

A Penguin Readers Guide

Stony River

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It is the summer of 1955, and eleven-year-old Linda Wise has finally found a new friend from the right side of the highway. Though Tereza is a little rough around the edges and isn't the ideal companion in the eyes of Linda's parents, she's exciting and spices up the boring town of Stony River. As the two girls head down to the meandering river to smoke cattails, they catch a glimpse of unusual activity at Crazy James Haggerty's home. The sight of a police car in his driveway piques the girls' interest, and they scramble to the perfect spying location just in time to see a young girl exit the home carrying a baby. It is from this point on that the three girls' lives are inextricably linked.

The lives of Miranda and her son, Cian, are forever changed when Officer Nolan arrives on their doorstep, informing Miranda that her father, James, has died. Taken from her home where she has been secluded for twelve years, Miranda is thrust into a bright new world where people travel in cars, water comes out of taps and one god is worshipped, rather than the multiple gods and goddesses she has known and loved for her whole life. There are endless questions about her upbringing and how she came to be pregnant with her son, with many adults insinuating it was at the hands of her father.

Meanwhile, Tereza uses the vacant Haggerty home as an escape from an abusive stepfather and a weak-willed mother. She knows her life has to change drastically if she wants to achieve her dream of becoming an actress, and it certainly won't happen unless she leaves Stony River and her seedy reputation behind. A chance encounter with a young man named Buddy changes her fortune. He becomes her knight in shining armor, whisking her away to a place where she feels safe and loved for the first time in her life. But there's something about Buddy that just isn't right: She can't turn him on like she has other boys in the past, he keeps talking about how the Devil can creep into his soul and his dedication to Charles Atlas verges on a religion. Tereza is able to look past all of this and loves him for the stability he and his grandmother Dearie provide.

Linda's attempts at finding her runaway friend, Tereza, are all for naught. No one seems to be as worried as Linda, and as time goes by, she gets new friends and moves on. She's led a sheltered life with her frequently ailing mother and traditional father, who have

done little to prepare her for her teenage years. When a car pulls up beside her, driven by a good-looking man who offers her a ride, Linda is reminded of her father's words about the fragility of the male ego, so she hops in. It is a ride that turns her world upside-down and once again brings together Miranda, Tereza and Linda in this riveting mystery.

AN INTERVIEW WITH TRICIA DOWER

Q. You mention in your Author's Note that *Stony River* had its beginnings as a short story titled "Not Meant to Know." What sort of process did you go through to expand that story to make it a full-length novel? What was it about this story in particular that called out to you to revisit it and envision it as a novel?

The short story is part of a collection inspired by eight of Shakespeare's female characters. When I began "Not Meant to Know," I intended to create a contemporary counterpart to *The Tempest's* Miranda, who has been exiled on an island since she was three with only her sorcerer father and some magical creatures for company. I found her story too ambitious for the short form, but still wanted to tell it. I was also curious about what happened to Tereza after she ran away and to Linda beyond the year covered by the short story. As far as process goes, I decided to adopt the "facts" of the short story as facts for the novel—the era and setting; the girls' names, ages and family backgrounds; the implication that Crazy Haggerty was involved in some sort of witchcraft. Then I imagined the three girls' lives before and after the day Linda and Tereza witnessed "my" Miranda being taken from her house by police officers. I went step by step and let myself have fun with it. ■

Q. The events in *Stony River* surrounding the police shooting were based on a true crime in your hometown in New Jersey. How much of an impact did the murder investigation have on you, and why did you want to weave it into your story?

I was visiting my sister and her family in California when my brother-in-law called out, “Hey, come see this.” A true-crimes TV show was running a story about the shooting of a police officer in 1958 during the robbery of a car dealership in my hometown. I didn’t remember it as well as I thought I should have, considering the car dealership belonged to a family I had known. When I returned home, I searched the internet and came across a *Newark Star-Ledger* series called “Deadly Secrets,” by Robin Gaby Fisher and Judith Lucas—a serendipitous find because I was contemplating murder in the novel, and the newspaper series gave me an opportunity to incorporate crime investigation details authentic to both the period and setting. I found a photograph online of the city hall draped in black and, because of the date, assumed it was in honor of the officer’s death. Since I didn’t personally remember the funeral or the reaction of others to the news, I made those up for the novel. Readers should know that my characters bear no resemblance to the real ones depicted in the newspaper series. ■

Q • Also in your Author’s Note you write in reference to the 1950s, “Nothing was as it seemed back then. Realizing that has been liberating.” Can you expand upon that notion of feeling liberated and how your experience with the novel helped you to that point?

Because it was such a repressed time, unanswered questions and whispered words led me to imagine, as a child, worse things than were actually happening. Consider this: There was no internet then to search for answers; it was easier for adults to censor what children could see; sex manuals were kept in a locked case behind the librarian’s desk—you needed a marriage license or wedding ring to look at them. What “it seemed back then” to me as a child and even as a teenager was that life, particularly for a female, was complicated and fraught with danger. I wanted to convey that danger in the novel and to include some of the terrible things, such as incest, assault and murder that were not necessarily happening more often than today but which seemed like greater threats because they weren’t discussed openly. What’s liberating to me now is that I needn’t dwell

on what was threatening about the era and can engage in some feel-good nostalgia from time to time. ■

Q. While your novel sheds light on secrets that people in the 1950s tried to hide, it is also an homage to that time period with references to the wonderful music, TV shows, actors and pop-culture icons that made it famous. What is it about this era that makes us look back upon it as such an idyllic time?

I'm not a cultural anthropologist, but the fifties may have been the first instance of a youth culture with music and celebrities that many adults didn't approve of, so the times have become emblematic of "youth." A robust postwar economy also meant an increase in the disposable incomes of many North American families. Kids with bigger allowances and/or summer jobs and the postwar baby boom made the youth market huge. Today, reruns of 1950s TV shows cater to the boomers' nostalgia for their early childhood experiences. Something I didn't know when I was growing up but have since learned is that a rebuilding Europe was eager for American goods, fueling manufacturing growth in the U.S. What had been considered luxury items became affordable for the middle class. This is reflected in *Stony River* when Linda imagines her father as the stage manager from *Our Town* saying, "The Sulos came here from Linden right after Ike took office. Flush enough, I declare, to buy one of them new houses with the fancy colored stoves and fridges." An interesting aside is that a friend of mine, who was a teenager in postwar Scotland, said they didn't have a poodle-skirt, rock-and-roll type of fifties there, probably because of all that rebuilding. ■

Q. What was your inspiration for James Haggerty's beliefs? What sort of research did you do to get the amount of detail you included in your novel?

I started with my premise for the short story "Not Meant to Know," which was that Miranda's father, like Shakespeare's Prospero, was involved in some sort of magical practice. Since I had given him

an Irish name, it was logical to me that he practiced a form of paganism he had learned in Ireland. I researched that, read several relevant books and came across an online group of Irish witches. They answered my questions, directed me to other resources and assured me I couldn't go too wrong with my allusions to the incredibly varied history and practice of Irish paganism. ■

Q. James Haggerty's home was filled with books, and Miranda uses her extensive reading background in order to make sense of the world after she leaves home. How important was reading to you as you grew up? Why did you want reading and books to be so integral to Miranda's character?

I was an early reader and a bit of a loner. I enjoyed hiding out in my room with a book that could transport me to another world. Not that my world was unpleasant; it just wasn't exciting. With Miranda's life being so narrow, I wanted to give her a glimpse of life outside the walls of her house and the language with which she could imagine something different for herself. ■

Q. You grew up in a town in New Jersey very similar to Stony River. How much did your own experiences in that town influence the novel?

I pictured the town when I was writing—the river, the neighborhoods, the train station, the movie theater and so forth—and recalled the rhythm of daily life, the people and their attitudes. That gave me confidence in my ability to bring the setting to life. Friends who grew up with me get a kick out of finding reminders in the book, such as smoking cattails (we called them “punks”) and a policeman coming to school to advise us what to do if a stranger tried to entice us into a car: Scratch the license-plate number in the dirt with a stick. As Linda wondered, “What if there was no dirt, no stick?” ■

Q. Many of the female characters in the novel show great courage, determination and a yearning to create their own

destinies, which goes against what many would view as a stereotypical 1950s woman. Why did you decide to portray your female characters in this way?

My view is that the “stereotypical 1950s woman” did not lack ambition, just opportunity. Young women of my generation were steered into secretarial, nursing and teaching careers because they were considered jobs you could “fall back on” if, heaven forbid, something happened to your husband. It was difficult to resist the pressure to get married and have children. That was a postwar phenomenon, I think. Men returning from war wanted the jobs women had been doing, and women were cajoled through advertising that their families needed them at home. Dreadful things happen to my three main female characters, but I didn’t want to portray them simply as victims. And while Doris and Betty are fairly traditional wives, they strive to make their voices heard. Betty is particularly interesting because, although she lives with undiagnosed pain some believe is psychosomatic, she wants some independence from her husband in order to discover where “he ended and she began.” ■

Q: What are you working on next?

A sequel of sorts. I’m following Linda’s life until the early 1970s. If I live long enough, events of the twenty-first century might make it into my stories!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Given that there were three young protagonists in the story, whose perspective did you enjoy reading the most? Why do you feel you were drawn to that character in particular?
2. In an interview, Tricia Dower says she hopes her novel provokes readers to think about how we deal with issues today and whether we do so in a better way than the characters in the novel did. How would you respond to this in regard to the

issues raised in the novel such as domestic abuse, violence, religion, divorce and homosexuality?

3. Do you think this story could have had a contemporary setting? Would it still have worked overall as a novel?
4. The novel spans seven years in the lives of the protagonists. In your opinion, which of the girls (Linda, Miranda, Tereza) grew the most as a character over that time? Would you have predicted this from your first impressions of the characters?
5. How is traditional marriage presented in *Stony River*? Are any of the characters happy in their relationships? What does this imply about marriage and how it was viewed in the 1950s?
6. How did you feel about Buddy? He ranges from calling Tereza “fragile, like an African violet” to punching mirrors and abducting girls. Was he a sympathetic character? Why do you think he felt he had to save and protect Tereza?
7. Were you surprised by the amount of guilt that Tereza felt over stealing Miranda’s money? Why do you suppose this was so?
8. From the outside it appears that Linda has the perfect family; however, it could be argued that her upbringing has prepared her the least for real life outside of her parents’ home. Would you agree or disagree with this statement? What was your reaction to some of the life lessons her mother and father tried to teach her?
9. If you had to choose between growing up in the 1950s and growing up today, which would you choose and why?

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