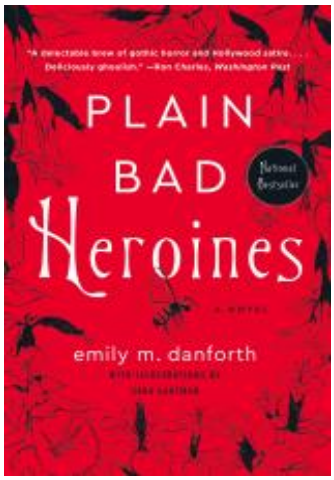
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Plain Bad Heroines

written by emily m. danforth, with illustrations by Sara Lautman



About the Book

The award-winning author of THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST makes her adult debut with this highly imaginative and original horror-comedy centered on a cursed New England boarding school for girls --- a wickedly whimsical celebration of the art of storytelling, sapphic love and the rebellious female spirit.

Our story begins in 1902, at the Brookhants School for Girls. Flo and Clara, two impressionable students, are obsessed with each other and with a daring young writer named Mary MacLane, the author of a scandalous bestselling memoir. To show their devotion to Mary, the girls establish their own private club and call it the Plain Bad Heroine Society. They meet in secret in a nearby apple orchard, the setting of their wildest happiness and, ultimately, of their macabre deaths. This is where their bodies are later discovered with a copy of Mary?s book splayed beside them, the victims of a swarm of stinging, angry yellow jackets. Less than five years later, the Brookhants School for Girls closes its doors forever --- but not before three more people mysteriously die on the property, each in a most troubling way.

Over a century later, the now abandoned and crumbling Brookhants is back in the news when wunderkind writer Merritt Emmons publishes a breakout book celebrating the queer, feminist history surrounding the ?haunted and cursed? Gilded Age institution. Her bestselling book inspires a controversial horror film adaptation starring celebrity actor and lesbian it girl Harper Harper playing the ill-fated heroine Flo, oppo-site B-list actress and former child star Audrey Wells as Clara. But as Brookhants opens its gates once again, and our three modern her-oines arrive on set to begin filming, past and present become grimly entangled --- or perhaps just grimly exploited --- and soon it?s impossible to tell where the curse leaves off and Hollywood begins.

A story within a story within a story and featuring black-and-white period-inspired illustrations, PLAIN BAD HEROINES is a devilishly haunting, modern masterwork of metafiction that manages to combine the ghostly sensibility of Sarah Waters with the dark imagination of Marisha Pessl and the sharp humor and incisive social commentary of Curtis Sittenfeld into one laugh-out-loud funny, spellbinding and wonderfully luxuriant read.

Discussion Guide

1. Mary MacLane was a real person. Were you familiar with her before reading this book? If not, are you inspired to do more research? Why do you think MacLane was such a controversial star in her day, but relatively obscure today?

2. How did the footnotes, illustrations and overall design of the novel shape your reading experience? Did any particular elements stand out to you?

3. PLAIN BAD HEROINES is a work of meta-fiction. How many layers of storytelling did you notice throughout the novel? Who do you think the novel?s narrator is?

4. How does social media influence the characters and events in the novel? What are the positive and harmful effects of gossip and ?buzz??

5. PLAIN BAD HEROINES pays homage to classic and contemporary gothic and horror stories. What influences did you pick up on? Did you notice any tropes being riffed on or subverted?

6. What do you believe the wasps in PLAIN BAD HEROINES represent? Why do they appear in certain scenes?

7. Think about this quote: ?That?s history for you, my darlings. When you dig it up, it always carries a whiff of rot.? How do you interpret this statement? How does this theme reoccur throughout the novel?

8. Which horrors in the story are real and which are imagined? What was most frightening to you, and why?

9. How do the past and present timelines in the novel echo each other? Which instances of events or circumstances mirroring each other did you notice?

10. How do the experiences of the queer characters in the past and present timelines differ? Did reading this novel influence your understanding of the presence of queer people in history?

11. What is PLAIN BAD HEROINES? message about whose stories get to be told? Why is representation in storytelling important? How do the stories we?re exposed to shape us?

12. "[Mary MacLane] grew up and the world was hard and her fame didn?t fix it,? Audrey says. Do you agree with this assumption? What does fame provide, or not provide, for the characters in this novel? Why do they crave it?

13. How do you interpret a ?bad? heroine? Do you think MacLane or any of the heroines in this novel were bad people for the things they did? Is anyone in this novel truly evil?

Author Bio

emily m. danforth is the author of the highly acclaimed young adult novel THE MISEDUCATION OF CAMERON POST. She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Montana and a PhD in English from the University of Nebraska?Lincoln. She lives with her wife and two terrible dogs in Rhode Island. PLAIN BAD HEROINES is her first adult novel.

Critical Praise

?Full of Victorian sapphic romance, metafictional horror, biting misandrist humor, Hollywood intrigue, and multiple timeliness --- all replete with evocative illustrations that are icing on a deviously delicious cake.?

Plain Bad Heroines

written by emily m. danforth, with illustrations by Sara Lautman

Publication Date: October 5, 2021
Genres: Fiction, Gothic
Paperback: 656 pages
Publisher: William Morrow Paperbacks
ISBN-10: 0062942867
ISBN-13: 9780062942869