

# The Wilderness

## By Karen Novak

### Reading Group Guide

#### **About this guide:**

The discussion questions that follow are meant to enhance your reading group's conversation about Karen Novak's *The Wilderness*, the chilling tale of a son's abuse at the hands of his self-righteous father, of a long-ago murder and its haunting aftermath, and of a woman's obsession with following the thread of the mystery, even at the risk of losing her own family.

#### **About this book:**

When the body of an elderly man is found naked, frozen to death on the grounds of an abandoned petting zoo near where private investigator Leslie Stone lives with her family, the discovery triggers what Leslie calls the "haunted amusement park" of her mind. Voices and apparitions she knows to be hallucinatory disrupt her waking world. And she is unable to forget that the old man has left behind what seems like a riddle to be solved: an odd drawing and a children's poem with a shifting meaning, titled "The Wilderness."

Compelled to find out what happened, Leslie finds her search interlacing with that of investigative journalist Sophia Mallory, who is tracing her personal path through the historical tragedy of slavery and its aftermath. Together they uncover a pattern of institutionalized violence so brutal, so inexplicable, that it resembles a curse. As "The Wilderness" leads the women deeper into the plot, it also leads them deeper into their own psyches, forcing them to question their motives for solving a mystery that threatens to destroy the lives of everyone they love.

#### **For discussion:**

1. What is it about the Kendrick case that provokes Leslie's interest and reawakens her illness? Leslie leaves her house in the middle of the night to follow a hunch (42), and ends up following the ghost of a little girl to the frozen site of her entombed bones (50). What is the effect on the reader of the first 51 pages of the novel, which set the plot in motion?
2. To whom is James Kendrick's letter addressed (17-40)? What state of mind does it express? What does he hope to achieve by writing it?
3. According to Greg, Leslie "*thinks* things through the way a junkie *thinks* about the next fix" (58). In what ways does Leslie's professional life interfere with being a parent and partner? Given the nature of Leslie's illness (28), as well as the fact that her professional specialization involves rapes, murder, and other violence against children, is there any way for her to protect her daughters from her own obsessions? How much is the reader's sympathy for Greg increased by the effects of his first person narration? Does this, the third Leslie Stone novel, suggest that Leslie's marriage is finally over?
4. Leslie calls Phillip Hogarth "my never-ending mistake" and tells Sophia Mallory that Phillip is "who the devil wants to be when the devil grows up" (103). Yet as this same

paragraph makes clear, Leslie's attraction to him is profound. Is he more suited to "bad girl" Leslie (18) than Greg is, and if so, why does she consider him a "mistake"?

5. Molly Stone is deeply angered by the ongoing drama of her mother's illness and her parents' marriage. Sections of the novel are narrated from Molly's point of view (unlike Greg's sections, in third person narration rather than first); what do we learn about Molly? What is Novak suggesting about the similarities between Leslie's past life and Molly's present one? Is Molly being traumatized by her mother's absence just as Leslie was by her own mother's departure?

6. Discuss the character of Sophia Mallory. What is she seeking? In what ways is her fate, like Leslie's, determined by events in the past? How do she and Nate fulfill each other's wishes? Why does she withhold information from Leslie (146,152)?

7. What is the nature of Nathaniel Kendrick's psychosis, and what does "retrofitting memory" (149) have to do with it?

8. Who is opening and closing the cage doors at Happy Andy's (45)? Why is the water contaminated? What is suggested by Kendrick's quote about "many others" and what is Kendrick's relationship to the serial killings that included the murder of Sophia Mallory's brother?

9. Reviewer Marilyn Stasio has commented that *The Wilderness* is "no more a conventional ghost story than the two previous books," and that "it continues Novak's attempt to expand the limits of human understanding by probing Leslie's disordered mind..." (*New York Times Book Review* 12/26/04, p. 22). Why are Novak's novels so refreshingly unconventional, in comparison with most mystery fiction? What aspects of her writing—style, plotting, themes, use of character, her imaginative quirks—contribute to this sense of strangeness?

10. Just as Novak's previous novel *Innocence* tapped into the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale "The Nightingale," *The Wilderness* centers on a puzzling 17<sup>th</sup> century poem (47). How does the poem function in the imaginative and historical structure of the novel? How does it provide a central element in the plot?

11. What are the aspects of Leslie's character that make her so compelling to read about? How does her mind work? What is her sense of humor like?

12. Like the previous Leslie Stone novels, *The Wilderness* is concerned with the idea of being haunted, and examines situations in which the past is being relived or repeated. Nathaniel Kendrick imagines Sophia Mallory to be the girl murdered decades before and he believes himself to be his own uncle, who loved the murdered girl. Leslie herself is haunted by child victims of violence. What does Novak suggest about such hauntings and their force in human psychology?

13. What is the significance of the novel's title, and what is its relation to the picture book of the same name? Why is Sophia Mallory seeking a copy of the book? What clues are revealed on pages 130 and 182?

14. Given the history of slavery and racism in the novel, why does Novak choose to keep the story's regional setting vague?

15. Discuss the aspects of the plot that are difficult to work out, complexities of the plot and what, if anything, is left unresolved at the end of the novel.

**Suggested reading**

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*; Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*; Madison Jones, *A Cry of Absence*; Dennis Lehane, *Shutter Island*; Henning Mankell, *Faceless Killers*; Alexander McCall Smith, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*.

**Karen Novak** is the author of two other Leslie Stone novels, *Five Mile House* and *Innocence*, as well as *Ordinary Monsters*. She lives in Mason, Ohio.