

BOOK CLUB KIT



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CLICK THE PAGE TITLE TO BE TAKEN
DIRECTLY TO THAT SECTION!



NOTE TO READERS

SPOILER WARNING

This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of *The Unheld* by Luke Larkin and contains spoilers.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Body horror
Child neglect
Animal attack
Animal death
Death of a parent

RESOURCES

Fiction can serve as a mirror for our lives, and some of the themes in this book might affect readers in a very real way. Here are resources for readers who want to seek support for the issues they're facing.

Evermore's Grief Support Directory
evermore.org | 202-263-3656



Dear Reader,

What you're about to read is indeed a Western horror novel, but I didn't quite think of it that way as I wrote it, despite my love for both genres. Instead, what I thought about was how this world in which you and I live grabs and claws and snatches at us from all angles, pulling us in all directions, and meanwhile the things we ourselves reach for slip further away. It seems, quite often these days, that this world is designed to alienate and separate us, and was designed that way by people intent on taking too much but incapable of holding it all. In writing about this, I wrote a horror novel. In writing about my home, a place that means the world to me, and which has meant (and been) the world to so many people before me, a place that's been taken from those people and is threatened even now, I wrote a Western. I wrote a world where things are taken and things are sought, and where things can be found, but not without a price. Much like our own, maybe.

Writing and reading are, to me, two of the last ways we have of reaching for and holding what we want, what we need, and what is rightfully ours. I hope you find some of that in these pages.

Tread carefully, travel safely,
Luke Larkin



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

You've talked about how influential Montana is to you as a writer. How did that shape the way you wrote the setting of *The Unheld*?

In my view, the book is entirely of Montana, but not all of Montana is in the book, and I hope readers appreciate that. This place I call my home is multi-hyphenate, multitudinous. As a horror writer, I drew on the sparser landscapes of the state—the vast plains, the burnt-out forests, the looming stone faces of the mountains. It's easy to feel small in a place like this. Sometimes, that feeling is a pleasure, as when you're out in the backcountry on a glittering day. Other times, that feeling is acute, consuming, and inescapable, like there's nowhere to hide and something is looking for you. I tried to tap into the latter for this novel.

Even more than setting, though, is history. The period the novel is set in, sometime in the 1890s, was not a glamorous or kind one for the region or the people within it. It was a time of unthinkable settler and colonial violence and exploitation of Native tribes and others. I think and hope that this book speaks to that, as well, because it's as much part of this place's identity as the beauty is. It's a fraught country. The whole place is. I wish it weren't.

What drew you to the theme of loneliness and the desire to explore it through the genre of horror?

Loneliness is foundational to horror, I think. Maybe loneliness is horror. I'm hard-pressed to think of a horror story where the main character isn't lonely or made to feel alone in some way, I think, because that's the root of terror and fear, that suspicion or knowing that you're alone. For a character in horror, even when there are others with you, there comes a point in every horror story where it's just you, and you realize that you have to look out for yourself, and that's what I think is the scary part. We are the characters, the "you," and we watch our fear play out for us: that maybe nobody's coming to save us. It's just you against the dark, and if you can't depend on yourself, it's over.

I think that speaks to a very American viewpoint, maybe—that individuality—and part of what I love about horror is how it challenges that individuality at every turn. Like, okay, Mr. Rugged Individual, see how you like it! Face it all alone, why don't you! And so, much of this novel and what I wanted to write about, on top of the terror that comes with being alone and the desperation and uncanniness it brings, is the widespread fear of the opposite, of understanding and acceptance. The chasm between each of us. It's gaping, but we have to cross it. We have to.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

There are multiple points of view throughout the novel: Charlie, Theodore, Patton, and even a chapter from the Beast. Which was the most challenging character to write, and which was the most enjoyable?

That's tough! Charlie is the beating heart. She's where it started, and she embodies that sense of helplessness, that smallness I mentioned. Hers is a journey of finding her own help in her own hands, and that was a pleasure to discover alongside her.

Theodore is the brain, then. He's an intellectual, and sometimes that's not a good thing for him. He's the stranger in a strange land, misguided and secretive. A character who is not of the land but seeks to comprehend and overcome it, which is a fool's game, as he finds out. He was challenging in that way, as a character you want to knock some sense into, in no small part because you feel for him. I do, at least.

And Patton, or Paveameohtse, is maybe the soul, the essence. His presence in the story is, I felt, as necessary as the land's. Other characters probably have less to lose than Patton has already lost, and that was important to me to communicate without reducing him to that loss. He has more than any to gain, too, I think. He was trickiest, but not at all frustrating. Nutritive.

The Beast's chapter was a surprise, and was the final puzzle piece, in a sense. I discovered that, if I'm to write a book about a monster that preys on loneliness, and if the monster's "weakness" is understanding and connection, then we have to get inside the monster's head, don't we, if we ever want to put this thing to bed, if it's ever to be defeated.

We're in a horror renaissance right now. What do you think pulls readers to these stories? What pulls you to writing them?

I spoke a little about it already when I talked of loneliness just now, but the answer is catharsis, totally. It's a lot like tragedy, that way. You often hear about Mary Shelley being the mother of horror, and if that's true, then Shakespeare is its patron saint. For me, horror is about seeing our fears rendered and played out to their natural conclusions in a safe, controlled environment, just like a tragedy on stage. Horror, even at its most "base," is always political that way, and that's why it's always interesting. There's always something to be afraid of, that we're trying frantically to wrap our minds around and to solve. Instead of diminishing our fears, we can dress them up and make them both more powerful and totally defanged, and that helps a lot in understanding them.



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

The Beast stalking and haunting the characters in *The Unheld* is unique and unsettling. Did you know early on that hands would play such a vital role for both the Beast and the story?

I think about hands a lot! For most of us, they're the primary physical way we encounter the world, aren't they? It's a terrifying business, to touch and be touched, understand and be understood. The characters in this book are touch averse, all in their own ways, and often literally, but definitely metaphorically and emotionally, too. To have each of them hounded, haunted, taunted, and confronted by literal hands, both foreign and familiar, felt natural and freaky, and was quite a launching point for the ideas here.

Horror readers know that survival is never guaranteed. Were there any characters who you originally planned on dying but made it out alive, or vice versa? If so, what changed their fate?

Honestly, not really, and sometimes I feel that that makes me some sort of traitor in the horror genre. Like, I saved every main character! No final girl this time, sorry. Maybe I'm a coward that way, but more important to me was offering each of them the chance to overcome, and, well, they all took it. If my aim here was to craft a vision of how connection, understanding, and even intimacy offer salvation against loneliness, then who am I to deny that salvation to any one character? Who am I to say that some people can be saved by it and others are forsaken? More productive, maybe, to show how each of them finds that salvation and what it means to them.

That's why Charlie's father had to die, though. He is saved, I think—redeemed?—but not physically. That was another vector of that kind of salvation I wanted to tinker with. If Charlie can't physically save her father, what then? How does she make sense of her own isolation and hurt without retribution? If the man who inflicted loneliness upon her all her life finally leaves her, ultimately and irreversibly? What if, perish the thought, he's sorry, has no good excuse for himself, and all she's left with is the choice to forgive him? Should she? Must she? Is that salvation?

Moving forward, though, I won't be so sparing of my characters, I don't think. This was a special case, to start.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) How do you interpret the book's title, *The Unheld*? What meaning do you see it conveying about the different characters and themes of the book?
- 2) When the Beast is dragging Charlie away, her father hesitates to shoot and save her. Theodore believes the important thing is that he eventually fires the gun, but Charlie feels it was too little, too late. What do you think? Why do you think her father hesitated?
- 3) If you could use scrying to visit the memories of a historical figure or fictional character, who would you pick and why?
- 4) Theodore waited three years after receiving Lawrence's hand to act. What do you think held him back? And do you believe his interpretation that the hand stopped moving because the "invitation had expired" because the Beast found him "lacking, unfit"?
- 5) Which character's point of view did you engage the most with and why?
- 6) What message or meaning do you take away from the book's ending?
- 7) Theodore tells Charlie when they first meet that "being frightened of something is simply the first step to understanding it." Do you think that's true?
- 8) Charlie, Patton, and Theodore are all visited by disembodied hands that draw them toward the Beast. What similarities and differences do you see between how they each approach the invitation and what they think they'll find upon reaching their destination?
- 9) Charlie is fueled by her anger toward her father, but decides to let it go after his parting words to her in the Beast's lair. What did you think about his apology and Charlie's choice to release her anger? Do you think they ever would've been able to communicate with each other without the Beast's interference?
- 10) What do you think made Charlie, Patton, and Theodore targets for the Beast's attention?

Find more questions on the next page.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

11) In what ways do you think Patton's experiences in the book help him to work through his grief and create a plan to return home after his exile?

12) Discuss the use of hands in the novel. How do you see them functioning as both an element of horror and a metaphor for the book's themes?

Author Luke Larkin has two additional questions for you:

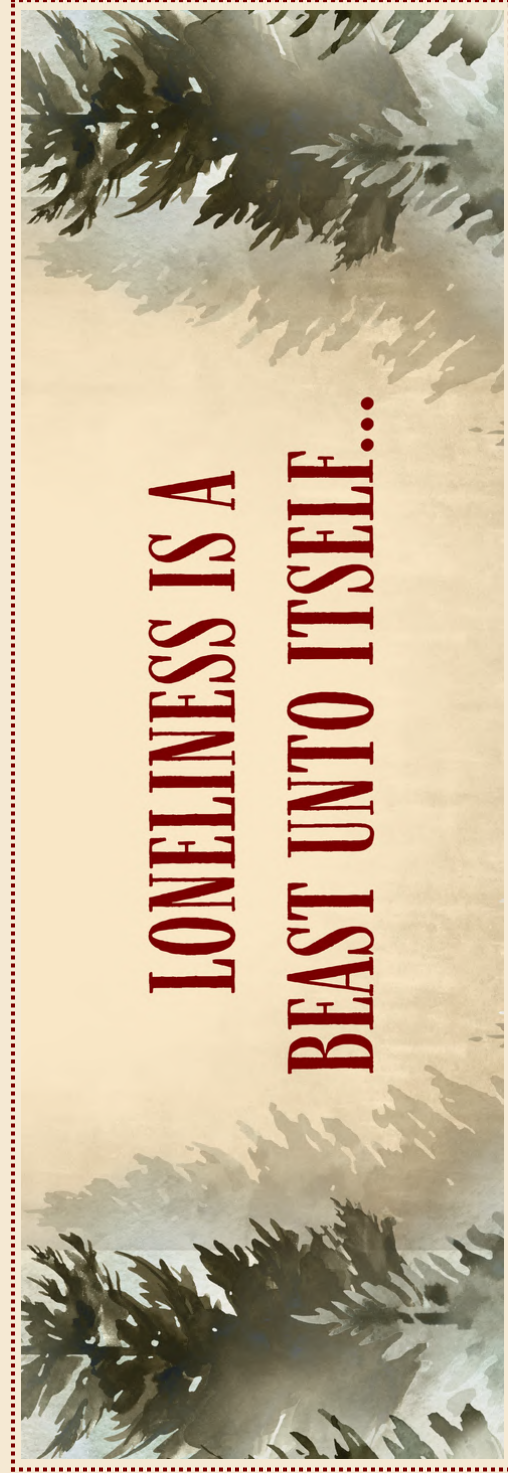
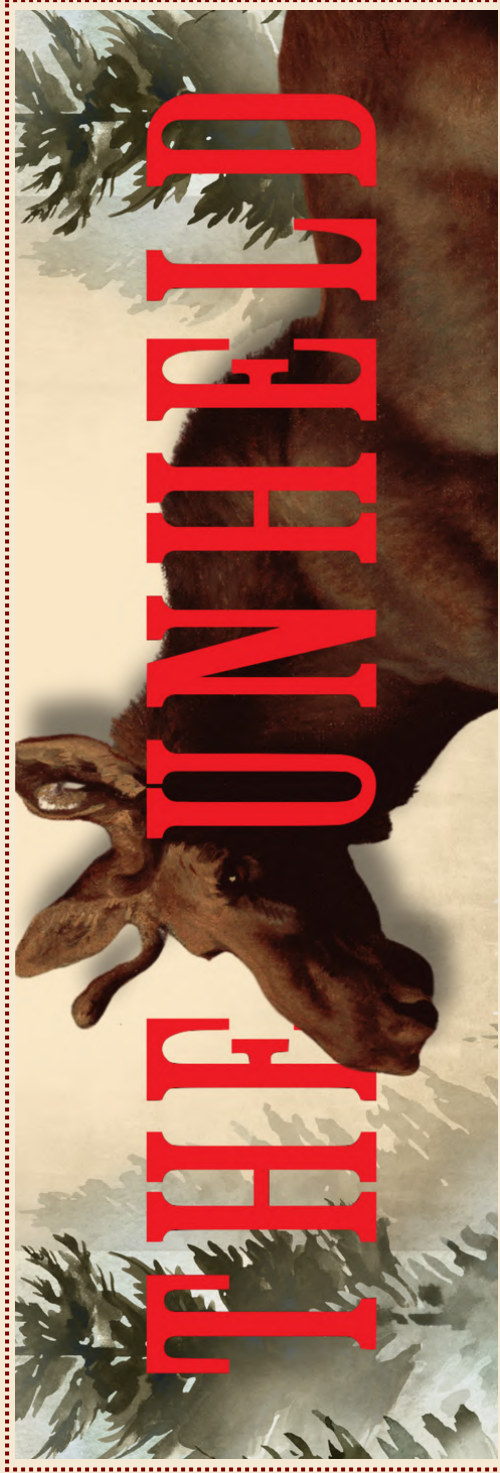
13) How do physical and emotional distance both bind and motivate these characters?

14) The monster in this novel operates by stealing its victims' hands and using them to lure those victims' loved ones to a similar fate. What might this say about the nature of loneliness and grief? Why and how does Charlie's final confrontation with the Beast end this cycle?

Write down any questions you want to ask the group here:



PRINTABLE BOOKMARKS



PRINTABLE POSTCARD



PLAINSEND, MONTANA

At the mountain's feet. At the forest's mouth.
The Unheld by Luke Larkin



TO:

FROM:

ADDRESS:

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PLAYLIST

NEED THE PERFECT SOUNDTRACK FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB MEETING?
CHECK OUT THE OFFICIAL PLAYLIST:

"I Can See the Devil"
by S.G. Goodman

"Feel It All"
by KT Tunstall

"This Is a Photograph"
by Kevin Morby

"Let Me Drown"
by Orville Peck

"Another Wasted Life"
by Rhiannon Giddens

"You don't even know who I am"
by underscores

"Lost River"
by Murder by Death

"Far Away"
by Kelela

"Morton's Fork"
by Typhoon

"Nettles"
by Ethel Cain

"Carnage"
by the Antlers

"Sadness As a Gift"
by Adrianne Lenker

"Hunter"
by Björk

"Sad and Beautiful World"
by Mavis Staples

"Buffalo Replaced"
by Mitski

"Post Script"
by Typhoon

"Haunt Me"
by Sade



Listen via Spotify by scanning the code above
or clicking here!



WORD SEARCH

SEE IF YOU CAN FIND THE CHARACTERS, LOCATIONS, AND MORE ELEMENTS FROM THE NOVEL IN THIS WORD SEARCH.

D	B	E	A	S	T	L	T	D	C	V	C	C	L	R
F	N	S	X	M	Y	H	A	E	J	R	H	H	O	E
Y	A	A	O	H	E	A	K	R	X	H	E	A	N	B
G	R	O	H	O	K	F	K	U	K	S	Y	R	E	B
H	S	C	D	N	O	T	T	A	P	I	E	L	L	E
E	H	O	S	T	Y	K	N	R	K	N	N	I	I	W
Z	R	A	L	V	C	A	V	O	R	P	N	E	N	B
E	Q	V	J	A	T	H	A	L	X	W	E	N	E	W
T	I	L	X	N	W	C	A	F	H	D	M	H	S	S
V	H	W	O	Z	E	R	M	N	I	A	R	T	S	G
N	G	M	D	B	D	N	E	S	N	I	A	L	P	H
Y	C	Y	E	M	D	S	C	N	L	A	F	U	G	J
E	L	R	G	P	S	L	N	K	C	T	H	F	H	I
T	U	N	I	N	G	F	O	R	K	E	M	G	V	C
S	O	C	I	E	T	Y	I	J	G	F	Y	N	O	H

Beast
Charlie
Cheyenne
Flora
Hand

Hannah
Larkin
Lawrence
Loneliness
Montana

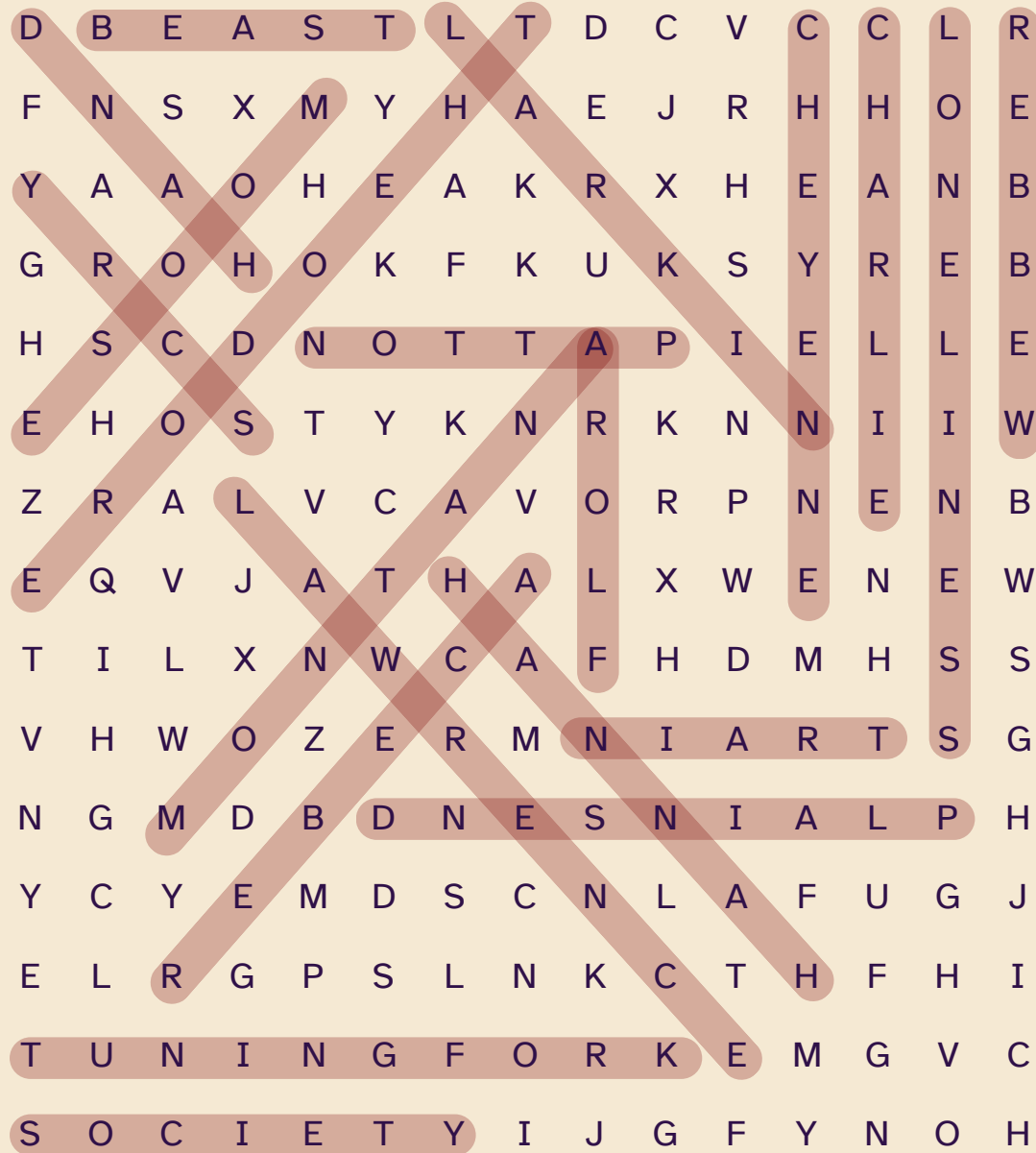
Moose
Patton
Plainsend
Rebeca
Scry

Society
Theodore
Train
Tuning fork
Webber



WORD SEARCH

CHECK YOUR WORK AGAINST THE SOLUTION BELOW.



Beast
Charlie
Cheyenne
Flora
Hand

Hannah
Larkin
Lawrence
Loneliness
Montana

Moose
Patton
Plainsend
Rebeca
Scry

Society
Theodore
Train
Tuning fork
Webber



MOVIE NIGHT

TOSS SOME POPCORN IN THE MICROWAVE AND PREPARE TO COZY UP FOR A BOOK CLUB MOVIE NIGHT INSPIRED BY YOUR LATEST READ!



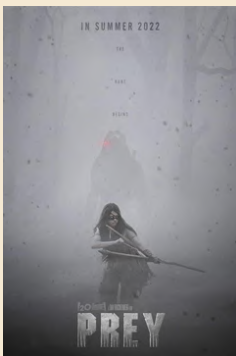
***The Wind* (2018)**

If you want more Western horror, check out this supernatural film set in the late nineteenth century on the American frontier. Two couples living in a remote area of New Mexico become friends, but as time passes, each of the wives grows untrusting of the prairie and is convinced that an unseen entity is stalking them.



***Gaia* (2021)**

Readers who enjoyed the blend of nature and body horror in *The Unheld* should add *Gaia* to the top of their watch list. This South African horror movie transports viewers to Tsitsikamma National Park, where two forestry service workers stumble across creatures that infect humans with a fungus that cannibalizes their bodies.



***Prey* (2022)**

Those who couldn't get enough of Charlie's determination and bravery, this one's for you. Part of the Predator franchise, *Prey* follows a young Comanche woman in 1719 who must protect her people from the mysterious and deadly creature in the woods that's begun hunting humans.



BITES & SIPS

THEMED BEVERAGES AND SNACKS ARE A GREAT TREAT FOR A BOOK CLUB MEETING—WHETHER YOU’RE SHARING THEM TOGETHER OR SHOWING THEM OFF VIRTUALLY. HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS INSPIRED BY *THE UNHELD*.

HOMEMADE SOURDOUGH

The smell of fresh sourdough greets Charlie when she enters the cabin near the end of the novel. Try your hand at crafting a loaf of your own and serve with honey as a nod to the bread and honey treat eaten by the girl in Charlie’s storybook.

alexandracoooks.com/2017/10/24/artisan-sourdough-made-simple-sourdough-bread-demystified-a-beginners-guide-to-sourdough-baking

MOZZARELLA FINGERS

Finger food is a must for any book club meeting for *The Unheld*. These mozzarella fingers wrapped in prosciutto and topped with an almond nail are as delectable as they are spooky.

holokahome.com/prosciutto-wrapped-mozzarella-fingers

OLD FASHIONED

Whiskey is Theodore’s drink of choice at the saloon, making the old fashioned—a cocktail developed in the 1800s—a perfect drink for your meeting.

liquor.com/recipes/bourbon-old-fashioned

DOC HOLLIDAY COCKTAIL

Tea is an exciting new drink for Charlie at the saloon, and this cocktail blends it with huckleberries, Montana’s state fruit.

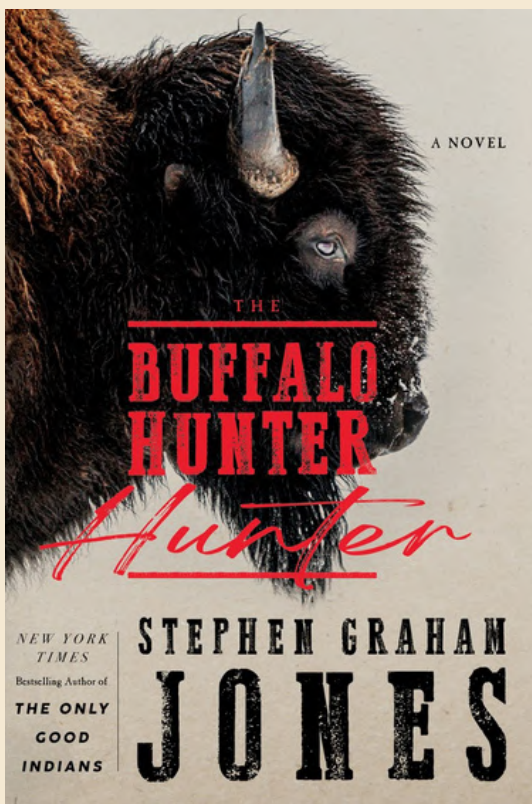
imbibemagazine.com/recipe/doc-holliday-cocktail-recipe

TURN THESE DRINKS INTO MOCKTAILS BY USING ZERO-PROOF OPTIONS!

REMEMBER TO DRINK RESPONSIBLY.



WHAT TO READ NEXT

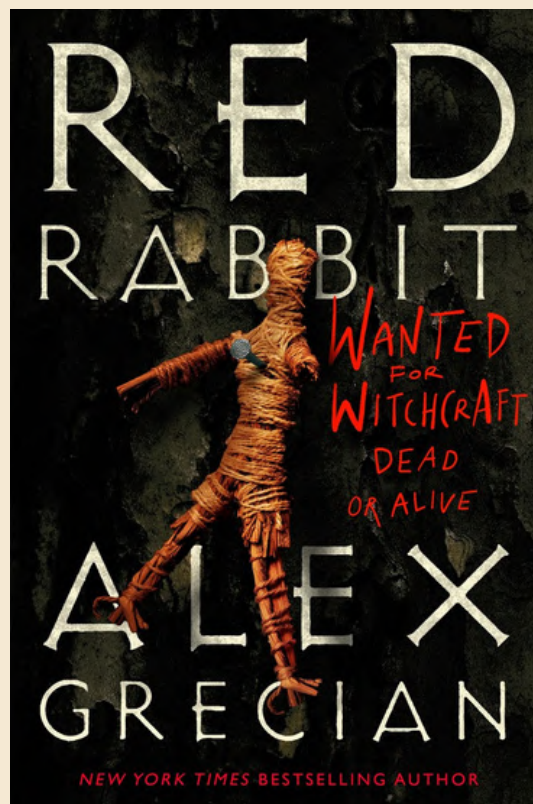


THE BUFFALO HUNTER BY STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

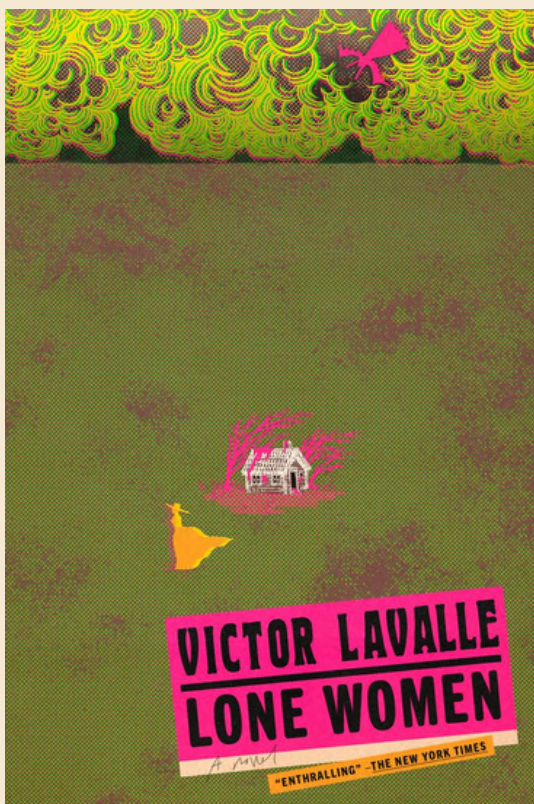
Readers who enjoyed Patton's chapters and are looking for more horror featuring Indigenous characters should pick up Stephen Graham Jones's Western horror novel set in Montana. In 2012, the discovery of a hundred-year-old Lutheran pastor's diary reveals the story of a Blackfeet vampire seeking revenge and justice.

RED RABBIT BY ALEX GRECIAN

If you liked Charlie, Patton, and Theodore teaming up to find the Beast, pick up *Red Rabbit*. This folk horror follows a ragtag crew in their stolen stagecoach throughout the Wild West as they fight against monsters in their hunt for the witch Sadie Grace.



WHAT TO READ NEXT

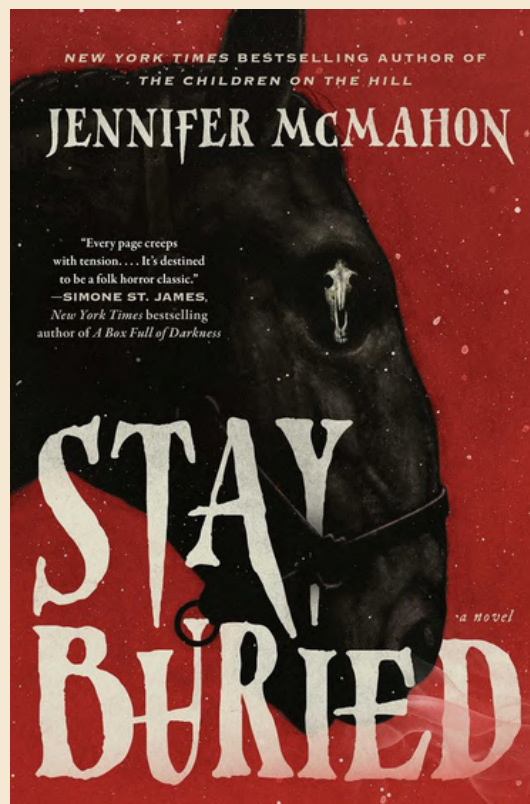


LONE WOMEN BY VICTOR LAVALLE

In 1915, Adelaide fled her home in California after the death of her parents to claim a plot of free land in Montana. With her is a steamer trunk that contains her darkest secrets. She keeps it locked at all times, knowing that death awaits those around her if she dares to open it.

STAY BURIED BY JENNIFER McMAHON

This novel weaves together events from 1919 and 2016 to tell the story of the danger that lurks in the town of Boone's Ferry, Vermont. In 1919, a mysterious illness strikes the town. By 2016, residents fearfully leave offerings to protect themselves from what they say is a vengeful spirit.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Based in Missoula, Montana, Luke is a queer author living and working in Big Sky country. He received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Montana, and his work can be found in places like *HAD*, *Sonora Review*, *Popshot*, *Firewords*, and elsewhere. *The Unheld*, his debut novel, is slated to release in Fall 2026 from Hyperion Avenue.



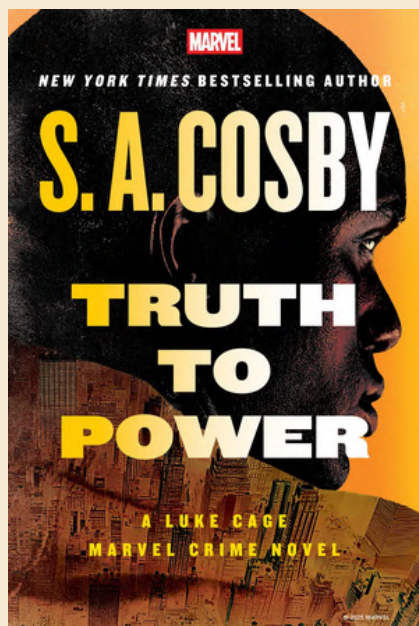
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 [@ONALARKIN.BSKY.SOCIAL](https://bsky.app/profile/onalarkin.bsky.social)



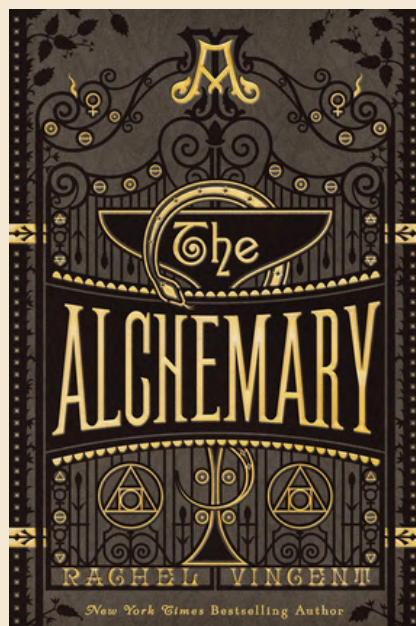
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OCTOBER 13, 2026



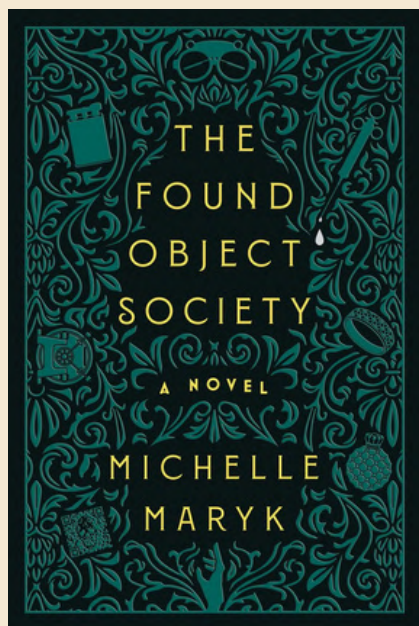
MAY 25, 2027



AVAILABLE NOW



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ALL OF
THESE AND
MORE!