

## Reading Group Guide

1. In what ways is S.T. caught between the MoFo world and the world of nature? How does this affect his sense of self? How does it both benefit and impair him at various points in the novel?
2. What drives S.T.'s actions—from leaving his home, to searching for Onida, to rescuing domestic animals, and more—throughout his journey? What are some of his key turning points?
3. S.T.'s relationship with Dennis evolves from S.T.'s deprecation and occasional hostility to a pure and loving friendship. In what ways do the unlikely duo complement each other? What do you think their bond stems from?
4. What other unlikely symbiotic relationships exist in the novel? What about in the real world?
5. Kraai initially claims that S.T. is “caged and clipped,” an idea that S.T. angrily rejects. However, S.T. later loses his ability to fly due to a wing injury. How is this significant to S.T.'s character and place in the world?
6. Consider the way the natural world communicates and how rumors spread in this novel. How are *Aura*, *Echo*, and *Web* similar and different to methods of human communication?
7. Although he is absent for most of the story, Big Jim is periodically portrayed through flashbacks. How does his character develop and evolve through S.T.'s memories? How does your perception of Big Jim change throughout the novel?
8. S.T. often wonders at the ingenuity of humans, from inventions like Cheetos® and hot dog-eating competitions to “how even though MoFos weren't born with wings, they made their own and put them on airplanes and maxi pads, and [...] how they flushed all their poops out to *Echo*” (chapter 37). How does this reverence compare to his feelings for the natural world? Can you think of moments where S.T. displays the same awe for nature?
9. Besides Cheetos®, what do you think are the best inventions and characteristics of humanity? Of nature?
10. Why do you think the book is titled *Hollow Kingdom*?
11. What are some of the overarching messages or themes of *Hollow Kingdom*?

12. Who is your favorite character? Why?

### **A Conversation with Kira Jane Buxton**

#### **What sparked the idea for *Hollow Kingdom*? And what led you to want to write from the perspective of a domesticated crow?**

I once tried to rescue an injured crow while around forty of his family members screamed from the surrounding evergreens. As I ushered the little crow into a box, his entire murder went completely silent. They seemed to understand that I was there to help. The murder treated me differently after that—accompanying me on walks and calling out to me—and I became quite obsessed with learning more about crows. I now have two crows that visit me every day. They are quirky and complex characters—deeply loyal and loving to those they choose (woe betide those they don't!). I wanted to explore the mind of an endlessly fascinating species that we often overlook, one that has a perfect bird's-eye view of our own.

#### **What was your greatest challenge writing from S.T.'s perspective?**

Getting started! I was initially intimidated to voice a crow given how fond of them I am. I let the idea marinate in my mind for several years before eventually attempting it. Once I understood that S.T. is a crow who is deeply enamored of humans, and that he was going to tell the story of what happened to our species, I sat down to write the first chapter and his voice flowed. His language was saltier than I expected, but if you've ever angered a crow, you can imagine that it's not out of the realm of possibility.

#### **What animals do you have in your own life? Did they inspire any parts of *Hollow Kingdom*?**

I find animals to be the very best company. I am owned by three cats, a Brussels griffon, my two crows, and a charm of hummingbirds who visit me daily. My entire morning routine is dictated by these wonderful creatures. My two crows informed a lot of S.T.'s behaviors and idiosyncrasies, and I've been lucky enough to spend time with many of the wild species I've given voice to in *Hollow Kingdom*. The character of Genghis Cat is based on my tabby. She is essentially a merciless miniature tiger who rules our household with an iron paw.

#### **What kind of research did you do while writing *Hollow Kingdom*, and what was some of the most interesting or surprising information you learned?**

I read nonfiction about the natural world voraciously, always eager to know more about the creatures we share space with—whether our backyards or the Pacific Ocean. Researching animal and plant behavior for *Hollow Kingdom* was tremendously invigorating. I find it overwhelmingly joyful to discover characteristics particular to each creature—like an octopus having sentience in each of its eight arms and the ability to regenerate them if one is severed, or that koala fingerprints are so similar to human fingerprints that there has been crime scene confusion. I'm especially interested in the

emotional complexities of animals—elephants grieve, baby elephants suck their trunks for comfort, crows help other family members build nests. It is both humbling and exhilarating to learn about these beguiling, often highly relatable behaviors. There is so much we don't know about the biological life-forms we inhabit this earth with. I hope much of it remains a beautiful mystery.

**Your love for animals and nature really shines through on the pages of this novel. Were any experiences in your life particularly formative in making you a nature lover?**

When I was twelve years old, I volunteered at a zoo in Indonesia. My job was to pick beetles out of buckets of mealworms, which got old fast. I ended up sneaking around the zoo, befriending keepers and having incredible animal encounters, like hand-feeding our Sumatran rhino and holding reticulated pythons. Both my parents are animal lovers, so I was raised in a household that was prone to rescuing everything from hamsters to wild birds. Having formative encounters with the natural world motivates a conservation ethic. I believe that connections with animals are not only good for our spiritual fulfillment and psychological well-being, they remind us that we are not separate from nature; we are an integral part of it.

**Why did you choose Seattle as the focal point for a story set during the apocalypse?**

My husband and I moved to Seattle because we fell in love with the trees here. It was a wise move. Neither of us had spent much time in the presence of Douglas firs and western red cedars and spruce trees and found it transformative to live around these living, breathing, benevolent giants. Seattle is my literal home and the home of my heart. In many ways, *Hollow Kingdom* is my love letter to the place that has allowed me to thrive artistically and to the Washington state wildlife that piques my curiosity every day.

***Hollow Kingdom* has so many utterly unique and memorable side characters, some of whom appear only briefly: Genghis Cat, Winnie the Poodle, Dawul the young camel, and Angus the Highland cow, to name a few. How did you go about creating their voices? Did you have a favorite?**

Some of these characters are based on real animals that I know and love (I have changed their names and genders so they don't sue me for defamation). Sometimes the voices are very clear to me, and at other times I have to be patient with discovering a particular cadence and character. I was actually trying to voice a hummingbird when Angus the Highland cow defiantly burst onto the page. I love them all. I'm partial to Dawud because I grew up around camels in Dubai and have always adored them. I'm also pretty fond of Angus and his narcissistic demeanor. And of course, Genghis Cat. As the mediocre servant of the feline muse who inspired him, I must give credit where credit is due.

**What are some of your all-time favorite books?**

*My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle, *The Soul of an Octopus* by Sy Montgomery, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* by Annie Dillard, *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben, *Why I Wake Early* by Mary Oliver, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, *The Wild God of the World* by Robinson Jeffers. Some recent favorites are *Less* by Andrew Sean

Greer, *Circe* by Madeline Miller, and *My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite.

**If you could turn into an animal for a day, which animal would you choose?**

I love this question. Perhaps a crow since they really know how to have a good time. My female crow has a great zeal for life; it's palpable. She's a prankster and has a sense of humor. I often watch bald eagles and wonder what it feels like to ride the thermals and feel the sun on your wings. Perhaps a humpback whale so I could experience what it feels like to breach. I suspect the most sensible answer to this question is that I would choose to be my dog. He is a deeply indulged persnickety curmudgeon named Ewok who lives a life of immoderate luxury. I truly want to explore the inner lives of every species. Can I be a different animal every day and experience them all?

**What's next for you as a writer?**

S.T. is such an irrepressibly lovable crowtagonist. He also happens to be an emotional basket case and I don't think we've seen the last of him. I hope to keep having the privilege of engaging with the natural world and letting it inspire my writing. And I do hope to meet many more animal companions along the way.