her own—and by the end, she’s done so many terrible things, been so close-minded, that she may not deserve to be successful. I’m leaving the question of what Jessica deserves up to the reader.

If you don’t mind me wearing my scholar hat for a moment, one of Jessica’s biggest, earliest flaws is that she swallowed the capitalist,

patriarchal system wholesale. She's so deeply conditioned by the neoliberal idea of what success means: that she has to be the best at everything; that she has to achieve this uncomplicated, unnuanced version of first place in every aspect of her life in order to be valuable. It's an ugly belief system because it's ultimately about achieving power and dominance over other people; there's no room for give and take. Jessica's fatal flaw is that she saw how bad this belief system treated people like her father and she still subscribed wholeheartedly; in fact, she contorts herself in service of it almost until the end.

Unlike Jessica, I've worked hard to accept that failure is normal, that there's no one right way to be, and that if I tell myself I'm successful, poof! I am. I'm the arbiter of value in my own life. Who else's opinion matters, in the end?

Jessica tries to think of herself and others as “good” or “bad.” Do you think people can be just one or the other? Do you think book characters follow the same rules?

I don't think anyone is good or bad—I think we all hold a range of possibilities, and our circumstances tug, seduce, compel, or command certain things out of us. These interactions form patterns of behavior that concretize over time until, often, the way we behave is more a matter of habit.

I think the fact that we can recognize a range of possibilities within ourselves and within one another is the reason we find storytelling so compelling. We want to trace the good in the people we might otherwise call bad, uncover the bad in the people who appear good. We're all hungry to explore our complexities through book characters, so in that way, I do think they follow the same rules (the interesting ones, at least!). The license book characters have is they get to explore the outer limits of our good and bad tendencies, extremes most of us wouldn't be able to get away with. So in that way, reading a book is like watching an

experiment unfold: What could happen if I leaned into certain possibilities within myself?

As much fun as it is to watch your characters crumble, you highlight the weight of trauma, insecurity, toxic friendships, and expectations bearing down on them. Do you have any advice for college students, or anyone else, who are trying to manage that weight?

My advice is hard-earned from personal experience, so it might not be right for everyone. With that said, the most important thing I have done is to work on no longer feeling ashamed of myself or anything that's happened to me. That's my advice: let go of shame and guilt. Shame can creep in and manifest as a lot of other things—anxiety, sleeplessness, anger—so take the time to really explore yourself and the weight you're feeling. Look at yourself the way you would a book character, putting together the narrative of your life and thinking about the many events that have shaped you, shaped your desires and your actions, good and bad. See yourself in your complexity, and then give yourself the grace and forgiveness you would give any interesting, complex character.

For anyone struggling with sexual trauma, allow yourself to feel the way you feel. Don't get tamped down or hushed up by the world. Be full of rage, if you are full of rage. Allow yourself time to stop the world if you need to. Know you are loved in the full complexity of who you are and that you are not alone.

The best thing I discovered in college was that I had access to free counseling. (This is true of grad school, too.) What a gift. Talking to someone else about how you're feeling is healing.

When all your characters have secrets, how do you get to know them? Did you have their failures and alibis mapped out before you began writing, or did you figure out their roles as you went?

Ah, people's secrets are the best way to get to know them! That's actually how I dove into each of my characters—I went right for the jugular. I do a ton of character and relationship mapping before writing any book, and especially for this one. I wrote pages about who each character was—not just the surface stuff but, more importantly, how they saw themselves, what they wanted in their heart of hearts, what stood in the way of getting what they wanted, and what, if taken from them, would make their lives crumble. Then I mapped their relationships with each other (Jessica and Mint; Mint and Caro; Frankie and Coop; etc.) and particularly with Heather. I was looking to understand how Heather could threaten each of them in ways that would make them plausible suspects, so she had to be connected to what they most wanted and were most afraid to lose.

Once I feel like I know what makes my characters tick, then I turn to plot. The plot grows logically and usually organically out of characters' worst fears and deepest desires, and how those things interplay. And yes—I keep a very meticulous account of alibis and timelines! I actually overwrite those parts for myself beforehand, so I go into writing each scene knowing more than what's explicitly on the page. Hopefully it contributes to a larger mood and tension.

How did you keep everything—the repressed memories, the motivations, the insecurities—straight once you figured them out?

I devoted a lot of time to imagining who each character was and how they felt about each other and themselves, so I felt like I knew my characters inside out. By the time I started writing *In My Dreams I Hold a Knife*, it was almost like they were friends whose stories I'd absorbed. After my pre-writing, I wrote an extremely meticulous outline, chapter by chapter, where I color-coded the different storylines so I could literally visualize the plots weaving together.

There's a lot of darkness in this book. If you could shield a single character from the secrets and horror, who would it be?

You know, Amber Van Swann didn't deserve an ounce of what happened to her. Neither did Heather, of course, though she wasn't the easiest person to get along with, either. I'd shield those two. Everyone else either bought their trouble or needed a wake-up call.

What draws you to psychological thrillers as a writer? As a reader?

When I pick up a psychological thriller as a reader, I'm asking it for one thing: Tell me who I am—the parts I haven't figured out yet for myself. Of course, I'm reading for all the other things, too: getting hooked by a mystery and feeling that burning desire to uncover the answers, the pleasure of being surprised, the beauty of urgent language and the thrill of swift pacing. But it's that hunger to see characters react to dark, thrilling, high-stakes, emotionally packed events that really draws me. What would I do? What parts of the character resonate or repel me? Even better, what does the book say not just about me as an individual but the larger we?

As a writer, I'm drawn to the genre for a reason that's both simpler and harder to describe: I write psychological thrillers when I have a hunger to tell. When there's something burning inside me and I feel an almost obsessive urgency to get it on the page. To me, it's a genre of confession, and I tend to write hunched over, breathing faster, heart pounding. Writing psychological thrillers is like falling under a spell that won't be broken until I get the truth down on the page.

Do you have a writing routine? How do you get to the page and put together an entire novel?

I'm the queen of routines. I love them. I write in the exact same spot every day, with the exact same rhythms. I am not a spontaneous creature! But I think it helps my productivity. I try to write as much as humanly possible every day, so I fit in writing after pouring my first cup

of coffee in the morning and before starting my other work. As soon as the work day is over, I switch back over to my novel, and then the evening hours fly by until it's time for wine (and hopefully my husband is making dinner). Usually I'm able to pull myself out of my fictional world to at least eat, but then it's right back to writing until my eyes glaze over and I drag myself to bed. Luckily, at that point, I usually get a second wind that lets me read in bed—my favorite thing in the world.

What are you reading these days?

This will be a time capsule, because I'm a voracious reader and go through about two to three books a week, across genres. Right now, it's *You Exist Too Much* by Zaina Arafat, *Exciting Times* by Naoise Dolan, *Garden Spells* by Sarah Addison Allen, and *More Than Just a Pretty Face* by Syed Masood. All excellent. But my constants are poetry: on any given week, you can find me re-reading *Crush* by Richard Siken and *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* by Terrance Hayes. Siken and Hayes slay me.