

BOOK CLUB NOTES

THE RECKLESS AFTERLIFE OF HARRIET STOKER

LAUREN JAMES



A sharp thriller with a twist of the supernatural from a masterful sci-fi writer.

What if death is only the beginning?

When Harriet Stoker dies falling from a balcony in a long-abandoned building, she discovers a world of ghosts with magical powers – shape-shifting, hypnosis, or even the ability to possess the living. As she learns more about their community, Harriet is willing to do anything to unleash her own power, even if it means destroying everyone around her. But when all of eternity is at stake, the afterlife can be a dangerous place to make an enemy. Because who knows what grudges people have been holding onto for millennia, just waiting for a reckless girl to give them the chance to get vengeance.

FOR READERS AGED 14+
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PAPERBACK

“Lauren James is a genius.”

– *SFX Magazine*

“Lauren James isn’t just headed for the stars
– she’s already there.”

– *Samantha Shannon, author of *The Priory of the Orange Tree**

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WALKER BOOKS

Discussion questions

1. Did you connect with Harriet as a character, or agree with her choices? Why or why not? Did your opinions change throughout the book? Do you need to like a protagonist to enjoy a book?
2. For a long time we don't realise the extra narration is from Claudia. Were you surprised by the reveal? How did the hints at the future affect you as a reader?
3. How does the novel explore grief and loss through characters like Felix, Harriet and Leah?
4. *"A family, bonded through blood and bone and fealty. Nothing like Rima and Felix and Kasper, who found and chose each other. That kind of family is easy and gentle, but it's weak, too. A bond that's grown from friendship can be broken. Blood is more powerful. Blood bites back. Blood defends itself."* (page 128*). How are family bonds explored in the novel? Is this quote proven true or false by the end?
5. Different sections of the novel focus on and follow different characters. Did you prefer any character's voice to the others? Why?
6. How has the afterlife shaped Felix, Rima and Kasper's relationships with each other? How have they helped each other grow?
7. How are Lauren James' characters similar or different to ghosts you've seen in pop culture before?
8. How does *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker* explore the idea of power? How do various characters use and abuse their power (both supernatural or otherwise) in the novel?
9. If you could choose any of the ghosts' powers to have in the afterlife, whose would you choose and why?
10. Author Lauren James calls the book a "horror rom-com". What genre do you think best fits *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker* and why?

Q&A with Lauren James

What can readers expect from *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker*, and how is it similar or different to your other novels?

It's very different from my other books – it's a horror, which I've written a bit of in *The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*, but not fully explored. It's also my first book outside of the realm of science fiction, as this is a paranormal fantasy. I'm so glad I was allowed to explore other genres, as often authors are expected to continue writing similar types of books – so I feel really lucky to have stepped outside my comfort zone into something new. But it has a lot of the same elements of previous novels – humour, romance, plot twists, funny characters (or rather, characters who think they're funny) and found families.

The ghosts in your world have their own energies, rules, powers: what made you want to show a different side to ghosts than we've seen in pop culture before, and how did you decide on the shape and structure of the afterlife in *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker*?

My sci-fi is always heavily based on rules and real science, so when I started thinking about the world of ghosts, I naturally gravitated towards thinking about how ghosts might work scientifically. Everything has to have an energy source, and ghosts would be no exception. The world expanded from there, as I tried to work out how that might shape a society where there is one valuable resource – the energy that keeps spirits together. If you can get enough energy, there's no limit to how long a ghost can survive, which means the oldest ghosts are the most powerful, as they've had many centuries to take and retain that energy. It gets quite dark, as Harriet learns how far they've gone to achieve that.

Harriet isn't always a very likeable character. Why do you think it's important to have female protagonists that aren't always likeable, and who are some of your favourite female antiheroes?

Oh, gosh. There are so many I love! Villanelle in *Killing Eve*, Mrs Coulter in *His Dark Materials*, Fleabag in *Fleabag*, Alyssa in *The End of the F***ing World*, Lucille Bluth in *Arrested Development*, Petra in *Jane the Virgin* and Kerry Mucklowe in *This Country* – and I'll stop myself there, before I fill a textbook with complicated women!

I think the appeal for me is a female character whose goals are more important to her than being liked – she's willing to be rejected from society to make herself happy, and values her own judgement above anyone else's viewpoint. That takes a kind of selfishness that is really interesting to me, from a character creation point of view.

Tell us about your experience writing *The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker*.

It was really tough, actually! It took a few years of coming back to the first draft before I managed to get it right. This was my first fantasy novel after writing several sci-fi, which follow the rules of the real world. This is a paranormal fantasy with magic, so the plot possibilities seemed endless and overwhelming. Everything clicked into place when I realised the importance of a magic system with rules and limitations. When your characters have powers – each of the ghosts can do something unique, like hypnotism, shapeshifting or clairvoyance – it's very important that the magic has restrictions. Otherwise, what are the consequences of their actions? What is stopping them from becoming impossibly powerful? That gave my plot a structure that made the novel a lot easier to work with.

Out of all the powers the ghosts have in the book, which one would you most want?

I would love Rima's power of shapeshifting into different animals – it seems like the most fun, especially as she can fly as birds, or explore inside the walls of the building as a little mouse.

What's up next for you?

I'm currently working on a novel about climate change – something I've wanted to write about for years, but never felt good enough to tackle, as it's such an enormous topic. I'm finding it tough, and there's a lot of research to do, but it's such an important discussion to have. When I'm struggling to write something, I tend to go away and read lots of books, to teach myself more about writing by seeing how the masters do it. So I've been reading a lot recently – authors like N. K. Jemisin and Naomi Novik have been especially inspiring.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren James is the twice Carnegie-nominated author of *The Quiet at the End of the World*, *The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*, *The Starlight Watchmaker* and *The Next Together* series. She sold the rights to her first novel when she was twenty-one. Lauren teaches creative writing for Coventry University, WriteMentor and Writing West Midlands, and has written articles for numerous publications, including the *Guardian* and the *Children's Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. She is a passionate advocate of STEM further education, and all of her books feature scientists in prominent roles. She lives in the West Midlands and you can find her on Twitter at @Lauren_E_James or her website:

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