

# This Stays Between Us

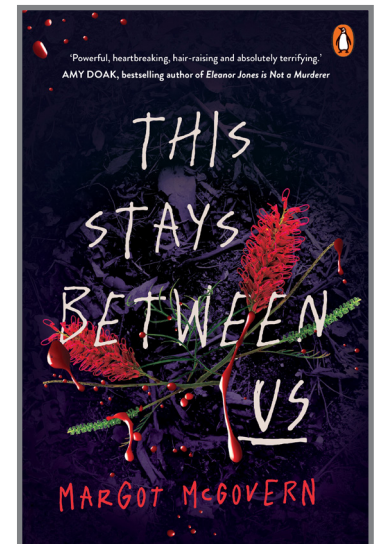
AUTHOR

**MARGOT MCGOVERN**

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Upper Secondary  
(Language, Alcohol and Drug Content, Sexual Content, Violence)



## SYNOPSIS

Four girls share a cabin on their school retreat—in an abandoned town where the ghost of Smiling Jack is known to haunt the isolated campers.

Shelley is the new girl with her own haunted past.  
Mack made things awkward by kissing her best friend.  
Priya thinks she's ready to take the next step with her boyfriend.  
Raffi has a flair for drama, and convinces them all to hold a seance.

But when you call on the darkness, sometimes the darkness replies . . .

## ABOUT THE CREATOR

Margot McGovern lives in Adelaide and has a creative writing PhD from Flinders University. Her debut novel, *Neverland*, was shortlisted for the Text Prize and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and her short horror fiction has appeared in issues of *The Dark* and the Aurealis-Award-shortlisted anthology *Hometown Haunts: #LoveOzYA Horror Tales*.

You can find out more about Margot by visiting her website: [margotmcgovern.com](http://margotmcgovern.com).

## THEMES

- Friendship
- Women and power
- Horror genre
- Ghost stories
- Final Girls
- Consent and empowerment

## STUDY NOTES

### WHILE READING

#### Writing Style

- How has the author leaned into and subverted horror tropes to tell this story?

- How has she used language throughout the story to set the mood and the tone of the narrative?
- Are there ways Margot's used things like repetition of words and phrases and motifs to further the story? Find an example of this in the text.
- Can you think of examples of other authors who have a similar writing style?
- Margot has used four different points of view—how do you think this has helped create tension in the narrative? What do you think would be different about the story if it had just been told from one character's point of view, for example, Mack? Do you think the novel would have been as satisfying with just one point of view/narrator?
- In a group of four—each choose a character. Choose a short passage from each character and read it aloud. What makes each voice distinct?
- Would you be able to tell whose point of view it was without the chapter headings guiding you?
- Would you describe any of the girls as unreliable narrators? How do you think this serves the narrative?
- Margot has used deliberate repetition throughout the novel. Pick one or two words or phrases (or other examples of repetition through the story) and write a short paragraph on why you think this has been so successful. (Examples could include: 'he's in the trees', red rain, the words 'What if...' and 'almost'.)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Horror/Final girls

- Which elements of the narrative takes place in the horror genre?
- There are those who believe that being 'scared' by entertainment mediums like horror films and literature is fun and can help build resilience in everyday life. Do you think this is true? Give an example of this from your own experiences.
- Margot has written the story as a homage to 90s horror films and wanting to explore and expand the idea of Final Girls. Do you think she has succeeded? Why or why not?
- There are many references to horror films and novels throughout the story. (Eg: *Halloween*, *Scream*, etc. Were any familiar to you? Can you think of others?)
- Look at the quote at the start of the novel from the Gothic Horror novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. Frankenstein is considered to be the original horror novel. Research the events surrounding Mary Shelley writing her debut novel and the themes in the book. Compare this to Margot's novel. Can you find similarities? Are there other connections that the two novels share—even though they were written over two hundred years apart?
- How has Margot used various traits and personality quirks of her characters to represent elements of a Gothic Horror novel? For example, look at what Raffi is wearing on p 137. Could this connect to the way female characters were crafted in novels like *Dracula* by Bram Stoker? (And what else could this symbolise?)
- What do you think of the ghost story Raffi tells about Smiling Jack at the seance (p 77)? Write your own ghost story about Smiling Jack's origins. Keep in mind that ghost stories are often spoken forms of entertainment and adjust the pacing and sentence length of your story to reflect this.
- Write your own short horror story. Keep in mind the various tropes that make these stories so successful. (Eg: A grain of truth, an isolated setting, some form of geographical or meteorological obstacle.) Include one of these tropes in your story. Read your story aloud to the class.
- Write a definition of a Final Girl in the context of a typical horror film or book. Now write another definition of what you think Margot believes a Final Girl to be.
- Look at Raffi, Mack, Priya and Shelley. Write a short paragraph on each demonstrating how they each represent an element in traditional horror films or novels.

### Friendship

- How would the dynamic of the group have been different if Shelley hadn't been sharing a cabin with Raffi, Priya and Mack? What main differences would this have thrown into the narrative?
- If Shelley hadn't been there, do you think Smiling Jack would have still acted the way he did?
- Do you think the four girls would have remained friends after the school camp?
- Look at the Epilogue. It is the only chapter from the point of view of 'us'. Do you think this is an effective way to end the narrative? How does this last chapter play into the horror genre. What do you think it suggests about the girls

and their new 'selves'?

- Can you think of some other strong friendship groups in fiction? How do they compare to Raffi, Mack and Priya? Why do you think the addition of a new person to a friendship circle is such a common literary device?

### Consent and Empowerment

- How does the decision to start the story with Shelley getting her period set the tone for the novel? Do you think the introduction of Shelley would have been the same without it? Why or why not?
- Consent is an important topic in society today. Given that the story is set in 2000, do you think that things have improved for girls and women since then? Do you think women's voices are being heard more than in the early 2000s?
- Smiling Jack aims to take control away from Raffi, Priya, Mack and Shelley. Look at the other men in the story. Do they behave in a different way? Could their methods of removing power be considered less deliberate than Smiling Jack? Does this make it any less harmful? Eg. look at the scene with Mr Wallace starting on p 197. How does his unconscious use of language diminish Mack's confidence and belief in herself?

### AFTER READING

- What makes the below passage so effective? How has Margot managed to create such a strong moment using just a few words? How have the scenes prior to this helped make this so impactful?

*Raffi's eyes flew open, the whites still showing and seeming almost to glow in the dark. The man's face filled Priya's mind. Her thoughts were teeth.*

*'Smiling Jack.'*

*The night shifted and slid. (p 93)*

- What are some tropes Margot has used to give the reader the impression that Shelley is haunted. When did you first start to suspect that something wasn't quite right with her?
- Do you think the pressure Priya feels on p 122 is common? What do you think would have happened if Priya had refused to drink more at this point? What would the knock-on effect have been for the rest of the narrative? Would the girls have still ended up in the same place later in the story?
- 4. 'The Hitchcock movie,' Raffi clarified. 'Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh? The infamous shower scene —?' She closed her fist around an invisible knife hilt and stabbed the air. 'Eek! Eek! Eek! Eek!'
- Mack had no idea what she was referring to.
- What do you think Raffi means on p 138–139 when she said Mack has 'Final Girl' ignorance? Do you think this is true?
  - This is the first time 'Final Girls' are mentioned in the story. Had you heard this term before? Do you think that each of the girls could be described as a Final Girl?
- How does the below moment from Raffi's point of view make you feel? How has Margot used language to make it a moment with impact—what literary devices has she employed?

*Raffi found this unacceptable. She was worth more than a bit part in a B-grade franchise. When she saw Mack's stolen bracelet hanging from the ute's rear-view mirror she felt no fear, only rage. Clear, focused rage. She had blown up her life to be with Mack. Retreat was supposed to be the story of their beginning. The story of how she, Raffi, stopped hiding and stepped fully and unapologetically into herself. How dare this man – this stranger – overshadow that. How dare he recast them as his victims. She would not be reduced to a grainy school photo in a newspaper article with his name in the title. Hell, she'd never speak his name again. He was just a man, no caps, and this was their story, not his. (p 253)*

Choose one of the other girls and write this scene from their point of view.