

Q&A with Julie Doar

The discovery of a murder on the family estate sets the novel in motion. Did you always know you wanted to open the story in this way, or did you come to it later in the writing process?

The discovery of the body was actually the initial idea. Before anything else, I had this image of a family taking a walk and stumbling upon this horror. As I began to write and question how this discovery would affect the characters, I played with the idea of changing the beginning, especially as the past and Nora’s disappearance became so critical and in some ways the more intriguing mystery. Somehow, I always kept this opening. I believe in something big happening in chapter one (almost like how a game of “Clue” always starts with a body), and I love this idea that the family sets out onto land they think they own and know—land they think they can trust—and then are so dramatically shocked and forced to reconsider everything they thought they knew.

What drew you to explore the idea of memory—especially how it can shift over time—and how did it shape your approach to the narrative?

Memory is such a useful tool for a writer. It’s almost like a wild card in the sense that if a character isn’t purposely being deceitful, then they just might not have a firm grasp on the truth due to a flawed or incomplete memory. Why does the memory not align with what happened? How do characters—and humans in general—frame their own past? Memory is like a trickster god in a way because a character might not lie, but the Memory might. When writing from Marlowe’s point of view, I didn’t want her to be foolish, but I did want her to have blind spots. She truly believes she has a clear idea of her childhood relationships, but the fact that she’s relied on her own memory for so long has misled her. I think a lot of the tension of the novel comes from the stark contrast between her memories and what other people are telling her.

The novel toggles between timelines as Marlowe unravels the truth about her friend’s disappearance. How did you balance the pacing and emotional stakes across the past and present?

This was a challenge. In earlier drafts, there were not two timelines. Marlowe was just recalling certain incidents from her childhood. This slowed down the pacing, and wasn’t quite believable. Why would Marlowe just be sitting there thinking of all these specific memories? However, the childhood scenes of Marlowe, her brothers, and Nora were so crucial. I have to credit my editors for their insight and, frankly, organizational skills. Pulling out the memories and creating a separate timeline required me to sort of “chop up” every scene. I must have created three or four different timelines, but it was exciting because I got to really ruminate on what I wanted the past to feel like compared to the present. I ended up leaning into the idyllic childhood and the sort of mischievous excitement mingled with confusion of being a thirteen-year-old girl. Then I could be more intentional with contrasting that to the present timeline, which is filled with so many questions and frustrations that really drive Marlowe forward on her mission to get to the bottom of things. Finding balance in which the past timeline is the emotion, and the present is the urgency was a really satisfying part of the revision process.

The estate itself feels like a character in its own right. What inspired this setting, and how did you use the atmosphere to create tension and a certain mood?

I grew up in the Hudson Valley, and it just demanded to be a setting for this kind of story. It's so beautiful, and there's something so mysterious about the empty barns and derelict farms. My maternal grandfather was a dairy farmer, and I remember hearing all these stories about the cows. The stalls were still there, as well as the old milking equipment in the barns. My grandfather, Harry Schroeder, was also a writer, and he wrote this remarkable column for a local newspaper, "The Millerton Farmer." His essays are just masterful renderings of the sadness, pain, and joy of working the land during a time when he knew the family farm was dying. His writing was a big inspiration when it came to creating the mood surrounding the farmers in the book, the Gallagher brothers. He wrote in one of his columns, "The land owes me nothing and has given me far more than crops. We were well met and will part well, but not easily." That line was with me when I was thinking about the setting.

On top of that, the area is rife with ghost stories, folklore, and hauntings. It's easy to believe that there are mystical elements in the woods or fields.

Family loyalty and sibling relationships play a central role in the story. What complexities did you want to capture in portraying these dynamics?

Siblings are fascinating to me. I have three brothers, and while no character is an exact replica, I did want to capture the feeling of how well your siblings know you, how in some ways your siblings tell you who you are. In childhood, you define yourself based on the similarities and differences between you and your siblings. I'm fascinated by that, and I think it makes for a really complex mix of resentment and loyalty.

Class tension is a thread throughout the novel. How did you approach writing about privilege, entitlement, and the divides within a small-town community?

My approach wasn't to go in with a grand statement in mind. I just wanted to write what was true. I grew up among farmers as well as wealthier residents of the Hudson Valley who loved and felt keen ownership over the bucolic land, but never actually farmed. The thing that is so great about a small-town setting is everyone knows everyone, so it's easier to poke at these tensions. People are aware of everyone's standing. You know who mows the lawns, and which homes are "country houses." Everything is out in the open and there's not huge degrees of separation. Your aunt is the gardener for your neighbors. Your friend's cousin is your teacher. Your teacher's husband owns the local pizza place. With a small town, you can explore these divides and class differences because it's all right there; nothing is hidden.

This is a novel about a young woman confronting both what's been buried and what she might have overlooked. What do you think Marlowe's character says about human nature?

Marlowe is someone who has chosen to go numb. We see this with her drinking—alcohol is a way to become unfeeling or forget pain. I think her way of viewing others and her role in her family is another method of numbing her pain as well. Humans have a tendency to self-medicate. Marlowe thinks she knows what is best for her. But actually, she's telling herself the version of her story that she is comfortable with. It was satisfying to write moments where Marlowe breaks out of the numbness and gets angry, but the question becomes: if she's so used to navigating life while numb, how long can she sustain that anger?

What was your process for writing *The Gallagher Place*? Did the ending come to you early, or did it shift and deepen as the characters developed?

I never know what the ending will be as I'm writing. I might have an idea, but often the story tells me what it's going to be. It's thrilling for me to write a first draft because it's almost like I'm surprised by the twists. It's a bit of a leap of faith. I had to just trust that the story would unfold, and there was a satisfying ending just around the corner. I was wondering, as I was writing: *What did happen to Nora? I really can't wait to find out . . .*

My process for *The Gallagher Place* was to bury myself in it and write everyday. This kind of consistency works for me because I was thinking about the story when I wasn't actively writing. Sometimes plot points would untangle themselves between writing sessions. I would go to sleep and wake up knowing a new facet of the story. I had certain scenes I knew were a part of the story, and I was working towards those scenes, but then other moments would come to me along the way.

What books, writers, or true stories influenced the mood and structure of the novel?

Tana French is my idol. I just think she's unmatched when it comes to a page-turning mystery with so much humanity and emotional depth. I grew up reading Agatha Christie, so I'm very influenced by her. *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn is a book that really stuck with me as well. I was also influenced by a lot of local legends in Upstate New York—from the classic folktales about Rip Van Winkle, and Sleepy Hollow, to the escaped convicts hiding in the Adirondacks, and the rumors about monsters in almost every lake.

What do you hope readers take with them after finishing the book?

I really hope readers get lost in it—that they stay up later than they mean to because they have to keep reading, or it makes a long plane ride pass quickly. I would be so happy if I saw someone reading it on the subway. That would be the greatest honor for me, because I love reading mysteries on the subway. I also hope it leaves people thinking about childhood friendship and siblinghood. There's something almost romantic about those bonds that I think is not often explored.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Discipline. That's boring, but it's the truth. A good idea is nothing if you don't put in consistent work. Also, get out of your head. Don't think about an "audience." When it's just you and the page, there shouldn't be an audience. When the time comes, and the story is ready, then you can consider sharing the story. In that phase, you have to welcome feedback, even if it's brutal. I used to have thin skin, but now I kind of relish handing my work over to someone and asking them to rip it to shreds so I can make it better.

Are you currently working on anything new?

I am. I have a wedding-weekend-gone-wrong story. I've been drawn to gossip. I've attended quite a few weddings in recent years, and I find the most interesting part of those events is the debrief among guests the next day. I'm working on something that focuses on that kind of debrief—where guests pick apart every awkward moment or overheard rumor, trying to figure out if a crime took place, and if so, who is guilty.

I also think there might be more stories lurking in the Hudson Valley. While working on *The Gallagher Place*, I was thinking a lot about hauntings. Stephen King novels, and shows like *True Detective* or *Pretty Little Liars*—they push the envelope and blur the line between reality and the mystical. They make you think: Ok, a ghost couldn't have killed this person . . . but did it? So that's something else I'm working on, but it's early days.