

The Writing Retreat

by Julia Bartz



About the Book

THE PLOT meets PLEASE JOIN US in this psychological suspense debut about a young author at an exclusive writer's retreat that descends into a nightmare.

Alex has all but given up on her dreams of becoming a published author when she receives a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: attend an exclusive, month-long writing retreat at the estate of feminist horror writer Roza Vallo. Even the knowledge that Wren, her former best friend and current rival, is attending doesn't dampen her excitement.

But when the attendees arrive, Roza drops a bombshell --- they all must complete an entire novel from scratch during the next month, and the author of the best one will receive a life-changing seven-figure publishing deal. Determined to win this seemingly impossible contest, Alex buckles down and tries to ignore the strange happenings at the estate, including Roza's erratic behavior, Wren's cruel mind games, and the alleged haunting of the mansion itself. But when one of the writers vanishes during a snowstorm, Alex realizes that something very sinister is afoot. With the clock running out, she's desperate to discover the truth and save herself.

A claustrophobic and propulsive thriller exploring the dark side of female friendships and fame, **THE WRITING RETREAT** is the unputdownable debut novel from a compelling new talent.

Discussion Guide

1. At the start of the novel, Alex sees a pair of high school friends on the subway. Viewing them makes her feel the loss of her friendship with Wren like "a penknife in the ribs," and she feels sad at seeing the high schoolers' "shared world. Their undeniable certainty that they were a team" (3). How do Alex's feelings of loss influence much of the resulting action in the novel?

2. Competition is central to the plot and the cause of so many of the events that unfold. In what ways do the young women allow competition to rule their lives at the retreat, and where do you see them rebelling against toxic comparisons?
3. What characteristics make Roza such a terrifying and successful adversary?
4. Compare and contrast Roza's personality with Alex's. How are they alike? How are they different? Does this change over the course of the novel?
5. Describe Blackbriar estate. In what ways is the mansion a character, too?
6. Alex and Wren have a complicated history, all of which comes into play when they are forced together at the writing retreat. Were you surprised by any elements of their relationship? How did their relationship change under these extreme circumstances?
7. Consider the parallels between the writers and the subjects or themes of their novels. How do these ties enhance your understanding of the women?
8. What twist shocked you the most? What about it was so surprising and effective?
9. In the last scene from *The Great Commission*, Daphne chooses a new name, Elizabeth. "She was leaving her old self behind" (299). Consider who at the writing retreat is trying to leave their old selves behind and why. Does anyone do so successfully? If so, at what cost?
10. While tense and atmospheric, the novel's tone is also quite funny and satirical. What lines made you laugh the most?
11. Daphne Wolfe is loosely based on Hilma af Klint, a Swedish painter born in 1862 who many consider the true inventor of abstract art. She was also a spiritualist and formed a group with other women to contact spirits. When one spirit asked Hilma to channel a "great commission," she accepted and painted some of her most famous works. Why do you think the author included elements of af Klint and female spiritualists? How is writing fiction a form of channeling?
12. Who would you cast in a film adaptation of THE WRITING RETREAT? What scenes or details would you especially want to make sure made it from book to screen?
13. How does Alex learn about her queerness through her interactions with other characters in the book, including Wren, Roza and Taylor? Why might it have taken her until her 30s to realize she's bisexual? Have you heard of other stories of women coming out after 30? How do you see them framed?
14. How do issues of consent and power arise in this book? How did you feel reading about Wren and Alex's sexual encounter in their apartment? Would you have felt differently about it if Wren were a man? How about the encounter between Alex and Taylor in the basement? What are other ways that this book explores themes of power and domination?

Author Bio

Julia Bartz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE LAST SESSION and THE WRITING RETREAT, a practicing therapist and a creative coach. Her fiction writing has appeared in the *South Dakota Review*, *InDigest Magazine* and more. She lives in Brooklyn.

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