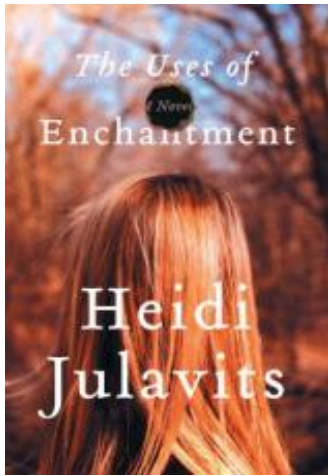


# The Uses of Enchantment

by Heidi Julavits

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## About the Book

**In late afternoon on November 7, 1985, sixteen-year-old Mary Veal was abducted after field hockey practice at her all-girls New England prep school. Or was she?** A few weeks later an unharmed Mary reappears as suddenly and mysteriously as she disappeared, claiming to have little memory of what happened to her. Her socially ambitious mother, a compelling if frosty woman descended from a Salem witch, is concerned that Mary has somehow been sullied by the experience and sends her to therapy with a psychologist named Dr. Hammer.

Mary turns out to be a cagey and difficult patient. Dr. Hammer begins to suspect that Mary concocted her tale of abduction when he discovers its parallels with a seventeenth-century narrative of a girl who was abducted by Indians and who caused her rescuer to be hanged as a witch. Hammer, eager to further his professional reputation, decides to write a book about Mary's faked abduction, a project her mother sanctions, because she'd rather her daughter be a liar than a rape victim.

Fifteen years later, Mary has returned to Boston for her mother's funeral. Her abduction—real or imagined—has tainted many lives, including her own. When Mary finds a suggestive letter sent to her mother, she suspects her mother planned a reconciliation before her death. Thus begins a quest that requires Mary to revisit the people and places in her past.

**The Uses of Enchantment** weaves a spell in which the reader sees how the extraordinary power of a young woman's sexuality, and the desire to wield it, have a devastating effect on all involved. The riveting cat-and-mouse power games between doctor and patient, and between abductor and abductee, are gradually, dreamily revealed, along with the truth about what actually happened in 1985.

Heidi Julavits is in full command of her considerable gifts and has crafted a dazzling narrative sure to garner her further acclaim as one of the best novelists working today.

## Discussion Guide

1. Does Mary's subterfuge with Dr. Hammer imply a criticism of therapy in general?
2. Why does Mary plagiarize Dora's story? Does she really lack imagination, as her mother believes? Or is there another reason she co-opts Dora's story?
3. How would Mary's experience in therapy have been different if Dr. Hammer were a woman? Would Roz Biedelman have been a better therapist for Mary?
4. How does the New England setting and the town's proximity to the Salem witch trials complicate Mary's "crime"?
5. What is the emotional legacy of Abigail Lake, and how does it differently affect Mary, her sisters, and her mother?
6. Is Dr. Hammer just trying to further his career, as everyone suggests? Is Mary his victim, or is he her victim?
7. Mary's relationship, or non-relationship, with her mother, is a key element in the book. Is Paula Veal to blame for what happens to Mary? Should she have forgiven her daughter?
8. Has "the girl," Mary, been abducted by the man, or is the man her hostage? Who, in the end, has victimized whom?
9. In the What Might Have Happened chapters, are we meant to believe that this IS what happened to Mary? Or is this Mary's fantasy of what happened? Or is it possibly even Dr. Hammer's version of what happened? How do the shifting points of view (from the girl's to the man's) suggest one interpretation over another?
10. Books are important to Mary, but especially those that she has never read. What is the function of these books? Does it matter that the reader never really knows what's inside of those books either? Can books sometimes exude MORE power if they remain unread?
19. Are we meant to believe Mary's reason for explaining why Paula Veal cut her daughters out of her will (except for the painting of Abigail Lake)? Did she forgive Mary? Does it MATTER one way or the other what she intended?

## Author Bio

Heidi Julavits is the author of four critically acclaimed novels (THE VANISHERS, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT, THE EFFECT OF LIVING BACKWARDS and THE MINERAL PALACE) and a memoir (DIRECTIONS TO MYSELF). She's also the co-editor, with Sheila Heti and Leanne Shapton, of the *New York Times* bestseller WOMEN IN CLOTHES. Her fiction has appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, *McSweeney's* and *The Best American Short Stories*, among other places. She's a founding editor of *The Believer* magazine and the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. She lives in Manhattan, where she teaches at Columbia University. She was born and raised in Portland, Maine.

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## **The Uses of Enchantment**

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