

LITTLE THREATS: READING GROUP MATERIAL

A Conversation with Emily Schultz

What inspired *Little Threats*?

I always knew that I wanted to write about a group of people years after a crime had happened. In my own life, I've seen people go through extremely traumatic events and how each reacts and learns to cope is very different. I also wanted to write about the '90s, and twins—my brothers are twins. And this story of people years after a murder seemed to be able to support all these subjects I wanted to write about. I've always found a novel is almost like a band writing a song. It starts as a few notes, then a melody emerges, and it comes together when it does.

Little Threats is very different from your debut novel, *The Blondes*—was the writing process different?

I'd like to point out that *Little Threats* also begins with hair! So there is at least that throughline. But it was very different in that *The Blondes* was told entirely through the voice of one character, Hazel, as she's on this journey through a very strange pandemic. The process for *Little Threats* was all about settling on the voices of the story. During editing we decided to only give POVs to the characters who had been through the 1993 events: the two families and Berk. Limiting the writing to them let me focus on what made me want to start this novel: what happens to people after the crime you read about in the news is no longer front-page.

Why did you decide to veer towards the suspense genre? What genre would you classify *Little Threats* as belonging to?

This is my first psychological thriller, but my late father, who was an English teacher, read three mysteries a week and always wanted to write one. Because of that he was a supporter of all my writing: poetry, literary fiction. I wish he could have read this one to tell me how I did.

I think I moved to the mystery genre because something has happened: women are taking up this genre as our own, as writers and readers. We get to express our darkest thoughts here—what we're most afraid of—in ways we couldn't in other places. For me, I would say what's more terrifying than your very first boyfriend showing up in your backyard unannounced years later? Once I had that scene between Kennedy and Berk I knew I had to tell the story.

I think how women read mystery is different than how men read it. For us, these are cautionary tales. While we're being entertained we're also processing our own experiences.

The culture and chaos of the 1990s is at the heart of the novel—why were you drawn to write about this time period? What were the 1990s like for you, personally?

I started off the 1990s very young, in my teen years, and ended that decade as an adult. That meant I made both the best and the worst decisions of my life in that decade. I always wanted to write about the music, novels, and films of that period because for me they were so exciting. It was a time of intense optimism and also subversiveness. Depending who you were, 1993 was peak grunge, or riot girl. Activism was

everywhere. Hip-hop was also exploding, and then by 1995 we were moving into electronic music and rave culture. I remember 1993 very clearly because it was the first year I lived in a house with my friends away from home. Berk's apartment is going to be familiar to anyone in college at that time, but I wasn't able to put in everything—I had to tailor it to these specific characters' experiences.

Are any of the events in the novel based on your own experiences?

When the character of Berk made his way into the book I recognized where he came from, and I started to understand Kennedy better. Like Kennedy, my first boyfriend was in his 20s when I was sixteen. I spent an unreasonable amount of time after it was over focused on a person for whom I was little more than a conquest. Those early relationships are formative and really shape the way you look at the world, who you trust or don't trust, whether you are capable of love and meaningful connections. For a very long time, I was not. It was a consensual relationship, but the power imbalance affected my confidence for years.

I want to think I've forgiven that person in my life. I could say nice things: he introduced me to the Beats and encouraged me to write. But I admit it was really easy to write Berk as a jerk—the sly flirty comments that also undermine, and the things he brags about. It was freeing to write Carter as someone who sees through him, even though Kennedy doesn't. The Berk Butlers of this world used to be a rite of passage for young women and men, and now we're looking at that differently. Another thing I learned is I'm far from the person I was at sixteen. In all those ways, *Little Threats* is my most personal book to date, but it's also the most fictionalized. I'm not very good at memoir or essays because I do need the freedom of fiction.

Little Threats is narrated from multiple points of view—did you find that some character perspectives were easier to write than others? Did you have any favorites?

It was trickiest to write Gerry because I've never been a fiftysomething male lawyer. But it's just like in acting. You happen on one thing and it becomes the key to the character. Once I put him alone in that house, changing the linens, it opened up his world for me. He really is all about the house, the suburb, and trying to keep life the same. Writing Everett felt natural because his life is probably closer to mine: I'm a country girl. His relationship with his mom, Marly, was also something I wanted to explore because it is complex. She's stuck in the past and she needs him to stay with her, but also wants him to get on with it and live his life. There is such a push and pull between them.

Kennedy's writing assignments from prison are so interesting! Why did you decide to share some of Kennedy's story in this way?

These sections are in first person because I wanted to give the reader an intimate portrait of the crime even though it's far in the past. It lets us know how much Kennedy has struggled with what she knows and doesn't know. I found it a very powerful device because it is a break from the main narrative. At the same time, it's easy to do it too much, so limiting it to her assignments was a way for me to use it just enough.

What kind of research did you do while writing this novel?

With fiction you can slow yourself down with too much research, so I try to get the story done first now and make sure facts are right during editing. And getting feedback is sometimes the best way to make sure it's right. I have relatives who have worked or taught in prisons and some of the details have come from their stories over the years. Gerry having a powerful friend sit beside him in court during the plea

hearing came from a celebrity court case I read about and it turns out it's common. When I did an early reading of that chapter, a public defender came up to me after and she said it captured how plea deals happen and how the privileged game the system. In terms of pop culture, I think because the setting and era were so personal to me, I had to do very little research. It does pay to fact check your memories though. I can't believe how off I was on music history sometimes. On that note, I will say that Carter's musical style is much more mine whereas Kennedy's is more like my husband's and my friends from the time. I did always feel like the granola girl around the punks.

You were the co-founder and an editor for *Joyland* magazine for many years. How does writing and publishing your own novels differ from your work as an editor? Do you think your "day job" has influenced your role as an author?

Reading different kinds of writing and from as many different perspectives as possible has been a gift to me as writer. It has helped me focus on my own voice: What do I bring? Why do I want to tell these stories? And it also means that I know how important the editing process is! There's always a moment of dread I have when I'm on the other side of editing, waiting for feedback on my work, but it's so vital to making any book better.

You grew up in Canada, and now live in Brooklyn. Why did you decide to set *Little Threats* in suburban Richmond, Virginia? What experience do you have with this area, and why did it interest you?

My family is from Detroit, but in the 1970s my dad decided he preferred Canada to Vietnam. It was closer. When I moved back to the US in 1997 after college I picked Richmond because I had family there. It was an almost random pick, but my time there turned into my crash course about living in America. Richmond is both North and South and all the burdens that come with those identities. I know Virginia is now reconciling with its history and embracing change, but back then it was a place that could be hostile to change, and to newcomers.

I didn't grow up like the Wynns but I worked in a store in Carytown with a rich white clientele and I saw the different kinds of wealth: the old money with no shame about its past—the ones who bragged about being related to statues—and the anxious new money families, like the Wynns, who could never stop striving. The women I served had a sadness to them I didn't expect from the rich. That was only one part of Virginia though. Everett is another part and so is Dee Nash with her family history. I left after two years but the complexity and beauty of that place stayed with me.

Guilt—and the way it defines us and destroys us—is an important theme in the novel. Why were you interested in writing about guilt?

I was interested in writing about people learning to move beyond their mistakes—or not, depending on the character. In Kennedy, I wanted to show someone who had destroyed her life before it began, but who was trying to make a new start. All the forces of the world continue to punish a person after a jail sentence. Even with her privilege, Kennedy faces that.

Without giving too many spoilers, is the guilt Kennedy feels hers? Or is she carrying it for someone else? Similarly, Carter disappears into her addiction in the years following Haley's death and Kennedy's imprisonment—is it because she wasn't there and couldn't save her friend? Is it because she can't save her sister from her sentence, or their mother from cancer? Carter is described as the softer twin, and I see

her as the caregiver in the novel. She puts her own needs second, but the stress of that weighs on her. Sometimes very young people have these incredible burdens—often invisible to others.

How much did you know about your characters and their paths before you started writing *Little Threats*? Were you surprised by the murderer's identity? Or had you known it from the outset?

I knew who had done it after maybe my first fifty pages, but that had a drawback because the murderer was incredibly obvious throughout the first draft. I had to go back over scenes and take out the tells and strengthen a lot of secondary characters. I really wanted the clues to stay within the girls' world also—ephemera of the era—print photographs, letters, the trinkets and necklaces they wore. Because I was thinking a lot about symbols of girlhood, the things we let go as we get older.

What's next for you?

My new novel is underway, but all I can say right now is it's about three friends from New York who get together upstate for what they call a remembering party. It doesn't go according to plan. I really want to get away to work on it, but we did a podcast adaptation of *The Blondes* last year and that has taken off and just been dubbed into French and Spanish so there's interest in it again as a TV series. But trust me, that never goes according to plan either.

Reading Group Guide

1. *Little Threats* is told from the point-of-view of several different characters, and through interviews, writing assignments, and memories. How did experiencing these different viewpoints change your reading experience? Was there a specific character that you felt most connected to?
2. Kennedy must discover what it means to be an adult after spending her formative years in prison. How does she transform over the course of the novel? What would her adulthood have looked like if Haley had never been murdered?
3. Take a look at the different sibling relationships explored in *Little Threats*, comparing and contrasting the connections between Haley and Everett, Carter and Kennedy, and even Berk and Wyatt. How do relationships with siblings shape us?
4. *Little Threats* is set in 2008, but the crime at its heart took place in 1993. Did the culture of the 1990s have an impact on the crime? How does the 1990s era impact the characters in the present-day? Discuss the interplay between past and present in the novel, particularly looking at the characters who are trying to bury their pasts.
5. Discuss the impact that class and socioeconomic status have upon both Haley's murder investigation and the punishment (or lack thereof) of those responsible. Consider the different ways that money and symbols of wealth are discussed by the various characters.
6. Throughout the novel, how did your suspicions about the identity of Haley's murderer shift and change?

7. Though Haley is not alive during the events of the novel, she is very much a character. In what ways is she represented on the page? Which characters act in her interests? How does Haley transcend the typical definition of a "victim"?
8. Why do you think that Carter and Everett are drawn to one another? Do you think they would have formed a relationship if they had not been connected by the crime? What do you imagine happens to them after the novel's end?
9. Each of the characters in *Little Threats* carries guilt over Haley's death in different ways. How does guilt manifest in each of them? Why do certain characters find ways to cope with guilt, and others crumble beneath it?
10. There are many variations on relationships and power and age in the book. Is this something we see differently now than we did in 1993, or 2008?