BOOK CLUB KIT

Discussion Questions

1

In A Dark and Secret Place, Heather discovers some startling secrets about her family. Have you ever discovered something unexpected about the people close to you?

2

The book asks a lot of questions about nature vs nurture. Do you think your genes or your upbringing have more say in the sort of person you are?

3

How responsible do you feel Bert is for Michael's behaviour? Partly, entirely, or not at all?

4

Would you write to a prisoner who had committed multiple murders? Why or why not?

5

Heather is eager to find out the truth behind her mother's relationship to Michael Reave. In the same situation would you have done things differently?

6

You're a Netflix producer, and you've just been handed a vast budget to make *A Dark and Secret Place* into a multi-part series. Who would you cast to play Heather, Michael, Nikki and Colleen?

7

Are there any scenes that have particularly stuck in your memory? From the previous question, how do you imagine them in the movie version of *A Dark and Secret Place*?

8

The book occasionally hints that a dark kind of magic may be at work behind the scenes. Do you think any supernatural elements were at play?

9

Do you think Heather and Michael will stay in touch beyond the events of the book? Do you think Heather and Ben will rekindle their (brief) romance?

10

If you could ask the author any question, what would it be?

About the Author:

Jen Williams lives in London with her partner and their small ridiculous cat. Having been a fan of grisly fairy tales from a young age, these days Jen writes dark unsettling thrillers with strong female leads, as well as character-driven fantasy novels with plenty of adventure and magic. She has twice won the British Fantasy Award for her Winnowing Flame trilogy, and when she's not writing books she works as a bookseller and a freelance copywriter.

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Q&A with Jen

Q: Where did the idea for *A Dark and Secret Place* come from?

I had, for years, been exchanging grim true crime stories with my agent. Like a lot of people, I find serial killers fascinating–well, fascinating isn't really the word, is it? Perhaps morbidly interesting would be more accurate. I think they are interesting to us because they are almost impossible to understand: planning to take someone else's life–not once, but over and over–feels so abhorrent and inexplicable that consequently we feel a need to pull them apart and understand it. Having read biographies of people like Ted Bundy and the Green River Killer, I tend to think that there is something missing from them, some vital piece of humanity. Bundy clearly cared nothing for the women he murdered, but was very concerned about taking care of his bike; because, I suppose, it was useful to him. *A Dark and Secret Place* came from the urge to understand the incomprehensible. I wanted to look at the life of a serial killer and try to track what happened, even though ultimately the key to it all is probably beyond our reach. Heather will never truly understand what Michael is, no matter how close she is to him.

Q: You've previously written fantasy novels. Why the change in genre?

I was just nearing the end of writing *The Poison Song*, the third book in the Winnowing Flame trilogy, and I had developed a huge craving for something entirely different. By that time, I had written six epic fantasy books, all of which were long, chunky novels, and the part of my brain that makes up weird worlds and keeps magic systems in check was totally depleted. I like to challenge myself with each new book, and what could be fresher than an entirely different genre? I've always been a big reader of thrillers, and alongside my interest in true crime, it seemed like the natural next step. It was a very steep learning curve, and I am so grateful to my agent and editors for their patience and expertise. In the end it was a hugely satisfying experience. I think writers are always happiest when they are learning something new.

Q: What is your writing process?

I have been writing seriously since my early twenties, and only recently have I started to realise that each book wants to be written differently. Generally though, after spending a lot of time fleshing out ideas in notebooks, I write a very rough plan, featuring all the main story points, taking me from the beginning to the very end (the end is often extremely vague…). Then I start writing the first draft, which usually begins to deviate from the plan at the 30K word mark. At that point, I chuck out the old plan and draft a new one. It doesn't feel especially efficient but I've found that I like the stability offered by a rough plan, whilst also needing it to be loose enough that when the story has legs, it can start forging its own path.

Q: Folklore and fairy tales are referenced a lot in the book. Do you have a particular interest in them?

I've always loved folklore and fairy tales – just like Colleen in *A Dark and Secret Place*, I was especially fond of anything that featured witches, because it was pretty much the only time I saw women depicted as both powerful and deeply untrustworthy. When I was very little, around five years old, my mum ordered a copy of *The Complete Grimms' Fairy Tales* from a book club for me, expecting it to be a cutesy, Disney-fied collection with pretty illustrations. What she got was a massive tome with a brown cover, illustrated with very old fashioned black and white woodcuts. The stories all seemed to involve a lot of stuff straight out of a horror movie, so she decided to put it away for me until I was "older." Of course I got hold of it not long after that, and adored it. The copy that Colleen carries around with her is based on that old Grimms' tales collection.

Q: The other big theme in the book is, of course, serial murder. Is Michael Reave based on any particular serial killers?

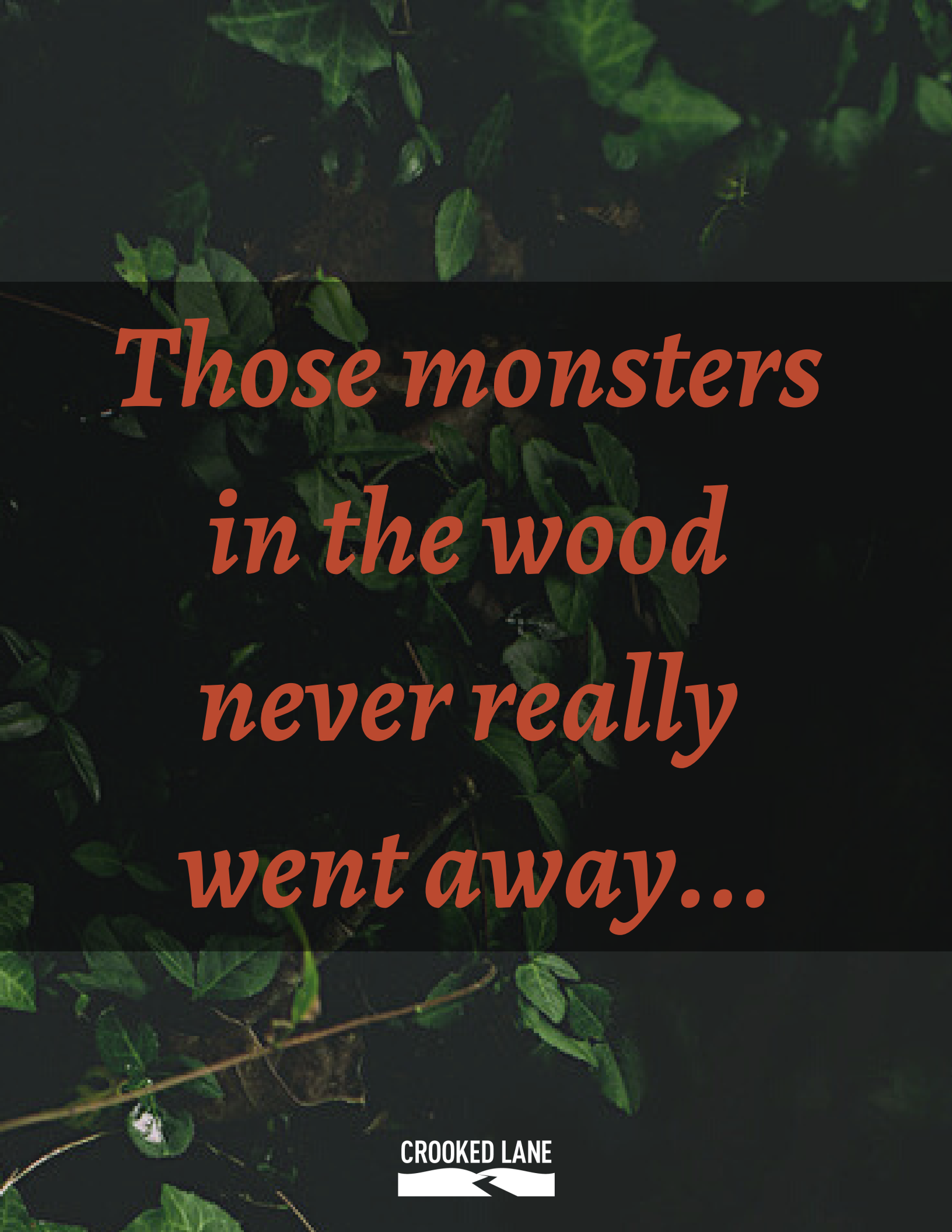
Reave is really a kind of heightened amalgamation of several serial killers, with no particular one serving as the inspiration. However, Dennis Rader (who was also known as BTK) was a case that seemed to feed directly into the story; he had a wife and two children who were entirely unaware of what he was up to until he was arrested for it. The idea that someone close to you had been doing something appalling is obviously a big theme in *A Dark and Secret Place*; especially with regards to how it might make you doubt your own identity, too.

Q: A Dark and Secret Place goes, appropriately enough, to a lot of dark places. Were there any sections of the book that were especially difficult to write?

I've tried not to be too graphic with a lot of the more horrific parts of *A Dark and Secret Place*–not because I'm especially squeamish, but because implied horrors are often a lot scarier than what you can describe on the page. However, there is a scene that takes place early on in Michael's life that concerns a baby bird, and although I wouldn't necessarily say it was difficult to write, it's the scene that comes back to me most often when I think about this book. Obviously, the novel deals with a lot of very dark material, from abuse to murder to suicide, so quite often I would just stop and think for a while about how to handle these very difficult subjects.

Q: Any odd little Easter eggs you can tell us about?

In the very earliest sketches for this book, it was set in the 1980s. I decided to name Heather after one of the best films of the period…*Heathers*. The 80s setting was left behind pretty quickly, but the name stuck. Ben Parker, the police officer who sets up the meetings between Heather and Michael, was named after Charlie Parker, the PI in John Connolly's brilliant detective series.


Those monsters
in the wood
never really
went away...
CROOKED LANE