

Foreword by Noah Hawley

It started with a question. Or, rather, it started with a series of moments that built up to a question. An independent study at Sarah Lawrence about the history of paranoia in American politics; news footage of a siege at Ruby Ridge and then a second in Waco, Texas. Or maybe it started with *The X-Files*. It was the mid-nineties after all. Somewhere in the mixture of all these elements, the question was born: *What are we so afraid of?* And by *we* I meant Americans. The history of this country is a history of fear—fear of government, fear of a loss of individuality, fear of each other.

The fear waxes and wanes, but it never fully disappears. We were born with it, it seems, and it follow us from generation to generation.

For those of you who don't remember, the nineties was a decade rich with conspiracy theories about a New World Order and black helicopters hovering in secret, of a government hell-bent on seizing our guns, of enslaving us at the direction of a secret global elite. Just as the seventies was a time of intense paranoia, in which a White House conspiracy had been proven to go all the way to the top, so was the nineties a time of rampant distrust and rumor. And so, in 1993, a question was asked by a young man in a cramped studio apartment in New York City, a question that became an idea about a professor of conspiracy theories whose wife is killed in a plane crash. An idea soon packed with my clothes and moved to San Francisco, where pages were written on weekends and long bus rides to work.

Behold the young novelist struggling to arrive.

The question was a broad one, but I quickly realized that the ideas that drove the novel had to be specific. In the end, you see, a question is not enough to fuel a novel. It needs characters. The questions that drive the book have to become *their* questions, the ethereal nature of themes grounded in human identity. And so the question *what are we so afraid of* becomes instead *what is he so afraid of*, Linus Owen, our hero. A man who teaches classes about paranoia, but has managed to remain one step removed, until an actual conspiracy consumes his life. Why is it easier for him to assign blame for the world's (and his own) problems to the actions of unknown global powers? Than to admit that people have flaws, that we're our own worst enemies, that the father who died from a two-pack-a-day habit wasn't a victim of Philip Morris, but, in fact, a suicide? A weak man who smoked each cigarette knowing full well that it would kill him.

The nineties passed. *X-Files* culture shifted. American paranoia waned, but only for a moment. For here we are, twenty years later, and the pendulum has swung again—the names have changed; the New World Order has become Pizzagate, militias have become sovereign citizens. But the fear remains. It is our fear, the burden we carry. We thought the Internet would save us, shining a light into the dark corners of uninformed paranoia, but it has only made the fear stronger. Rumors fly now in real time, igniting the embers of uncertainty. And meanwhile the question remains.

Reading Group Guide

1. Noah Hawley is also the author of *Before the Fall* and *The Punch*, among other novels. Do you see any similarities between *A Conspiracy of Tall Men* and his other work? Noah is also an accomplished writer, director and showrunner who most recently created and oversaw the TV shows *Fargo* and *Legion*. Are there elements of Noah's work on those shows you see in this novel?
2. How do you think the title relates to the book?
3. To what genres do you think this book belongs? How does it bend those genres?
4. Linus isn't alone in his journey to uncover the truth. What do you think Edward and Roy add to the story? Could Linus have done it alone?
5. Did you connect to Linus? Which characters did you find the most relatable?
6. What do you think Hawley's purpose was in writing *A Conspiracy of Tall Men*? What ideas or themes was Hawley trying to get across?
7. In its exploration of conspiracy theories, *A Conspiracy of Tall Men* walks a line between realism and absurdism. Did you accept the story at face value throughout, or were there any points where you questioned the believability of the story? Did the conspiracy theory that drove the plot feel far-fetched or do you think it is possible?
8. Did you enjoy the writing style of the novel? Did knowing more about the characters make you care for them more, or if you'd known less about Linus and his friends, do you think you'd have been just as invested in the plot?
9. Did you think this book has a satisfying conclusion? Did the open-ended nature of the conclusion make you wish there was a sequel to the novel?
10. *A Conspiracy of Tall Men* was first published two decades ago. How do you think the story holds up in this day and age? Do any of the themes seem less pressing to you than they might have two decades ago? Do any of the themes feel even more important in the context of current events?