

Every town has its secrets.
Sanctuary is built on them.

a novel

SANCTUARY

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Is there a character in *Sanctuary* that resonates strongly with you? Which one, and why?
2. Sarah attaches herself to three women not just for friendship, but also for their power. As a coven, what does each woman bring to the table when it comes to their personalities and energies? What qualities would you want in your own coven?
3. Considering what we learn about Daniel, do you believe his ending was deserved? Did you feel sad, triumphant, or something else altogether at Abigail's fate?
4. Did you believe that this small town could become so fearful that its inhabitants excuse murder? Can you think of any real-life parallels?
5. The witchcraft in *Sanctuary* is fictional, though inspired by various traditions. Why do you feel it was important for the author to create a system rather than using contemporary Wicca?

6. America has a rich magical heritage beyond that connected to the Salem witch trials. What other cultures and people are represented in this book, and in wider magical pop-culture, that are not specifically white or European?
7. The existence of magic could change the world—for better or worse. What did you think of the regulation of magic in *Sanctuary*? How would you amend these laws?
8. If your town had a witch, what requests would you make of them?
9. If you were a witch like Sarah, how would you put your powers to use?
10. Have you ever had a magical experience? What happened, and how did it diminish or expand your beliefs and outlooks?
11. Did you notice any interesting parallels between the town's reaction to Harper's claims and Sarah's use of her power, and our real world today? Have you experienced anything similar?
12. How has stereotyping and prejudice affected you, or how have you caught yourself participating? Have you ever judged a person on their chosen beliefs, and did the conflict in the book change or reinforce your beliefs?
13. Jump forward in time. Where do you see the main players, such as Sarah or Maggie, a few months, a year, a decade after the events in *Sanctuary*?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for writing *Sanctuary*?

I'm a TV producer by profession and was in the U.S. covering the first one hundred days of the Trump presidency when singer Lana del Rey tweeted cryptically about hexing the president. That immediately struck me: What kind of world would it be if witches really did have power to curse people? And how would that world deal with the urgent questions we've all been tackling about women's voices, and how to weigh accusation and justice? Those ideas formed the "brain" of the story.

The "heart" of *Sanctuary* lies in its female friendships. Sarah, Abigail, Bridget, and Julia are a literal coven, but I think every woman has her own coven—a circle of close friends. As we all know, these friendships can be the most uplifting and empowering thing in your life. But they can also change when our circumstances do. And sometimes, heartbreakingly, they can turn very bad indeed. I know this firsthand. Maybe you do too?

Did you grow up reading stories with magic, and if so, which were your favorites? What about these tales captured your imagination?

Yes! I couldn't get enough of magic. I devoured classic fantasy: wizards and dragons and hobbits (and I guess elves, though I was never keen on elves). But my favorite stories were the British series *Dark Is Rising*. It's set

in rural Britain and draws on folk magic and deep myth. It was simultaneously contemporary and timeless and the first time I saw magic in a world recognizably my own, inhabited by people just like me.

While this book does contain magic, the book's heart is a crime novel. Was it your intention to write a book the reader could put together like a puzzle? Did you hope your readers might solve the investigation along with Maggie or just be swept along for the ride?

I get super-frustrated by crime novels whose solution relies on something the reader doesn't know. How unfair! So it was really important to me that there are clues all the way through in *Sanctuary*. On the other hand, you can't lay something out too plainly. Where's the fun in that? That's why Maggie is central—we share her thoughts as she tries to figure out what really happened, but at the same time, we're in on information and conversations she doesn't have. Many readers figure out part of the story, but so far, no one has worked out the whole thing by the end, and that's just what I hoped!

The women of *Sanctuary* are often strong, but it's hard to deem any of them "good" or "bad" people. Did you want your readers to take sides, and how important was it for someone like Abigail to remain empathetic?

Excepting a few extreme cases, there's no such thing as a wholly "good" or "evil" person in real life—and it's the same in *Sanctuary*. That uneasy border between empathy and sympathy is where I wanted to keep *Sanctuary's* readers. Abigail is a woman who, on the very first page, suffers an unimaginable loss, and we learn that she's experienced other losses along the way. You'd have to have a heart of stone not to feel for her. That's empathy. And yet *sympathy*? Abigail makes terrible, cruel choices for which others pay the price, and I can't imagine anyone supporting her decisions as events unfold.

Writing Sarah's character was particularly satisfying. She's someone who believes her purpose is to do good, yet it becomes increasingly obvious that she's nonetheless responsible for some awful things. I'm always fascinated by how people's feelings toward her change over the course of the story.

Which character is most like you, and why? Which character is least like you, and why?

There's a bit of me in all of them, from Abigail's ambition to Maggie's earnestness. Bridget is probably the least like me, so straightforward and kindhearted—though she'd be my first pick as a friend! (I also have a real-life Pierre; the book is dedicated to him.) Harper's determination to live life on her own terms really resonates with me, and her choices through the book would probably be my choices under the same circumstances.

Your exploration into the community dynamics of small-town Connecticut is fantastic, and all from an author based in the UK! Do you have a personal connection to that part of the United States, and what sort of research did you do into this particular area?

I travel to the U.S. often for my work and have good friends in the New York and New England area. I spent time in New England while I was working on the book, including staying in a swanky coastal town—I won't name it!—that informed everything from my descriptions of the characters' homes to the smell of the air. I also visited Salem, home of America's most famous witch trials, to try to understand how persecution arises in the specific context of a small town and how accusations take root. One of my favorite things to do whenever I travel is to read local newspapers. They really give you a feel for a place, its lives and concerns. And that, too, played into the creation of Sanctuary and how news travels within it.

Then there's the universality of small-town life anywhere. I come from

a part of England that's a lot like the world of *Sanctuary*. A historic, fairly affluent town, not far from the coast, where summers were spent escaping to the beach. I think there are universals in the dynamics of places like that.

Speaking of research, how did you immerse yourself into the world of magic and witchcraft? Why and how did you decide to create something different for your book, and what were your main sources of inspiration and fascination?

My corner of England is also home to Stonehenge, with its druidic myths, and to one of the most renowned covens in modern British magic—the New Forest coven. (The forest dates from before the Roman Empire—that “new” is a British joke, y’all.) My brother and I were allowed to run wild there as children. At university, I specialized in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, which is full of occultism: figures such as “the Queen’s Magician” John Dee, and the characters they inspired, such as Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus. So growing up, I was steeped in magical thinking.

At the same time, I faced many challenges when exploring how to represent magic in *Sanctuary*. Uppermost was that a country like the modern United States would have immensely rich and diverse magical traditions: from indigenous communities, and from all corners of the globe, given an immigrant, diaspora twist. How might some of those have been suppressed and others sanctioned? And I was also mindful that witchcraft is a living religion for some today. It was vital to me that I didn’t trivialize, misrepresent, or appropriate heritage and belief.

And then there was the immersive research! London has a thriving magical community, and I have been welcomed into gatherings as varied as an evening of candle magic in a graveyard chapel, a heathen “blot” (celebratory rite), an herb magic workshop, and a lecture on the role of the magical community in the Stonewall-era gay liberation movement.

Witches like Sarah are responsible with their magic; however, for entertainment's sake, how would you use magical talents (if you had them)?

Wholly irresponsibly. I'd probably end up as a "Dark Lord." (Being a writer is the next best thing, right?)

If you could only recommend one book for the rest of your life, which book would it be, and why?

Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her best poems will break you into tiny pieces and put you back together again in the space of just twelve lines. They're astonishing.

What piece of advice would you give to aspiring writers?

When an idea grips you, don't let that moment pass, whatever it takes! My job in a TV newsroom was amazing but exhausting, so I quit to go freelance with the idea of writing during the downtime between jobs. No surprise that things didn't go to plan. The idea that became my first novel, *Gilded Cage*, came to me bang in the middle of a demanding documentary project. But I knew I had to get it down on the page before it slipped away. So I started setting my alarm clock for 5:30 a.m. and wrote for two hours before work every morning. Don't wait for that "perfect moment" when inspiration and free time come together. They never will.

Besides writing, what else are you passionate about?

Swimming and small islands, ideally combined. My dream is to spend half the year living on an island, writing and swimming, and the other half making TV, because my documentary work keeps me plugged into the world of news and current affairs that inspires me. I think I found my dream island while on a short break to unwind after finishing *Sanctuary*—but no, I'm not going to tell you which one!

If there's one thing you'd like readers to take away from *Sanctuary*, what would it be?

Own your choices, and be true to the power inside you.