



When the Stars Go Dark

PAULA McLAIN

BOOK CLUB KIT

A Letter from the Author

Ten years ago, when inspiration struck in the form of a real woman from history—Ernest Hemingway’s first wife, Hadley—the idea seemed to come from nowhere. I had never considered writing a historical novel, let alone one that featured an actual person. And yet once I plunged into the research and writing process, it struck me powerfully that I wasn’t just telling a story; I was honoring Hadley’s life and spirit, and giving her a voice.

Something eerily similar happened in the writing of *When the Stars Go Dark*—the idea for which came just as unexpectedly and mysteriously, and with an electrical inner “yes” I’ve learned to pay attention to. I pictured a missing persons expert obsessed with trying to save a missing girl and also struggling to make peace with her past. Almost immediately I knew the story had to be set in Mendocino—a small coastal town in northern California where I spent time in my twenties—and that the time frame of the narrative had to be pre-DNA, pre-cell phone, before the internet had exploded and CSI had laypeople thinking they could solve a murder with their laptop.

Choosing 1993 was instinctual—random—and yet when I dug into the research, I was startled to learn that a rash of real-life abductions of young girls had occurred in the same geographical area and time frame I was exploring, most notably the kidnapping of twelve-year-old Polly Klaas. Polly was taken at knifepoint on the night of October 1, 1993, from the bedroom of her home in Petaluma while her two friends watched. It was a horror story that triggered every parent’s deepest fears, and set into motion the largest manhunt in California’s history.

I confess I didn’t sleep well in the weeks and month I researched Polly’s case and others. It began to feel imperative that I tell their stories as bluntly and factually as possible, as a way to honor their lives and dignify their deaths and disappearances. Saying their names became for me a sacred act. A kind of prayer.

Writing a novel is such an interesting mix of effort and surrender, of control and vulnerability. It wasn’t until late in the stages of drafting that it fully dawned on me just why I was so drawn to tell this particular story and not any other. My troubled detective Anna Hart is obsessed with trauma and healing, with intimate violence and the complex hidden connection between victims and predators because I’m obsessed with those things, and long have been. I’ve given her other parts of me too—a version of my childhood spent in foster care, and my abiding love of the natural world as deep medicine. What Anna knows and thinks about the hidden scars of sexual abuse, I know as a sexual abuse survivor. I also know I’m not alone.

Sometimes I look up and down the street as I’m walking and wonder which of the girls and women walking the other way—masked and socially distant, now, in 2020—share my story. I believe that our sorrow connects us, yes, and that it can also be the source of our power as well as our empathy. Anna Hart’s pain has led her to her path, her destiny, and mine has led me precisely here. To these characters, real and imaginary, to the fern forest, dripping with fog, to the bluffs above the roaring Pacific, to the cabin in the deep dark woods, and into the very heart of this book—which is as personal as anything I’ve ever written.

Love, Paula McLain

Photo © Melanie Acevedo

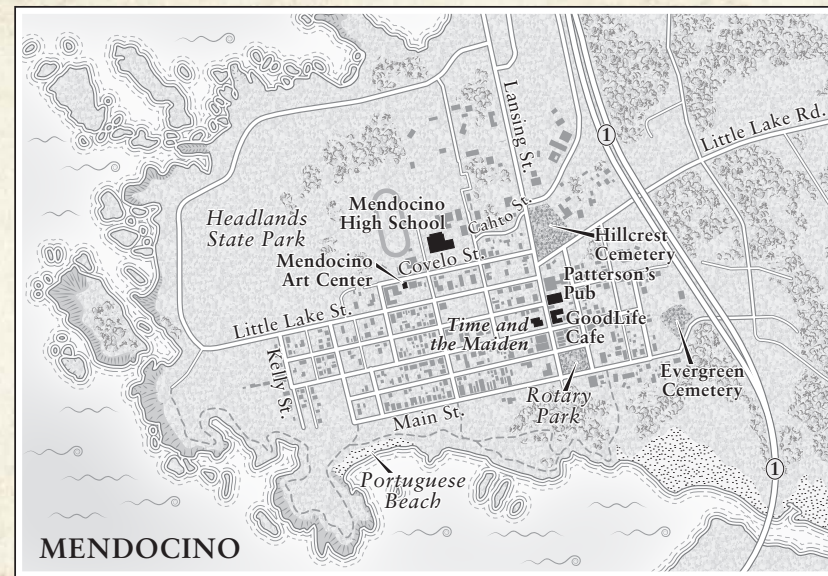


Mendocino Photo Gallery

Photos of Paula McLain in Mendocino on a research trip for the novel



Map of Mendocino



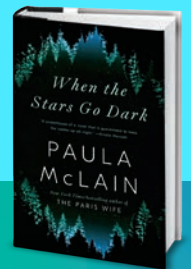
Discussion Questions

1. What did you think about the main character, Anna Hart? What did you like about her? How did she change and grow over the course of the book? How does she finally make peace with her past?
2. *When the Stars Go Dark* is set in Mendocino, California. How does the setting shape the novel? How did the author bring the small town and its surrounding woods to life for readers?
3. In Chapter 3, McLain writes, “If you think about it, most of us have very little choice about what we’re going to become or who we’re going to love, or what place on earth chooses us, becoming home.” Do you agree? How does this sentiment apply to the characters in the novel?
4. There are a lot of contrasting elements in *When the Stars Go Dark*. Light and dark, for example. Good and evil, lost and found, courage and fear, to name a few more. What other contrasts did you notice? Why do you think these opposing ideas are important to the story?
5. Paula McLain is a *New York Times* bestselling author most known for her historical fiction (*The Paris Wife*, *Circling the Sun*, and *Love and Ruin*). How did this book play with genre? In what ways did it feel similar to historical fiction, and in what ways did it feel more like psychological suspense or true crime?
6. Blame and guilt are big themes in the book, as is redemption. How do these themes manifest throughout the novel? What other central themes are featured?



Discussion Questions

7. At one point in the novel, McLain writes “Sometimes our dreams can be the most revealing things about us. Who we are when no one’s looking, who we believe we’re truly supposed to be, if we can get there.” Do you think this is true? What do the characters’ dreams reveal about their true nature?
8. This book is intense at times, grappling with difficult subject matter around trauma. But it’s also beautiful and contemplative. How does McLain balance the emotional registers throughout her novel?
9. Silence and voice are commonly mentioned throughout the book. What do those two words mean in the context of this novel? Which characters have a voice and which are silenced?
10. McLain writes, “I don’t believe forgiveness is something we have to kill ourselves to earn. It’s already here, all around us, like rain. We just have to let it in.” What does this book say about forgiveness? Why do you think forgiving yourself is sometimes the hardest thing to do?
11. What do you think is the author’s message to readers of *When the Stars Go Dark*? What did you take away from her book?
12. Discuss the author’s note at the back of the book. How did reading about McLain’s inspiration and personal for the story influence your feelings about the novel?



Spicy Mussels with Chorizo

I had a version of this dish at Patterson's Pub in Mendocino on one of my research trips for the novel. This also happens to be the first "grown-up" dish I learned to make for company. It has the advantage of being inexpensive as well as delicious!



Ingredients

- 8 oz. of chorizo sausage, casings removed, roughly chopped
- 2 shallots, minced
- 2–3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp red pepper flakes
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 cup white wine
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 leeks sliced into rings, white and light green parts only, rinsed well and drained. If you prefer, fennel bulb, finely sliced works beautifully for this dish as well. About one cup of sliced fennel should do it.
- 3 cups canned peeled tomatoes with their liquid. If you have good fresh tomatoes on hand, about seven Roma tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and chopped work well.
- ¼ cup hot cherry peppers finely sliced or minced
- ½ cup finely chopped parsley, divided
- 4 lb fresh mussels, scrubbed well and debearded. Discard any partially open mussels or those with cracked shells.

In a Dutch oven or large, deep pasta pot, cook the chorizo until brown over medium-high heat. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Drain off all but about a tablespoon of the fat from the cooking pot.

Add shallots, yellow pepper, cherry pepper, red pepper flakes, black pepper, leeks (or fennel if using), and sauté over medium-high heat until soft and fragrant. Then add garlic and tomatoes with their liquid. Cook for two or three more minutes to let the flavors combine, then add mussels to pot. Add the wine, butter, ¼ cup cream, and ¼ cup parsley. Give the mussels a stir, then cover the pot and cook until the shells have opened, about 5–7 minutes. Remove mussels to serving bowls.

To cooking pot, add the reserved chorizo and the rest of the cream. Simmer several minutes more until all the flavors have combined, then ladle the finished broth over the mussels. Garnish with a bit more chopped parsley and serve hot with lots of warm crusty bread to better enjoy the delicious broth.

Notes: If you're pescatarian or vegetarian, the chorizo can be omitted. I might add a little salt in this case, to balance out the dish. If you don't care for spicy food, omit the hot cherry pepper, omit or reduce the red pepper flakes, and substitute a nice smoked sausage for the chorizo. Feel free to experiment, and enjoy!

Playlist

“A Sky Full of Stars”—Coldplay

“Take Me Home”—Chord Overstreet

“Hold You in My Arms”—Ray LaMontagne

“No One Ever Loved”—Lykke Li

“If I Go, I’m Goin”—Gregory Alan Isakov

“In the Forest”—Van Morrison

“Stars”—Grace Potter & the Nocturnes (feat. Kenny Chesney)

“When It Don’t Come Easy”—Patty Griffin

“Rescue”—Lauren Daigle

“Falling Like the Stars”—James Arthur

“Shine”—Lolo

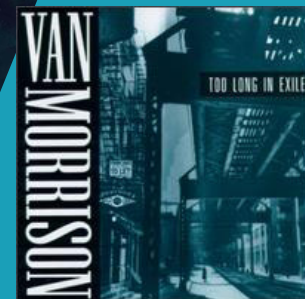
“Rise”—Eddie Vedder

“Into the Mystic”—Jason Isbell & the 400 Unit, Live at Twist & Shout

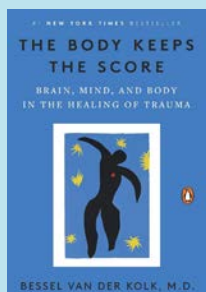
“All of the Stars”—Ed Sheeran

“Learning to Fly”—William Fitzsimmons, live in Amsterdam

“Mystery of Love”—Sufjan Stevens

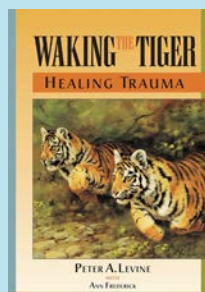


Further Reading



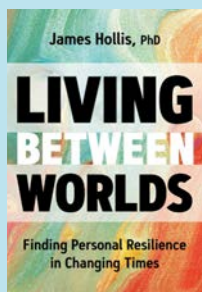
***The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.**

Drawing on thirty years of dedicated research, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk offers illuminating insight into how trauma literally reshapes the bodies and brains of survivors, and explores critical paths to healing and recovery that can help survivors fully inhabit themselves emotionally, psychologically, and bodily.



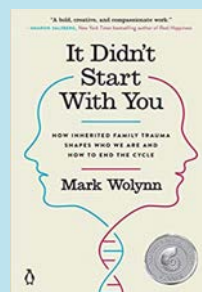
***Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, Peter A. Levine**

With a deep understanding of human behavior and the mind, Peter Levine explores the physiological and psychological effects of both deep and “ordinary” traumatic events, and introduces Somatic Experiencing, a revolutionary treatment approach for addressing and transforming the scars of trauma.



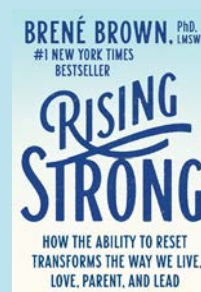
***Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*, James Hollis Ph.D.**

Hollis uses his considerable experience in Jungian depth-psychology to shed light on how we weather life's challenges and uncertainties to deepen the inner journey, and find meaning. “We can find what supports us when nothing supports us,” Hollis writes here. “By bearing the unbearable, we go through the desert to arrive at a nurturing oasis we did not know was there.”



***It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*, Mark Wolynn**

A thought-provoking look at inherited trauma, that uses recent findings in the field of epigenetics to uncover how traumas from previous generations can leave physical and emotional traces in their descendants. Wolynn also suggests methods for finding resolution, integration, and healing, even if the family member who suffered the original trauma has died.



***Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, Brené Brown**

With her trademark humor, empathy, and insight, Brené Brown looks deeply at how to overcome life's adversities, drawing on resilience, self-dignity, forgiveness, gratitude, and self-reflection.



***When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, Pema Chödrön**

A meditation on how to stay afloat when life feels most erratic and unsettling. Chödrön is an ordained nun and celebrated Buddhist teacher, as well as a wise and beautiful writer. She tells us: “Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”