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The Blackhouse

by Carole Johnstone



About the Book

From the author of the ?dark and devious...beautifully written? (Stephen King) MIRRORLAND comes a richly atmospheric thriller set on an isolated Scottish island where nothing is as it seems and shocking twists lie around every corner.

A remote village. A deadly secret. An outsider who knows the truth.

Robert Reid moved his family to Scotland?s Outer Hebrides in the 1990s, driven by hope, craving safety and community, and hiding a terrible secret. But despite his best efforts to fit in, Robert is always seen as an outsider. And as the legendary and violent Hebridean storms rage around him, he begins to unravel, believing his fate on the remote island of Kilmeray cannot be escaped.

For her entire life, Maggie MacKay has sensed something was wrong with her. When Maggie was five years old, she announced that a man on Kilmeray --- a place she?d never visited --- had been murdered. Her unfounded claim drew media attention and turned the locals against each other, creating rifts that never mended.

Nearly 20 years later, Maggie is determined to find out what really happened and what the islanders are hiding. But when she begins to receive ominous threats, Maggie is forced to consider how much she is willing to risk to discover the horrifying truth.

Unnerving, enthralling and filled with gothic suspense, THE BLACKHOUSE is a spectacularly sinister tale readers won?t soon forget.

Discussion Guide

1. When present-day Maggie first arrives on Kilmeray, her immediate experience with the islanders --- Jaz, Kelly, Gillian and Bruce --- is positive. How does this interaction set the tone for Maggie?s relationship with them throughout the course of the book?

2. At multiple points in the novel, Maggie stops herself from revealing the recent death of her mother. Why do you think she feels the need to hide such a large part of her story?

3. On page 50, Maggie recalls her mother?s fierce proclamation: ?*Mental illness is a tool of repression and ignorance*.? What does this tell you about Maggie?s mother, and do you think her statement has some truth to it?

4. When Maggie encounters Charlie on the bluffs, he tells her of strange sightings on the island, which serve to bolster Maggie?s fear of the crows she?s recently found. He goes on to mention ?thin places? and tells her that Kilmeray is one. Did you believe Kilmeray truly is a ?thin place??

5. When we first meet Robert, we know right away that he is a haunted man. In contrast, he describes fellow islander Charlie MacLeod as ?smiling, charming, everyone?s friend? (page 70). What does Charlie represent to Robert? And how does Charlie differ in the past from the present?

6. Maggie sees and hears strange things throughout the course of the novel and has a growing suspicion that someone on the island is trying to scare her. Why doesn?t Maggie mention anything to people she has befriended? And how does her fear work against her in finding answers?

7. Both Maggie and Robert feel drawn to the island and are compelled to stay longer once they?re there. How do their relationships with the island differ? What are the similarities?

8. The villagers play a prominent role in the novel, often hindering Maggie and Robert but other times providing them with support. Discuss the ways the villagers hide the truth, and also how they help.

9. Mary is obviously devoted to Robert, but he becomes so absorbed in his own self-hatred that he begins to believe Mary is conspiring against him. What did you think Mary was thinking? Did her evolution surprise you? How does this novel make us think about marriage and partnerships today?

10. Both Maggie and Robert suffer from some form of mental illness. Robert, in 1994, is unable to receive proper care, while Maggie, in 2019, is prescribed medication and receives a certain level of community support (from both Will and Kelly) but still struggles with acceptance. Consider conversations around mental health as well as our healthcare system. How do these characters? experiences reflect what we see in our society today?

11. The island itself is richly atmospheric and memorably described. How are both Maggie and Robert affected by the island?s moods and elements?

12. How did you feel about the choice Maggie makes at the end of the novel?

Author Bio

Carole Johnstone is the award-winning author of the novels MIRRORLAND and THE BLACKHOUSE. She lives in the Highlands of Scotland, although her heart belongs to the wild islands of the Outer Hebrides.

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