

"Vivid characters and rich settings . . .
A voicey and compelling debut." —Karin Slaughter

THE HUNTER



JENNIFER
HERRERA

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A conversation with JENNIFER HERRERA

Tell us what *The Hunter* is about.

The Hunter is about a detective whose career revolves around uncovering others' motives for their worst behaviors. Yet her own motives behind the actions that destroyed her life remain completely mysterious. This is a story of how she solves the case that cracks open what's broken about herself.

The Hunter is for anyone who has fallen back in love with their own family. It's for those wanting romance, not just the quick and easy kind, but the kind that tests your mettle. But above all, *The Hunter* is for those who are looking to escape into another world, one where the mysteries raised are solved by the end and where you close the book feeling as though you've learned something, maybe even about yourself.

The majority of the story takes place in rural Ohio, where you grew up. Why did you decide to set your first novel in a town similar to your hometown? And how important is the setting to the story?

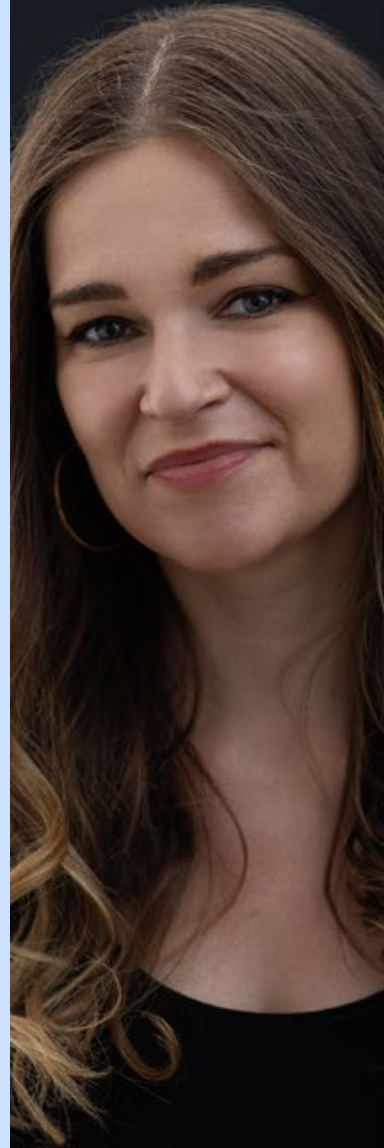
For the first five years of my life, I lived in a trailer park, which, while not economically diverse, was diverse in just about every other way. So when my

family moved to a small town in rural Ohio, I wasn't prepared for how alien I would feel there. Everyone was related. They all looked alike. They went to the same church. They held the same beliefs. If you're not from there, it's unbelievable. But those places still exist.

When I was a kid, all I knew was that I didn't fit in and wanted to get out. When I got older, I started to wonder what it was about this community that made them so afraid of letting the outside world in. As with most things I don't understand, this experience ended up in my writing, where the setting echoes the story's main conflicts.

The main character, Leigh O'Donnell, returns to her hometown to solve a murder. What qualities does Leigh have that make her a good detective? And what are her flaws?

Leigh is very intuitive. As her brother puts it, there are things her body knows that her mind can't yet understand. I think this is true of everybody to some extent. But because Leigh possesses this skill so acutely, it means she can use her emotions to guide her toward clues. But on the flipside, it also means she doesn't always have insight into her own actions. As a result, she often



comes across as erratic, unpredictable, and a loose cannon. She's always toeing that line between being divorced from reality and deeply connected to it. She doesn't always know which is which. Neither does the reader.

In *The Hunter*, you don't shy away from addressing big issues such as police corruption, mental illness, and racial stereotypes. Why was it important for you to include these themes in your debut novel?

As I said, I grew up in this town that was falsely homogenous (and I knew it was false because of where I'd lived before). So books where everyone has the same race, the same sexual orientation, the same mental health status, etc., don't feel real to me.

I didn't set out to write an "issues" book but rather a book that represents reality as I know it. Reality is messy and complicated and diverse. I hope that's what I captured.

In *The Hunter*, the main character investigates the mysterious drownings of three men in a small town. Was it a conscious decision to write a novel where no female characters are harmed?

When I first set out to write this book, I had to decide who would die. Automatically, I imagined a dead woman. It was really disturbing to recognize that I had this unconscious bias. I didn't know where it came from. So I started to look back at the suspense novels I'd read, and time and again, I found that the victims were women. There are lots of reasons for this. Some benign, others not so much.

One reason may be that because women have less muscle mass than men, they are seen as easier to kill. So, having them die expands the pool of potential suspects. Another may be that women are seen as inherently sympathetic, whereas as a culture, we still care less when men die. But the thing that worries me is that, in reading about dead women, women are being conditioned to see ourselves as victims.

We are being conditioned to see ourselves as vulnerable and in need of a man's protection. We are being conditioned to see ourselves as possessing less power in this world than we actually do.

I don't want women to come away from this novel feeling powerless. I want them to feel connected to the characters that, while flawed, are the ones in control.

Before you were a novelist, you were a literary agent. How did you get your start in the industry, and why did you decide to take the leap to write a novel of your own?

I was in grad school and hated it. I am not one of those people who is cut out for academia. I was toying around with the idea of writing fiction instead (I've always been a big reader). After I read something I'd written out loud at a local writers' conference, one of the attendees came up to me and said he needed a ghostwriter, and was I interested? That was the beginning of a long journey that sent me to New York City, to an industry that, at least in the beginning, was punishing. But I loved it, in a way I'd never loved any other job. Eventually, I made it from being an assistant to being an agent. Yet there was still a need in me that my career didn't address.

I think most of us have an urge to create. My mom fulfills this through quilting and sewing. My husband plays music. My sister belly dances. Writing makes me feel like a fully alive person. At this point, I can't imagine not doing it.

Has anything surprised you about the book writing process?

I once saw an interview with an author who said that her readers seemed to think that if only she could type faster, she'd be able to write more books. That's what's been the most surprising part of this for me—that writing isn't just about having discipline or great ideas or applying butt to chair. It's also about giving your story the space to breathe. It's about hav-

ing faith that you can do the hard thing without having to rush to the finish line.

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In a way, working in publishing primed me for having the patience I needed to be a writer. In working with my own clients, I've seen how long and how painstaking the process is to "get it right," as well as how steep the competition is when you're just getting started. You need to be completely devoted to the thing you're creating. "Mediocrity is always in a rush," is a phrase I repeat to myself a lot. It helps me slow down and respect the process.

What is your favorite suspense novel? And what authors did you look to for inspiration while writing *The Hunter*?

Tana French's *The Likeness* will always hold a special place in my heart. It so clearly draws inspiration from *Rebecca* and *The Secret History*. Yet its setting gives it a knowable structure, which is extremely comforting to me as a reader. It's the best of all worlds as far as I'm concerned.

In terms of authors I took inspiration from as I wrote, there are so many: Attica Locke, for her ability to represent moral ambiguity without making the reader feel unmoored. Gillian Flynn, for her well-timed twists. Laura Dave, for pulling at your heartstrings while taking you through an intricate mystery. Silvia Moreno-Garcia, for infusing her work with lush, atmospheric details that root you to a place. Oyinkan Braithwaite, for her expert pacing that has you rushing to the end. Louise Penny, for her knack for creating communities you fall in love with. And honestly, Charlaine Harris, for those steamy sex scenes. I love a good sex scene.

What are you working on next?

When I wrote *The Hunter*, I had no intention of making it a series. I hate it when books end on a cliffhanger, where you have to read the next book to find out what happened. Yet when I sat down to write again after finishing *The Hunter*, all I seemed to want to do was to continue Leigh's story.

This isn't exactly surprising given what a sucker I am for a series. If I fall in love with a character, I will read all forty books with that character without thinking twice. Yet here, I also saw a sequel as an opportunity to build out more of Leigh's world and, in particular, her husband's world, whom we don't get to spend much time with in book one.

There are series that start with a splash and then fizzle out. Then there are ones that only improve as the narrative proceeds, where the author gets more confident with the world they've created and the story feels deeper and more gratifying over time. My hope is that, if Leigh's story continues as I hope it will, it will be the latter, and that readers who have fallen in love with her will be rewarded with more to look forward to.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 *The Hunter* is narrated in the first-person point of view, and we get to know Leigh intimately as we see the events of the novel unfold through her eyes. How did reading from Leigh's perspective influence your experience as a reader? Would you consider Leigh a reliable narrator?
- 2 The town of Copper Falls is an outwardly beautiful location that reveals a decaying inner core. Are there other examples of outer beauty hiding darkness in the novel? Consider the way Estella is treated or how the caves are regarded by the townspeople.
- 3 Ronan's interest in archetypes is highlighted by the strong use of symbols throughout the book. How did these symbols inform your reading experience? Do you think they had an impact subconsciously? Think of the caves (the unconscious), the apple orchards (bounty), and the snakes (deception). Have you seen these symbols elsewhere in literature? Why do you think the author chose to echo those here?
- 4 Compare and contrast the ways that different characters cope with trauma throughout the novel, looking specifically at Leigh and Maude. What subconscious or conscious tools do they use to continue on after experiencing something terrible? In what other ways do our minds play tricks on us in order to move past pain?
- 5 Take a look at how far each character in the novel goes to protect what they hold dear, whether that be their family, their town, or their health. Are they justified in the actions they take? Do you think you would have made the same decisions?
- 6 Who do you think are the true villains in *The Hunter*? Were their punishments (or lack thereof) just?
- 7 No female characters are harmed or killed in *The Hunter*. Did you notice this while reading? How does this contrast with other tropes in the suspense genre?
- 8 Some townspeople are so attached to Copper Falls that they will commit crimes in order to hide the lies the town was built upon. Discuss the different ways that false stories and memories are portrayed in the novel and the impact they have. What false stories have you encountered in your own life? In the world? What effect do these inaccurate histories have?
- 9 Look at the different representations of race and class in *The Hunter*, both in the present day and in the town's history. How do the town leaders' biases regarding class and race impact the events of the novel? How does the gap between Leigh's and Eric's lived realities affect their relationship and their ability to communicate?
- 10 What do you imagine will happen to Leigh and her family after the novel's end?
- 11 *The Hunter* asks, How can we uncover the truth when we keep lying to ourselves? After reading the book, how would you answer this question?

