

# AND THE TREES STARE BACK READER GUIDE





# DEAR READER,

What can I say about this precious, precious book?

The book I wrote for my younger self because she needed it desperately and never found it. The book that took me deep into Estonia's bogs, the dark history of the USSR, and the tenderest places in my own heart.

It started with a tiny piece of Eastern European folklore: a story about a five-year-old girl who disappeared in a cursed forest only to emerge five years later still five years old.

They call it a ghost story. But I found something else in it.

A story about an older sister weighed down by the trauma. About what it means to live as a marginalized person under a hostile state. About love in all its messiest, hardest, most impossible forms.

A story about realizing who you are along the way.

This is my love letter to Estonia. My love letter to those bowed by the weight of all the trauma this world serves up. And, perhaps most of all, my love letter to younger me—and anyone else who has felt they were carrying the whole world and at any moment it might crush them.

If that's you, this one is for you. I see you. Keep going.

Love,

*Gigi*



# THE SINGING REVOLUTION

This book is fiction, but **The Singing Revolution** was very real and led to freedom from the USSR for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Here are some of the key events of the revolution in Estonia:

## 1939

The Soviet army invades Estonia and begins an **occupation** that will span decades and cost more than a hundred thousand lives. It becomes illegal to fly the Estonian flag and anything seen as non-Russian is brutally suppressed.

## Mid- to late-1980s

A new Soviet leader (Gorbachev) introduces a government reform program (**perestroika**) that promises more free speech, among other things. Activists begin testing the limits by peacefully protesting against mining operations and other injustices. After many years of an iron fist, they are surprised to find that the government generally tolerates the dissent.

## 1987 and on...

Protesters begin **singing banned nationalist songs** en masse. When police order people to leave festival grounds, hundreds of thousands simply move locations and keep singing.

## August 23, 1989

Two million people across 400 miles in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania join hands to create an unbroken chain known as **The Baltic Chain of Freedom**.

## August 20, 1991

Estonia declares independence. The next morning, Soviet troops attempt to take control of the **Tallinn TV Tower**, but peaceful protesters show up in force, blocking the road and the area around the tower with their bodies to slow the tanks. They win the standoff and the Soviets retreat.

## December 26, 1991

The **USSR officially dissolves**.



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Throughout the course of the book, Vik's feelings about the bog change and change again. **How does this reflect her emotional state?** What does it say about her sense of hope or despair?

2. As the truth unfolds, characters wrestle with ideas about **who is "real" and who counts**. In what ways does this mirror current social struggles? In what contexts is the world still trying to parcel people out as if some count more than others?

3. Much of the mystery in this book centers around Anna's inability to communicate what happened. What does Vik's **journey from ignorance to understanding** tell us about dealing with uncertainty? What does she get right and wrong?

4. Were you familiar with **CPTSD and OCD** before reading this book? Did anything about Vik's thoughts and feelings surprise you or change your perspective on mental illness?

5. This book is set during **Estonia's Singing Revolution**. Did you know about the revolution before reading? What do you think of the different ways people peacefully protested for their independence? What can the Singing Revolution tell us about today's protests and movements?



# Q & A WITH THE AUTHOR

## WHAT INSPIRED THE BOOK?

While traveling in Eastern Europe, I stumbled upon a folktale about a creepy nearby forest. The forest, locals claim, had been disappearing people for years. One day, a little girl walked in and vanished. Five years later, she walked back out—without having aged a day.

I couldn't get the story out of my mind, so when I moved to Estonia and started exploring the bogs and researching the country's history of occupation by the USSR, I knew I wanted to take this folktale and tangle it up with the very real history of Estonia's Singing Revolution, which eventually freed them from Soviet rule.

## WHAT WAS YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS?

I started with the usual things: history books, scholarly articles, and Estonian-authored essays about niche details (such as the role of Finnish TV in the lives of northern Estonians, who rushed to purchase expensive TV antennas so that they could get news and stories that weren't USSR propaganda).

Beyond that, because this is near-historical fiction, I wanted to talk to people who lived through the Singing Revolution. I sought out women who were in their teens or early 20s when Estonia gained independence and asked them to tell me about their lives over coffee or lunch. This is where details like the vodka socks (a home remedy for all manner of ails that involves soaking socks in vodka and letting your feet steep in them), the careful washing and re-use of plastic grocery bags as purses, and the rock-hard teddy bears come from.



# Q & A WITH THE AUTHOR

## VIK HAS OCD AND CPTSD. WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO EXPLORE THAT IN THIS STORY?

Firstly, because mentally ill people (like myself) exist and have always existed. We deserve to see ourselves in stories. Period.

Secondly, this is a story about a trauma survivor.

She lost her sister. She lost her father. She lives with a lack of safety in a world that does not mean her well.

*Of course* she's impacted by that trauma. *Of course* she's got more hurdles than someone who's had a peaceful life.

I want trauma survivors to see themselves in this story and know that *it is normal* for our bodies and minds to respond to external trauma like this. That they are okay. That they are lovable. That they are whole.

Sometimes we need to see our scariest, strangest, or most secret feelings outside ourselves in order to process them. In order to love ourselves through them. In order to understand that we are just scared kids trying to get it right.

## I LOVED THIS BOOK. WHAT SHOULD I READ NEXT?

If you like my work, I have two other YA books already on shelves: *The Wicked Unseen* and *We Are the Beasts*.

I'm also an unending fan of *Bad Witch Burning* by Jessica Lewis, *The Raven Cycle* by Maggie Stiefvater, and anything by Sami Ellis.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gigi Griffis is a critically-acclaimed author of books for teens and adults, including *We Are the Beasts* and *The Lioness*. She's a sucker for little-known histories, "unlikable" female characters, and all things Europe. After almost ten years of semi-nomadic life, she now lives in Portugal with an opinionated Yorkie-mix named Luna and a collection of nerdy history books.

While she never saw the flicker of lantern eyes while she was exploring Estonia's bogs, she did once pay her respects to a suspicious bit of mist.

## GIGI GRIFFIS



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# OUT NOW

# THE WICKED UNSEEN



To say sixteen-year-old Audre doesn't fit in would be the understatement of the century. She's a city kid who's found herself in a rural town. The only girl at school who'd rather kiss a girl than a boy. Not to mention that the whole town believes there's a secret Satanic cult conducting rituals in the nearby woods—and Audre is a born skeptic.

When the preacher's daughter and Audre's secret crush, Elle, goes missing on Halloween weekend, the town is quick to point fingers—in Audre's direction. While they harass Audre's family for being newcomers and nonbelievers, Audre realizes she might be the only person here who can find her friend.

The deeper she goes, though, the weirder it gets. What happened to Elle—and is the evil this town is hiding really what Audre thinks it is?

***“An absorbing mystery with strong characterization.”*** – Kirkus

***“At times discomfiting and chilling, and at others thrilling and empowering, *The Wicked Unseen* will be a popular addition to mystery and horror shelves.”*** – Booklist

***“Griffis captures the reality of this 1980s and '90s cultural moment with eerie resonance, and brisk pacing paired with clever mystery elements deliver.”*** – Publishers Weekly



# OUT NOW

# WE ARE THE BEASTS



When a series of brutal, mysterious deaths start plaguing the countryside and whispers of a beast in the mountains reach the quiet French hamlet of Mende, most people believe it's a curse—God's punishment for their sins.

But to sixteen-year-old Joséphine and her best friend, Clara, the beast isn't a curse. It's an opportunity.

For years, the girls of Mende have been living in a nightmare—fathers who drink, brothers who punch, homes that feel like prisons—and this is a chance to get them out.

Using the creature's attacks as cover, Joséphine and Clara set out to fake their friends' deaths and hide them away until it's safe to run. But escape is harder than they thought. If they can't brave a harsh winter with little food... If the villagers discover what they're doing... If the beast finds them first...

Those fake deaths might just become real ones.

***"Full of courage, heart, and danger, WE ARE THE BEASTS is a thoroughly engrossing read about the lengths young women must go to to survive when confronted by beasts of all kinds. I gasped, I smiled, I was enraged—this book is triumphant."*** – Kendare Blake, #1 NYT Bestselling author of *Three Dark Crowns*

***"Visceral and poetic...A dread-filled yet inspiring tale of the power that angry girls can wield."*** - Kirkus Reviews