

PUTNAM **BOOK CLUB KIT**

"CHILLING AND CAPTIVATING."

—Megan Miranda, author of *All the Missing Girls*

**THE
WICKED
SISTER**

A NOVEL

KAREN DIONNE

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 How did the narration style of *The Wicked Sister* shape your reading experience? Did you enjoy hearing from both past and present perspectives? How did Jenny's story inform the modern-day story?
- 2 Who do you think the "wicked sister" of the title refers to? Compare and contrast the two sets of sisters—Rachel and Diana, and Charlotte and Jenny. How are their sibling dynamics similar or different? How did the sisters' connections, or lack thereof, affect their choices?
- 3 How is memory—and its fallibility—portrayed in the novel? In what ways does the unreliability of memory steer Rachel's life?
- 4 How is mental illness, and the stigma that surrounds it, portrayed in *The Wicked Sister*? Consider the different ways in which Rachel's supposed mental illness and Diana's real diagnosis are treated and handled in the novel.
- 5 Discuss the importance of White Bear as a symbol throughout the novel. Also look at the impact of nature and wildlife on the different characters, particularly Rachel's connection to the raven and the spider.
- 6 Do you think that Jenny and Peter are good parents to their daughters? Were they right in their decision to move the family to the Upper Peninsula? What do you think you would have done in their position?
- 7 How does the setting of *The Wicked Sister* contribute to the essence of the story? Could the events of this novel have taken place anywhere else?
- 8 While discussing fairy tales, Trevor says, "Everything is black and white, good and evil. And there's always the reversal at the end, where the good guys get to live happily ever after." In what ways does *The Wicked Sister* parallel a fairy tale? Why do you think the author chose to reference various fairy tales throughout the novel?
- 9 Compare and contrast the manner in which different characters cope with guilt. How does Rachel's relationship to guilt change over the course of *The Wicked Sister*?
- 10 What do you imagine Rachel will be like as a mother? How will her own family history shape her relationship to Trevor and their daughter?

A CONVERSATION WITH KAREN DIONNE



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AFTER THE GREAT SUCCESS OF *THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER*, AND THE EXPECTATIONS THAT CAME WITH IT, WAS IT A DAUNTING PROSPECT TO WRITE A NEW NOVEL?

It was. While the reception for *The Marsh King's Daughter* has been truly amazing, and I can't overstate how grateful I am to all the publishers, booksellers, reviewers, and readers around the world who have embraced Helena's story, whenever I thought about all the extraordinary things that had happened for the book, including becoming a #1 international bestseller and winning several best novel awards, it felt as though I'd set an impossibly high bar for myself. I often wondered if I could clear it again.

It wasn't until I realized that my job as the author was not to compare my two novels, but rather to make my new book the best version of itself that it could be, that I was able to set aside those creatively crippling concerns and write the new novel. I'm very proud of *The Wicked Sister* and am looking forward to hearing what readers think!

IN WHAT WAYS WOULD YOU SAY *THE WICKED SISTER* IS SIMILAR TO *THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER* AND IN WHAT WAYS IS IT DIFFERENT?

While both stories take place in Michigan's Upper Peninsula wilderness, and both feature a protagonist who grows up in a very insular environment, outwardly, their circumstances couldn't be more different.

In *The Marsh King's Daughter*, Helena spends her early years squatting with her parents in a ramshackle cabin in the middle of a swamp. In *The Wicked Sister*, Rachel grows up in a luxurious hunting lodge in a pristine tract of wilderness that has been in her family for generations. Rachel's parents are wildlife biologists, and as she accompanies her mother in her research, Rachel feels such a strong connection

to the black bears her mother studies that even as an adult, she believes she can communicate with them on an instinctive, almost spiritual level. As for Helena, because hunting and fishing are the means by which her family sustain themselves, to her, a bear is nothing but a game animal to be shot and eaten.

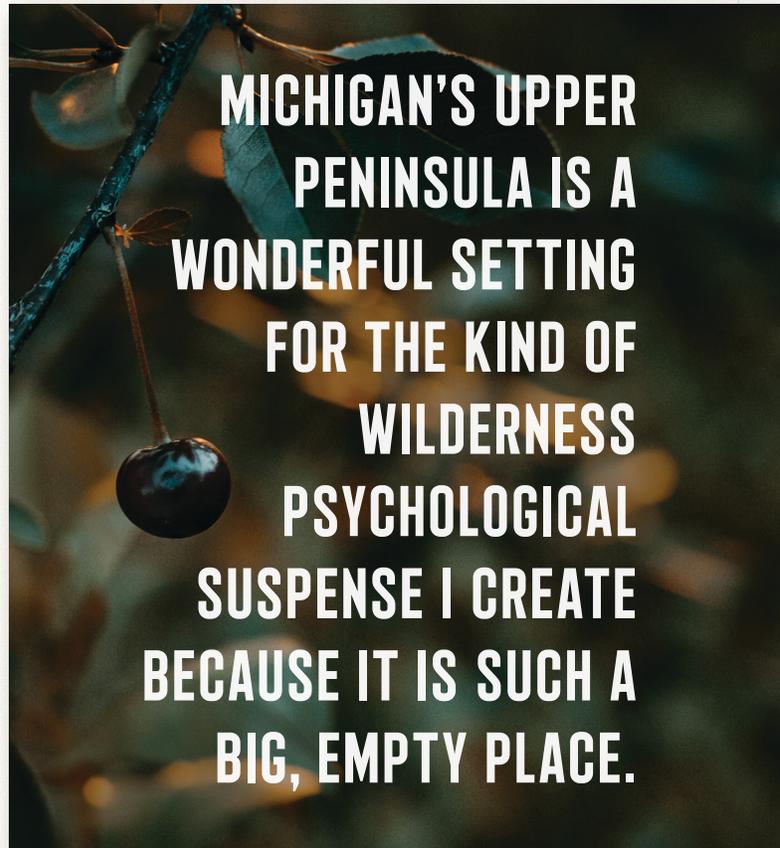
However, at heart, the two novels share very similar themes. I've always admired people who rise above a less-than-perfect childhood to make something of themselves, and both Helena and Rachel have a great deal to overcome. Helena's father kidnapped her mother when her mother was a teen, and Helena is the product of his crime. Rachel's family, too, has a dark secret that ultimately costs her parents their lives and sends Rachel to a mental hospital in penance for what she believes is her role in their deaths. After discovering the truth about their respective childhoods, both Rachel and Helena have to dig deep to find the strength to chart a new future for themselves rather than be defined by their past.

ONCE AGAIN, THE NOVEL IS SET IN MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA, A REGION YOU HOMESTEADED AND KNOW WELL. WHAT ABOUT THIS LANDSCAPE MAKES IT AN APPEALING SETTING FOR THE STORIES YOU TELL?

Michigan's Upper Peninsula is a wonderful setting for the kind of wilderness psychological suspense I create because it is such a big, empty place. I can plunk my characters in the middle of a swamp or a forest and let their stories play out with little to no influence from the outside world. This in turn makes the relationships between the characters purer and more intense. In *The Marsh King's Daughter*, Helena loves her father perhaps more than any child ever has because other than her broken shadow of a mother, there is no one else in her life. In *The Wicked Sister*, Rachel loves her older sister to a similar extreme, and willingly goes along with the dangerous games her sister dreams up for them to play because the isolation in which they

live means that Rachel has no measure against which to judge her sister's depravity.

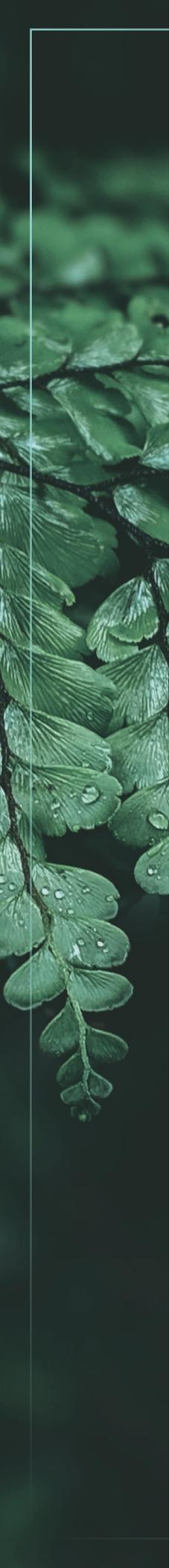
The remoteness of the Upper Peninsula wilderness also carries inherent physical dangers that make it a terrific location for a thriller. Because of its large size and small population, something as simple as getting lost can easily cost a person his or her life.



MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA IS A WONDERFUL SETTING FOR THE KIND OF WILDERNESS PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE I CREATE BECAUSE IT IS SUCH A BIG, EMPTY PLACE.

CRITICS NOTED THE FAIRY TALE ASPECTS UNDERPINNING *THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER*. WOULD YOU SAY THERE ARE ALSO SUCH THEMES IN *THE WICKED SISTER*?

There are. However, while *The Marsh King's Daughter* directly parallels the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale of the same name and the story of Helena's upbringing follows the broad strokes of that tale's events, *The Wicked Sister* incorporates aspects of several fairy



tales, including “The White Snake” and “Snow White and Rose Red” by the Brothers Grimm. *The Wicked Sister* also makes use of a number of traditional fairy tale elements: rival sisters à la Cinderella and her wicked stepsisters; an evil stepmother in the form of Rachel’s aunt, who may or may not have Rachel’s interests at heart; and an “enchanted” raven that offers Rachel assistance and direction. Even the location where the story takes place, a beautiful log cabin in the middle of a vast and impenetrable wilderness, mirrors the mysterious-castle-in-a-forest trope common in many tales, creating an otherworldly vibe as if the novel itself were a fairy tale.

BEARS PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN THIS STORY—DID YOU ALREADY KNOW A LOT ABOUT THEIR BEHAVIORS, OR DID YOU DO SPECIAL RESEARCH FOR THIS NOVEL?

Aside from a few near misses with bears during my Upper Peninsula homesteading days, I don’t have any personal experience with Michigan’s largest predator. To research my novel, I visited Oswald’s Bear Ranch in the Upper Peninsula, which happens to be the largest bear-only rescue facility in the entire United States. Dean Oswald was a great help in answering my questions and sharing his intimate knowledge of the rescue bears he cares for.

Some of the bear facts I learned in the course of my research are fascinating. For instance, while bears mate in early June, because of delayed implantation, how many cubs a female gives birth to the following winter depends on how much she weighs when she goes into her den. By making black bears an integral part of my novel I wanted to draw attention to these magnificent animals not as a source of fear or danger, but as powerful creatures to be respected and admired.

AN IMPORTANT FORCE IN THE NOVEL IS A CHARACTER WHO MAY BE A PSYCHOPATH. WHAT KINDLED YOUR INTEREST IN SUCH CHILDREN AND HOW DID YOU LEARN MORE ABOUT THEM?

Many years ago, a couple I knew well adopted three siblings. While the younger two flourished in their new environment, in time, the oldest became more and more difficult, and after some years, was diagnosed as bipolar. My friends struggled to cope with his behavioral issues for a very long time because they loved all three children and didn’t want to split them up. But eventually they had to face what to me even now seems like an impossible choice: institutionalize the oldest to protect the physical and mental safety of the younger two.

I explore a similar heartbreaking situation in *The Wicked Sister*, though the circumstances Rachel’s parents are forced to deal with are even more extreme because their daughter is a psychopath. The more I researched psychopathy in children, the more I came to appreciate the impossible challenge the parents of children who are incapable of feeling empathy and emotions face. These parents are true heroes as they navigate the path between doing what is best for their psychopathic child and what is best for their family at great personal and emotional cost.

RACHEL BELIEVES SHE ACCIDENTALLY SHOT AND KILLED HER MOTHER. BASED ON YOUR RESEARCH, HOW PLAUSIBLE IS THAT SCENARIO?

Sadly, as I researched my novel, I learned that such shootings are far more common than I had realized. According to the website Everytown, as of November 2019 there were at least 193 unintentional shootings by children in the United

States in that year alone, resulting in 73 deaths and 129 injuries.*

I wondered what the future would hold for these children, particularly the youngest who were too little to comprehend what they had done. At some point, they would find out about the terrible tragedy they were involved in. How would that knowledge change them? How could they live with themselves going forward? Could they ever come to terms with the fact that, however unintentionally, they had killed a member of their own family?

These are the questions that I wanted to explore in *The Wicked Sister*. As the story opens, Rachel has been living in a mental hospital for fifteen years as a self-inflicted punishment for her childhood crime—until she learns that she might not have accidentally shot and killed her mother when she was eleven as she has always believed. She goes back to her childhood home in a quest for answers—not realizing that

her parents' killer will do whatever it takes to ensure that Rachel never learns the truth.

THE NOVEL IS TOLD IN ALTERNATING FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT, MOTHER AND DAUGHTER. WAS IT A CHALLENGE FINDING THESE TWO DISTINCT VOICES?

Folks who don't write fiction might be surprised to learn that writing in multiple distinct voices is not at all difficult. In order to bring our characters to life, writers need to be able to crawl inside their heads, whether it's one character or several—not unlike an actor who assumes different roles for different movies. Writers are even able to empathize with the villains that we create because we know what makes them tick—though we also realize that our ability to understand and sympathize with a person whom anyone else would consider a monster sometimes makes us more than a little suspect!

RACHEL IS A BIT OF A “WILD CHILD,” IN THE VICTORIAN SENSE, IN THE WAY THAT SHE COMMUNES WITH THE NATURAL WORLD. HOW DOES THIS ASPECT OF HER CHARACTER DRIVE THE ACTION?

One of my goals as a writer is to create a sense of inevitability in my novels, so that when a reader finishes a book, they're left with the feeling that the story could only have happened in this place and time, and with these characters. To accomplish this, the relationship between the setting and the characters needs to be inextricably intertwined. In *The Wicked Sister*, Rachel's unusually strong connection with the natural world is at the core of everything she thinks and does. Had she been a person who hated the forest and wanted only to leave, her actions would have been very different. Instead, the choices she makes that spring from her love of nature shape the story, just as the natural world she loves shapes her.

* everytownresearch.org/notanaccident/#12904

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THERE IS A MOVIE IN THE WORKS FOR *THE MARSH KING'S DAUGHTER*. HOW INVOLVED WILL YOU BE IN THAT PROCESS?

This might sound strange, given that my novel is in development as a major motion picture, but as I was writing *The Marsh King's Daughter*, I never for a moment imagined it as a movie. Some authors claim that as they're writing, they're merely transcribing the story events that they see unspooling in their heads, and even envision specific actors as their characters.

I'm not like that. This, along with the fact that I have no screenwriting experience whatsoever, is why I was happy to hand off the project to people who do. The production company that optioned the screen rights and the screenwriter who adapted my novel as well as the actors and directors who've been involved in the project thus far have won or been nominated for Oscars and other major awards, so I am more than happy to leave Helena's story in their talented hands, and can't wait to meet her on the big screen!

That said, once the movie starts filming, I am very much looking forward to visiting the set—and perhaps one day walking the red carpet!

ARE YOU AT WORK ON A NEW NOVEL? WILL IT ALSO BE SET IN THE UPPER PENINSULA?

I'm currently working on a third psychological suspense novel that I am very excited about, which takes place in a small town on the shore of Lake Superior. The Great Lakes play a major role in shaping Michigan's history, climate, and geography, and three of the five Great Lakes border the Upper Peninsula, so the lakes are as much a part of the Upper Peninsula landscape as its marshes and forests.

The southern shore of Lake Superior between Grand Marais and Whitefish Point where this novel takes place is also known as the "Graveyard of the Great Lakes" because so many ships have gone down in that area, including the *Edmund Fitzgerald* immortalized in the Gordon Lightfoot song. This may give a hint regarding some of the story events in this novel . . .



RESEARCH & INSPIRATION FROM KAREN DIONNE

Black bears feature prominently in *The Wicked Sister* since Rachel's wildlife biologist mother studies the bears that roam their property, and Rachel develops a deep affinity for bears as a result. But aside from a few near misses during my Upper Peninsula homesteading days, I don't have any personal experience with Michigan's largest predator. To research my novel, I visited Oswald's Bear Ranch in the Upper Peninsula, the largest bear-only rescue facility in the United States.

Some of the bear facts I learned from owner Dean Oswald are fascinating. For instance, while bears mate in early June, because of delayed implantation, how many cubs a female gives birth to the following winter depends on how much she weighs when she goes into her den. And on a practical note, while Dean and his staff work like maniacs during the late spring, summer, and early fall gathering discarded produce from grocery stores and kitchen waste from schools, restaurants, and hospitals to feed the dozens of hungry bears they care for, during the winter, there is absolutely nothing for them to do because all of their charges are asleep!

I badly wanted to go inside one of the bear enclosures with him, but because his liability insurance wouldn't allow it, this is as close as I could get!



Rachel's family's hunting lodge was inspired by Granot Loma, a 50-room, 26,000-square-foot Adirondack-style log cabin near Marquette, Michigan, which is actually the largest log cabin in the world. Built on 415 acres of lakefront, the property includes a mile-long private beach, an indoor boathouse, and a 3,000 gallon hot tub that overlooks the private marina and Lake Superior.

While the hunting lodge in my novel isn't quite as large, I like to think that it is grander, with a copper roof, stained glass windows, and a great room filled with oriental rugs, Tiffany lamps, Navajo blankets, and enough taxidermy to fill a natural history museum. That's the beauty of writing fiction: I can make my hunting lodge as magnificent as I like!

Discover more here:

GRANOTLOMA.COM

OSWALDSBEARRANCH.COM

FRESH BERRY COBBLER

YIELDS: 6-8 servings
PREP TIME: 15 minutes
TOTAL TIME: 1 hour, 5 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- 2 c. blackberries
- 2 c. blueberries
- 2 c. raspberries
- ¾ c. plus 2 tbsp. sugar
- 2 tbsp. cornstarch
- 1 tbsp. lemon juice
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- ½ tsp. plus a pinch kosher salt
- 1¼ c. all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- 1 stick cold butter, cut into cubes
- ⅔ c. heavy cream, plus more for brushing

INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat oven to 375°.

In a large bowl, toss all berries with ¾ cup sugar, cornstarch, lemon juice, and lemon zest. Season with a pinch of salt.

In another large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, lemon zest, and remaining pinch of salt. Add butter and break down into pea-sized pieces, using your fingers or two forks. Gradually stir in the heavy cream and mix until a dough forms.

Pour the berry mixture into a 9-inch round baking dish. Using a large spoon or an ice cream scoop, drop dough over fruit. Brush the dough with cream and sprinkle with the remaining 2 table-spoons sugar.

Bake until the fruit is bubbling and the biscuits are golden brown, 47 to 50 minutes. Serve.

RECIPE FROM LENA ABRAHAM AT DELISH

delish.com/cooking/recipe-ideas/recipes/a53656/mixed-berry-cobbler-recipe