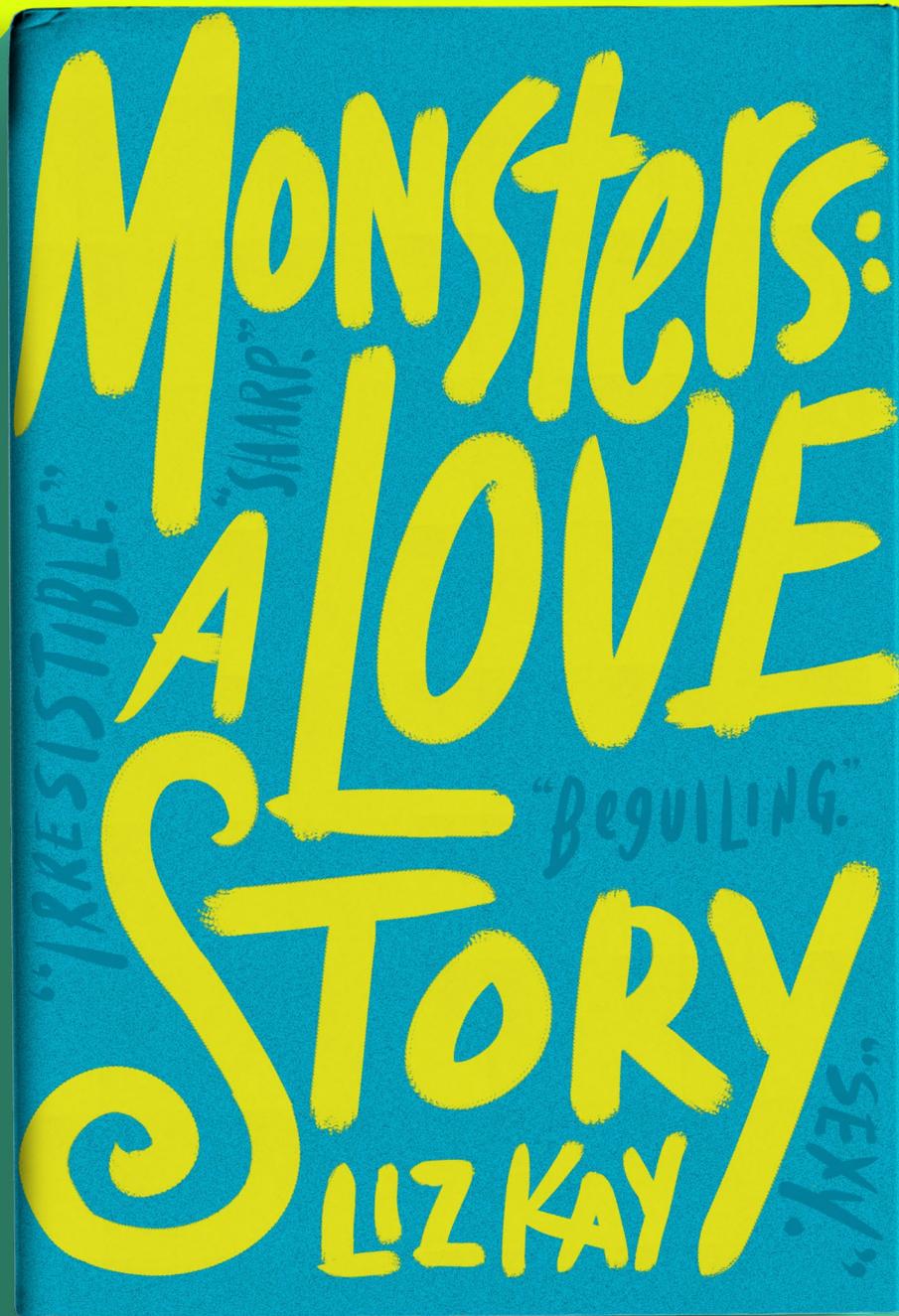


BOOK CLUB KIT



FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Do you think Stacey and Tommy are monsters? Why or why not? Was there a time in your life when you felt like a monster?
- 2 What was your first reaction to Tommy? Was there a point at which you began to see him differently? If so, when?
- 3 Stacey's novel-in-verse is a feminist reimagining of *Frankenstein*. How else does feminism play into the novel? Do you think Stacey is a feminist?
- 4 Stacey often feels that she's not enough for her sons, while Tommy admits that he often feels like he's in a scene in which he "play[s] a good father" (page 42). Do you think Stacey and Tommy are bad parents? Why or why not?
- 5 How does Stacey deal with her grief over the death of her husband? In what ways does this grief shape her relationship with Tommy? What would have happened if Tommy had fallen in love with Stacey's poetry while her husband was still alive?
- 6 How does Stacey grow throughout the novel? Is she happy at the end?
- 7 Stacey and Sadie both have complicated relationships with food. How does the novel address issues of female body image? Is this different in Omaha from how it is in Hollywood?
- 8 On page 36, Tommy says that *Monsters in the Afterlife*, the film adaptation of Stacey's novel-in-verse, isn't about sex, but rather about control. How does the line between desire and control shift throughout the novel?
- 9 Discuss Tommy and Phillip as two very different suitors for Stacey. What does each man bring out in her? Which would you pick?
- 10 While quick-paced, romantic, and often humorous, the novel tackles some heavy themes: infidelity, parenthood, grief, feminism. Ultimately, did you relate to Stacey? To Tommy? Why or why not? Did the novel make you feel differently about decisions you've made in your own life?

SCOTCH on the ROCKS

To authentically drink like Stacey and Tommy, drink several and drink them quickly.

INGREDIENTS

- Quality aged scotch, brand of your choice
- Ice

EQUIPMENT

- Rocks glass
- Jigger

STEPS

- Fill a rocks glass with ice.
- Using the jigger, measure 50ml of scotch into the glass.
- Serve.



Q&A
WITH

LIZ Kay

Tell us how you came to write *Monsters: A Love Story*.

I was at the tail end of a novel-in-verse, a retelling, not of *Frankenstein*, but of “Hansel and Gretel,” written from the perspective of the witch. There was something about the witch poems that other artists seemed drawn to. They wanted to talk about her, draw her, write their own poems in response. And so I was thinking about this idea of collaboration and about how collaboration could begin to feel like a loss of control. I liked the idea of two artists from very different worlds, one with such a minimal audience as to feel beholden to no one, and the other very much aware of the need to meet expectations, very much aware of being watched. I was really interested in these characters as artists, and so the first scene I thought to play with was the book festival panel. The first incarnation of that scene definitely didn’t make it into the book. It was terrible fiction and very dry, and I think Stacey used words like “enjambment.” It wasn’t any fun, but it was the first flicker of the charac-

ters coming to life. I wasn't sure at the time whether they were sleeping together, but I understood that everyone else in the room had the expectation that they would be, and that for Stacey that assumption carried pressures and judgments that were not directed at Tommy. I was initially surprised that a scene I imagined as being primarily about art very quickly became about gender.

You've written chiefly as a poet. How was writing a novel different?

There are a lot more words in a novel. That's a flip-pant answer, of course, but it's also at the crux of the difference. Poetry is painstaking, slow, word by word, and writing the novel, strangely enough, was so much faster. It's also more fun. Dialogue, specifically, was something I'd never really played with before, so it was all really new and big and exhilarating. Possibly the most freeing aspect of writing *Monsters: A Love Story* was that failure seemed inevitable. Did I know how to write a novel? I did not. Did I care if it was any good in the end? Not particularly. What I did know is that I was completely and intractably in love with the pages and characters in front of me, and that's what pulled me all the way through.

The book is set largely in Omaha and Hollywood. What drew you to these two worlds?

For me, in many ways, the book is a long love letter to Omaha, which is where I've lived for most of my adult life. Like Stacey, I came to Omaha as an outsider, and the Midwest is a weird place to try to settle into, but I've lived here a long time now and I absolutely love it. I love it for the people and the places and the flaws. I love it for its realness. Hollywood seemed like the perfect contrast, Omaha's polar opposite almost, and it was interesting to me to consider where Stacey especially would feel the most at home.

Where did you grow up? Are any aspects of Stacey's family similar to your own?

I grew up a little of everywhere. My father was in the Army and we lived in various spots around the

United States and Germany. There are definitely aspects of Stacey's family that look like mine. I have two sisters, so it seemed natural to want to explore Stacey's relationship with Jenny, though neither of my sisters would be anywhere near so easy to manipulate. And like Stacey, I'm the mother of sons (three), and I'll admit to drawing heavily on that experience in capturing some of the energy and moods and interests of boys, but my kids are older and smarter and funnier and all of my relationships are significantly more honest.

"I WAS COMPLETELY AND INTRACTABLY IN LOVE WITH THE PAGES AND CHARACTERS IN FRONT OF ME, AND THAT'S WHAT PULLED ME ALL THE WAY THROUGH."

Stacey is a tough female character, but she's also extremely vulnerable. Did anything surprise you while you were writing her?

Nothing surprised me about Stacey while I was writing her, but I was surprised by readers' reactions to her: Stacey is both too bitchy and not feminist enough; Stacey lets her sister babysit too often but is also too much of a traditional housewife. Initially, I think I was hurt on Stacey's behalf, but then I thought, No, that's exactly right, because women don't get to be human and flawed and full of contradictions. Meanwhile, Tommy had a difficult childhood, so he gets a free pass.

Was there a real actor who inspired Tommy?

No. Not really. Though we poets are all slightly obsessed with James Franco's interest in poetry and I was definitely aware of his short film adaptation of

a Frank Bidart poem. I wouldn't say Franco inspired the character of Tommy, but maybe some of Tommy's more literary leanings.

Stacey is the author of a feminist reimagining of *Frankenstein*. Do you see her as a feminist? Why *Frankenstein*?

I do see Stacey as a feminist, but I also recognize she's a woman who is traditionally at an advantage in the patriarchal system. She's beautiful, she's well educated, she's financially secure, she's aligned with successful, powerful men. The patriarchy is a pretty comfortable place for her, so while she's intellectually driven to critique the system, it's also often easier for her to accomplish what she wants by working inside it.

"I DO SEE STACEY AS A FEMINIST, BUT I ALSO RECOGNIZE SHE'S A WOMAN WHO IS TRADITIONALLY AT AN ADVANTAGE IN THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM."

I liked *Frankenstein* for its physicality, for its emphasis on deconstructing and reconstructing the body. I liked the emphasis on parts. We're not looking at a whole person. We're looking at an arm or a thigh or a breast. I do think women experience a great deal of pressure to compartmentalize and so the psyche becomes a scarred and stitched-together monstrosity as well. And of course, for Stacey the idea of physicality carries the additional pressure to be beautiful, to be desirable, to be perfect.

Both Stacey and Tommy feel pressured by societal expectations for their respective genders. How do

you see stereotypes influencing each character? In what ways do these expectations shape Tommy and Stacey's relationship?

I think Stacey's facing more complicated, contradictory expectations. In addition to all the superficial demands of beauty, she's supposed to be sexually available but discreet; vulnerable but not emotionally needy. And she has to be a chameleon. She's more of an actor than Tommy, performing for whoever happens to be in the room. Even her patterns of speech change when she's in these different roles, being the good mother or the doctor's girlfriend. It seems to me that she is most herself with Tommy, but even that becomes complicated as her feelings for him grow. The reality is that Stacey isn't going to be happy with just whatever Tommy feels like offering, but there's a perception that a woman voicing her desires (emotional, sexual, or otherwise) is either unreasonable or unseemly. And I think this is really where these gender expectations become such a burden for Tommy. Stacey has very specific wants, but it's on Tommy to try to navigate them without ever being told what they are.

Did you know how the novel would end when you began writing? Did you ever consider ending it differently?

I did know how the novel would end, though I struggled with the tone quite a bit. I wasn't sure that I wanted this ending, to be honest, but there wasn't an alternative that felt true for the characters, and so I compensated with a heavy-handedness that darkened the close of the novel in the original draft. My agent could tell you how didactic the last twenty or so pages of that draft were, but luckily she was willing to take me on anyway.

What's next for you?

I thought I'd go back to writing poetry, but I seem to have gotten myself sucked into another novel. It's structurally quite a bit different from *Monsters*, so I'm enjoying (torturing myself with) the challenge of figuring out how to crack it.

IN HER Own Words

AN ESSAY
by LIZ KAY

I've always been drawn to love stories, even as a child. I remember feeling like my favorite series, Nancy Drew, would be even better with just a little more Ned. (Poor Nancy, with her action-packed life and so very little action.)

So it wasn't a surprise that a love story is exactly what I ended up writing. On one level, *Monsters: A Love Story* is just the result of my falling deliriously in love with Tommy and Stacey, these two characters who are as real and damaged and dear to me as any people I know.

On another level, *Monsters* became a sort of culmination of obsessions, a way of working out and through things I'd been thinking about for

years: gender expectations, sexual politics, and the weight of desire. I'm particularly interested in the power of enculturation, how even those critical of the culture are incapable of escaping its influence because, much like Stacey, you can be a smart, feminist intellectual and still obsess over your appearance and struggle with an eating disorder. And so I wanted the novel itself to capture that tension between intellectual understanding and lived experience, for *Monsters* to be a satisfying love story even as it raised questions about whether it was a problematic kind of story to tell. I wanted to subvert the messages, but I wanted to do it while still playing by the rules.

Of course, when I write it like this, *Monsters* sounds so deliberate, so well thought out, but it wasn't. There were a lot of ideas swirling around in my head when I first sat down with the pages that would become *Monsters*, but "I think I'll write a novel" was not one of them.

I'd been thinking about poetry, really. I was on the tail end of writing a novel-in-verse, a retelling, not of *Frankenstein* like Stacey's, but of "Hansel and Gretel" from the perspective of the witch. There is something about the witch that other writers and artists seem drawn to, and so when I would read or publish the poems, people would reach out. They wanted to draw the witch, or perform the poems, or maybe turn them into animated shorts. And so I started thinking about this idea of collaboration, but even more how collaboration could feel like a loss of control, particularly if the poet in question was someone with a personality like Stacey's. The premise of *Monsters*, then, the movie adaptation at its center, came very quickly. I played with one scene and then another, and then Tommy and Stacey took over, and the rest of it was like a fever dream.

I really didn't know if I'd be able to pull it off, if I could even finish a novel, but by the time it occurred to me that I was writing one, I was much too much in love with *Monsters* to give it up.

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