

BOOK CLUB KIT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALIX E. HARROW



STARLING
HOUSE

"Alix E. Harrow is an exceptional, undeniable talent."

OLIVIE BLAKE, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ATLAS SIX*



“This book has everything you could possibly want this fall...a cursed town, a haunted house, a vivid & eerie setting—plus, characters willing to risk everything.”

—Reese Witherspoon

(Reese's Book Club October '23 Pick)

Dear Reader,

For someone who loves staying home, I've written an awful lot about leaving it. Not intentionally—it's one of those themes you see clearly only in the rearview mirror—but consistently. My characters are always running away, escaping, leaving their roots behind in exchange for the big city or the multiverse.

It was a fantasy of mine, I guess. I'd moved around a lot when I was younger, but by the time I started writing I was back home in rural

Kentucky, where my partner and I had bought an abandoned house on a couple of acres. It was a true and total wreck: the roof leaked; the pipes leaked; half the windows were broken; and the first time we turned on the lights it started a small fire in the attic. Over seven years, we made it beautiful.

And then we moved to Virginia. And it was only then, after we'd left, that I could write *Starling House*: a book about staying. I mean, it's about a lot of things—a liar and her awful cat, a bad town

and an old house, and the past that won't stay buried—but mostly it's about loving a place that doesn't always love you back. It's about the gritty, stubborn, stupid act of planting roots where you aren't wanted, and hanging on anyway. It's about home, in general, and my home in particular.



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I put everything I miss about Kentucky into this book: John Prine; Ale-8; stories that start “well, what had happened was...”; hot summers; underground rivers; rural librarians; old houses half-swallowed by honeysuckle; websites that are still under construction in the 21st century.

And I put in everything I hate: coal; rebel

flags; the way people are simultaneously obsessed with the past and determined to erase it; the racism and homophobia and the church that serves them up like home-cooked casseroles; websites that are still under construction in the 21st century.

In a Southern Gothic, the house is always the bad guy. But in fairy tales the house is—sometimes—on your side. Maybe it’s an enchanted castle or a witch’s cottage; maybe it has friendly ghosts or chicken legs.



Starling House became both those things, or neither of them. It’s a haunted house with a heart of gold. It’s *Beauty and the Beast* made by A24, *Howl’s Moving Castle* covered by Phoebe Bridgers. It’s what every home is: a dream and a nightmare, a safe haven and a horror show.

Come on in. But I wouldn’t linger after dark.

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DISCUSSION



QUESTIONS

1. How does Opal define home at the beginning of the novel and in the closing scenes? What would it have taken for the lodgings provided by Bev to feel like a true home?
2. Despite the wealth gap, what do Opal and Arthur have in common, both in their life stories and in their personalities? How does the balance of power shift between them? What do they ultimately need from each other?
3. What is the effect of reading the novel through Opal's first-person eyes, with footnotes written in the voice of a careful researcher? How was the tale transformed when you read it from Eleanor's point of view in chapter 30? What is Charlotte's role as a librarian in trying to discern and preserve the truth, despite a multitude of versions of a single story?
4. What were your initial theories about the creatures haunting Arthur? How did your perception of him change throughout the novel?
5. As you were reading about Gravelly Brothers Coal & Power, what historical truths emerged about the horrors of enslavement and environmental destruction in the American South? What motivated that violence, and what tethers Eden's residents to this place, despite it?
6. What tactics does Elizabeth Baine use to manipulate Opal? How are the actions of Innovative Solutions Consulting Group different from Opal's acts of theft and deception?



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7. How did you react to the artwork that is featured throughout the book? What do the images express that words cannot?
8. Discuss Opal's scrubbing and sprucing up of Starling House as a metaphor for other types of restoration and excavation she experiences. What else is recovered besides the beauty of Starling House's architecture? How much agency does the house itself have?
9. How do Jasper and Opal's memories of their mother sustain them, and limit them? What is her legacy, both good and bad? Discuss the many types of parenting performed in the novel.

10. Eleanor first thought there were cracks between a world of monstrous evil and our world, but eventually came to believe that the beasts were of our own making. What is your understanding of the evil forces that humanity has encountered through history—and the ingenuity of people like Opal who have conquered them?

11. How does Opal navigate her dream worlds? What strengths and fears are revealed when she sleeps?

12. Starling House has a vast library filled with books on folklore, mythology, and history. How do those books suggest the larger history of the Underland and the communities that encountered it?



Guide by Amy Clements and Alix E. Harrow

STARLING HOUSE

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STARLING HOUSE READING PLAYLIST

curated by

ALIX E. HARROW



Open  | Search  | Scan 

TRACK 1:

“Summer’s End” by John Prine

If I could have afforded the rights to the lyrics, this is the song I would’ve used as an epigraph for *Starling House*. Just the chorus, I think, simple and circular and a little bit broken-hearted: *Come on home/Come on home/No you don’t have to be alone.*

TRACK 2:

“You’ll Never Leave Harlan Alive” by Tiffany Williams and Darrell Scott

One of the best coal ballads of the last twenty years or so, covered by one of eastern Kentucky’s new wave of brilliant writers and singers. Harlan County is on the other side of the state from Muhlenberg County, but the story is the same: coal might be keeping you alive, but coal is also killing you.

TRACK 3:

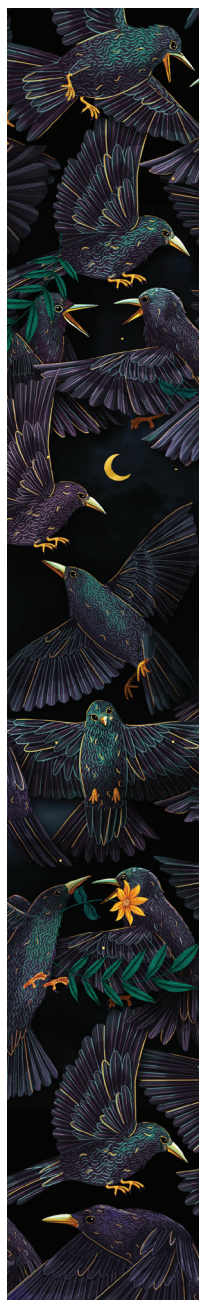
“Stay Down” by boygenius, Julien Baker, Lucy Dacus, Phoebe Bridgers

If you grew up in the churchy, small-town south, if you didn’t quite fit, if you weren’t quite made for youth group and potlucks—then you get this song. “Stay Down” is an anthem for the ones that aren’t welcome.



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TRACK 4:

“Nighttime Hunger” by Overcoats

A song that understands that monsters come out at night, and that sometimes you’re afraid of them—and sometimes you’re one of them.

TRACK 5:

“Cover Me Up” by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

One thing about Isbell is, he’s going to make me cry. *But home was a dream/one I’d never seen/til you came along.*

TRACK 6:

“Ill Will Creek” by Cole Chaney

A new song that sounds old, full of devils and hills and bones. It’s a perfect example of what I think of as the Appalachian Gothic, which isn’t really horror, but only an eerie, folkloric atmosphere of dread.

TRACK 7:

“Leaving Eden” by the Carolina Chocolate Drops

I saw the Carolina Chocolate Drops play when I was seventeen or eighteen. It was the first time I understood that the music I grew up with, the music I played (badly) on my fiddle, had a deeper, richer history than the one I’d been sold.

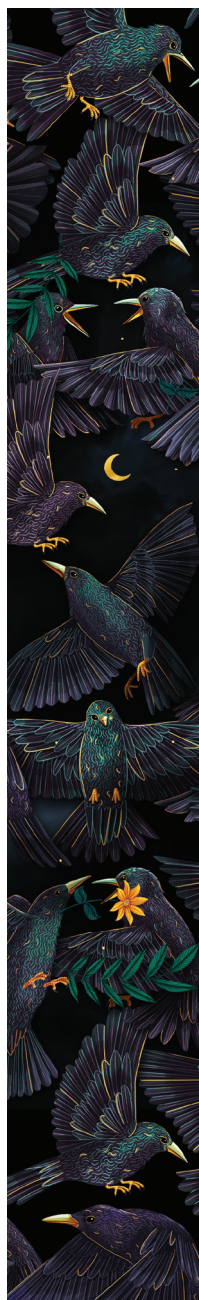
TRACK 8:

“Front Porch” by Joy Williams

More than anything else, *Starling House* is a book about home. I’ve always loved the idea of home not as a place you stay, or even a place you were born, but a place you can return to when you need to.

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TRACK 9:

“Coming Down for You” by Joan Shelley

Shelley is a Louisville writer, and everything she writes is dreamy and lyrical and plaintive. I love the idea of someone falling—into sin, into the Underland, maybe—and someone going down after them.

TRACK 10:

“In a Week” by Hozier featuring Karen Cowley

No one else writes songs that so delicately walk the line between gruesome folk horror and tender romance. What, really, could be more romantic than rotting together, side by side?

TRACK 11:

“In Your Love” by Tyler Childers

Tyler Childers is from my mom’s hometown—and if you knew how tiny that town is, you’d know how weird that is—and “In Your Love” is my new favorite of his. The music video was written by Silas House, another Kentucky icon.

TRACK 12:

“Paradise” by John Prine

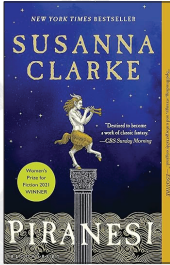
The classic 1971 bluegrass protest song about the fate of Paradise, Kentucky, which was once the coal capitol of the country, and is now nothing but the cemetery. *Starling House* began with this song—with the idea of poisoned waters and stolen homes, a paradise lost and remembered only in dreams.

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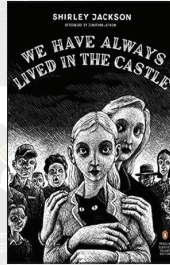
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MUST-READ TOP 10 SENTIENT HOUSE BOOKS



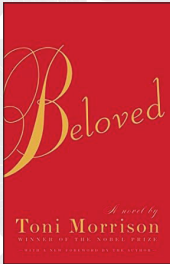
Piranesi
Susanna Clarke



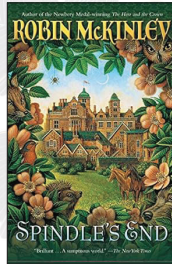
We Have Always Lived in the Castle
Shirley Jackson



Howl's Moving Castle
Dianna Wynne Jones



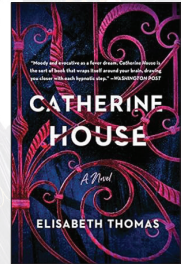
Beloved
Toni Morrison



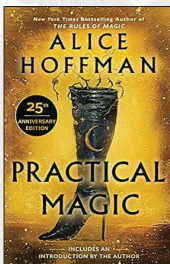
Spindle's End
Robin McKinley



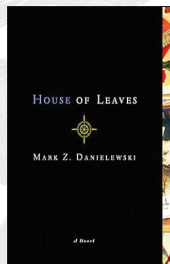
Mexican Gothic
Silvia Moreno-Garcia



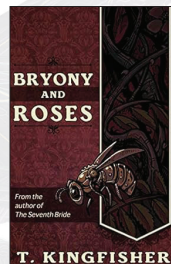
Catherine House
Elisabeth Thomas



Practical Magic
Alice Hoffman



House of Leaves
Mark Z. Danielewski



Bryony and Roses
T. Kingfisher