



THE HOUSE IN THE PINES

DUTTON

*Book Club
Kid*

A Novel

ANA REYES

"Powerfully eerie and atmospheric."—RILEY SAGER,
New York Times bestselling author of *The House Across the Lake*

DEAR READER,

The house in this book is one I've been writing about since I was eleven. I've never been there; the house simply appeared in the very first story I ever wrote for a writing contest hosted by the public library in Pittsfield, Massachusetts—the story of a girl who gets lost in the deep dark woods and stumbles upon a creepy house.

Twenty years went by. I moved around, wore many hats, and wrote a lot of poems before sitting down to write another story. As I wrote, somehow the cabin in the woods kept turning up on my page.

At the time, I was too distracted to notice my own obsession. I was living in Louisiana, working toward my MFA in fiction, and, like Maya, the main character of *The House in the Pines*, had suddenly quit Klonopin after several years of taking it nightly for sleep. The doctor who had prescribed it back in LA never said anything about addiction, while my new Baton Rouge doctor treated me like an addict when I asked her for it. She cut me off cold turkey, and I went through protracted withdrawal syndrome, the symptoms of which inform Maya's experience in the book. Writing about benzodiazepine withdrawal—albeit from her perspective—helped me through it.

This book is my exploration of that house, which I came to see as (among other things) an expression of my longing for home. The year I wrote my first story was the same year my family moved to Massachusetts, leaving behind my dad's side of the family in south Texas, three generations who'd settled there after leaving Guatemala in the early seventies. At eleven, I went from running with a herd of cousins all summer in our grandparents' yard, the air loud with Spanglish and Tejano music, to the cold quiet stillness of New England. I struggled to make friends there and had been spending a lot of time at the library.

Looking back, I see the house as a symbol of the home I was missing, not the brick-and-mortar place but the people, the community, the culture from which I'd found myself abruptly cut off. It made sense that I would write about it again in Baton Rouge; I was homesick there, too. The house in this book is born of the universal longing to return, not just to a place but to a time when we felt completely at home, surrounded by love and warmth.

The problem is that such a place is impossible. The people who make a home grow old and die, communities change, porches sag, and roofs cave in. The fantasy of a home that never changes, a place to which we can return regardless of the time that's passed, is both wistful and sinister in its implications.

The House in the Pines reflects this. Maya first saw the cabin as an idyllic place, like a cottage from a fairy tale, but now she uncovers the dangerous lie woven into its fabric. She can't quite remember what happened that summer night when, at the age of seventeen, she followed a man named Frank to the house he'd built in the forest. If she could, she would understand how he killed her best friend, Aubrey. And she could stop him from killing again.

Frank's cabin is a mystery with an even deeper mystery at its heart. Maya's understanding of what happened there evolved alongside my own understanding of home as a place we carry within. I'll let you decide what it means to you.

Thank you, reader, for following me into these woods.



**WITH GRATITUDE,
ANA**

A conversation with

ANA REYES



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***The House in the Pines* is your debut novel and a suspenseful psychological thriller about a young woman's quest to uncover the truth behind the sudden, peculiar death of her best friend and the haunting events that have followed her thereafter. What inspired you to write the story?**

The inspiration was mostly subconscious. I was living alone in a new city, cut off from any place I'd call home, when I wrote the first draft. This lonely feeling inspired one of the book's major themes, which is the universal yearning to return to a place and time of belonging. That theme shaped the story and helped me build the titular house in the pines.

Are there any Latinx authors who have played a role in your formation as a writer?

I read Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* in high school and fell in love with magical realism, a sensibility that informs most of my writing. Jorge Luis Borges inspires me with his wild imagination. And because I'm still growing as a writer, I'll add Ingrid Rojas Contreras to my list of muses, as her book *The Man Who Could Move Clouds* has helped me think about the book I'm working on now.

How did you decide to write a thriller? What about the genre was most appealing to you?

Funnily enough, it didn't start out as a thriller! The original draft was somewhat eerie and had suspenseful moments but lacked a clear genre. Luckily, I have a very talented agent who helped me see the book's thriller potential and worked with me on getting it right. Having grown up on Christopher Pike and R. L. Stine books, writing in the genre was, in retrospect, a no-brainer.

In your novel, a half-finished book by the main character's deceased Guatemalan father holds an important key to piecing the story together. What role does cultural heritage and family play in the character's quest to better understand herself?

Maya's father's book points to an important truth about the danger she's in. For me this was a metaphor for inherited trauma. Like so many people with roots in colonized places, the violence of the past has a way of showing up in the present in unexpected and highly personal ways. This is true for Maya in a very literal sense. To save herself, she must understand a story written before she was born.

Maya and Aubrey have a beautiful friendship, but you also show the cracks that exist in any close relationship, as well as the hurt that can result when one person falls in love. How did you write about their bond in a way that felt complicated and authentic?

I thought back to my own teenage years. I wasn't involved in anything as dangerous as the love triangle Maya, Aubrey, and Frank find themselves in, but my experiences felt just as dire to me at the time. Being a teenager is intense. This was the feeling I was going for in the scenes between the friends at seventeen, in the weeks before Aubrey dies.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Maya shies away from true intimacy by withholding important information from Dan. How does finally telling the truth about her alcohol dependence and Klonopin withdrawal, as well as Aubrey's death and her suspicions about Frank, change Maya's relationship with Dan?
2. Maya's experience with addiction ranges from always liking "a good buzz, ever since the first time [Aubrey] swiped a pint of her mom's vodka and they drank it stirred into Sunny D" to rationalizing "her dependence in so many ways, telling herself it wasn't a lie, just an omission; that she kept the pills in an aspirin bottle for convenience, not to hide them." How does Maya's dependence on various substances serve to keep her isolated in her adult life?
3. Dr. Barry, Maya's one-time therapist, says, "The unwell mind is rarely capable of recognizing its own illness"; he also tells her the mind will try to explain what it does not understand by creating patterns. Is Maya a reliable narrator, even to herself? How much does she trust what she perceives and remembers, and how much does she doubt her own intuition? Did you have faith in her perceptions?
4. Technology and social media play an important role in Maya's attempts to learn the truth about Frank. Do you think events would have played out differently if younger Maya had been able to research Frank online? Or would his sway still be as strong, regardless of all the information available?
5. The author emphasizes the importance of sharing stories. When Maya meets Dan, she feels the "intimacy of being with someone who loved the same stories." Maya and Aubrey connect in English class while doing a project on Emily Dickinson. Brenda tells the story of meeting Jairo repeatedly, until it takes on a fable-like quality. But Maya also realizes she "might as well have handed Frank a key to her head and her heart the day she told him the story of her dead father." How do stories allow these characters to open up to one another? Is this sharing of self through stories always for the best or can it have more sinister consequences?
6. How is Frank able to read Maya and prey on her vulnerability? What patterns can Maya discern in her experiences with Frank?
7. Maya is described as "half Guatemalan, a quarter Irish, and a quarter Italian"; she "looked Hispanic but had grown up with a single white mom and knew very little about her family in Guatemala." By the end of the novel, how does Maya begin to integrate her Guatemalan roots, connect with her father, and understand this part of her history?
8. Inherited trauma is woven throughout Maya's story: her father's violent death and Guatemala's tumultuous history, her aunt Lisa's mental illness, even the PCBs that poisoned the Housatonic River and Silver Lake. How does the author plant seeds of hope that it's possible to move beyond the damage of the past?
9. The author writes current scenes in the past tense, whereas past sections are in the present tense. In what ways was Maya more engaged in the past? How has Aubrey's death and her time with Frank affected her?
10. Were you surprised when you learned the truth about Frank's cabin? If not, when did you begin to suspect that something about it was wrong?
11. What did you think of the balance between the past and present sections in the novel? Did the two intersect differently for you as the read went on? Why or why not?

FRANK'S FOREVER SOUP

The dish Frank serves Maya in his cabin is a type of Perpetual Stew, a recipe popular in the Middle Ages but still around today. Ingredients vary by region; the cooking process is what makes it perpetual. You simply never let the pot grow empty, replenishing ingredients as needed, allowing the broth to simmer forever.

Frank's soup has been simmering for years, so the flavors are deep and complex. He also uses a secret ingredient (not listed here) that gives the broth the most enticing aroma. Feel free to substitute ingredients as needed, using whatever you have at hand. Whatever tastes like home.

Adapted from a recipe by Damn Delicious.

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons olive oil
2 pounds beef stew meat, cut into bite-size cubes
salt and pepper, to taste
2 carrots, diced
2 celery stalks, diced
1 onion, diced
8 ounces baby bella mushrooms, halved
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 tablespoons tomato paste
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
½ cup dry red wine
2½ cups beef stock
4 sprigs fresh rosemary
5 sprigs fresh thyme
3 bay leaves
2 sage leaves
2 potatoes, peeled and cut in ½-inch chunks
1 turnip or parsnip (or really anything that grows in darkness underground), optional
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley leaves

INSTRUCTIONS

- Start with a pot capable of holding up over many years. A Dutch oven for example. Season meat with a few shakes of salt and pepper. Brown in olive oil over medium heat, stirring now and then for 7 minutes. Set aside. **NOTE:** This step might seem unnecessary but is worth doing if you have the time. (*And after tasting Frank's Forever Soup, you might find yourself with all the time in the world!*)
- Add carrots, celery, and onion. Occasionally stir, 3–4 minutes, until tender.
- Add mushrooms and garlic. Occasionally stir, 3–4 minutes, until browned.
- Whisk in tomato paste until it deepens to the color of blood, about 1 minute. Then whisk in the flour and brown that, too, another minute.
- Add red wine, scraping any bits from the bottom of the pot, reduce slightly.
- Stir in beef stock, rosemary, thyme, bay leaves, sage, and meat. Bring it all to a boil; reduce heat and simmer until beef is very tender, about 30 minutes.
- Stir in root vegetables (potatoes, parsnips, turnips) and simmer until tender and stew has thickened, about twenty minutes. **NOTE:** twenty minutes minimum. Flavor develops over time. (*It's a shame Maya never got to taste Frank's Forever Soup as its flavor is so homey, so comforting, that no one who tastes it ever wants to leave.*)
- Discard all leaves and sprigs. Or leave them in; just don't eat them. Stir in parsley and season with salt and pepper, to taste.

HILDA'S GUATEMALAN TAMALES

Yields ~50 tamales

Savory and decadent, these tamales aren't an everyday food but a once-a-year tradition. In my family, tamales are to Christmas what turkey is to Thanksgiving. My grandmother Hilda Reyes spends two days preparing the dough, cooking the meat and sauce, assembling each tamale, and wrapping them in banana leaves. We eat them on Christmas at the stroke of midnight, which is also when we exchange presents, a tradition from Guatemala. There, people pour into the streets at midnight to set off fireworks, an exuberance I'll always associate with the taste of tamales.

Recipe by Hilda Reyes

INGREDIENTS

1 cup uncooked rice

5 pounds tortilla dough (*This can sometimes be bought already prepared; otherwise buy masa harina, a fine corn flour available at specialty markets, and add water according to the instructions on the package.*)

3 pounds pork, chicken, or turkey,
bones removed

12 ounces pork lard

3 pounds of tomatoes

3 ancho peppers

2 bell peppers, sliced

2 ounces pumpkin seeds

2 ounces sesame seeds

banana leaves (about 2 square yards),
available at specialty markets

1-2 jars green olives



INSTRUCTIONS

- Soak the rice overnight and puree it, uncooked, in a blender the next day. Add the pureed rice to the tortilla dough.
- Place the meat in a large pot and add enough water to cover it. Cook on the stovetop for about 15 minutes, adding salt to taste. Remove the meat from the pot and set aside.
- Add the broth from the meat to the dough and mix by hand until no lumps are left. Add the lard to the dough, along with salt to taste, and cook in a large pot on the stovetop over low heat for about 2 hours or until thick enough to hold its shape; it should be about the consistency of play dough. The dough must be stirred constantly while it cooks. (If you have other people around, feel free to ask them to stir.)

- Boil the tomatoes and peppers in a small amount of water. Brown the pumpkin and sesame seeds by toasting them in the oven or on a burner in a heavy, dry saucepan. Grind the seeds in a blender until they form a fine powder, then stir them into the tomato sauce, along with the salt and a pinch of sugar. Bring to a boil and cook 10 minutes. Add the cooked meat, cut up, and simmer over very low heat until ready to use.
- Cut the banana leaves into 10-inch squares and boil in plenty of water for 10 minutes. Wipe the leaves clean and toast them in the oven at 350 degrees, about 5 at a time for about 30 seconds on each side to make them more pliable.
- Spread the dough over each section of banana leaf. Add the sauce, making sure to include a piece of meat and a slice of pepper from the pot, and then add an olive. Put more dough on top and wrap up each banana leaf, tying it with a shred of banana leaf, string, or homemade string from a reed.
- Wrap tamales in aluminum foil (optional) and add an inch or two of water into a large pot. Heat the water to boiling and then add the tamales and cover the pot. Let steam for 2 hours. You can line the bottom of the pot with extra banana leaves to make sure the tamales don't touch the bottom of the pot and scorch.

SERVE WITH: Fresh lime juice and slices of plain white bread, such as Wonder Bread.

