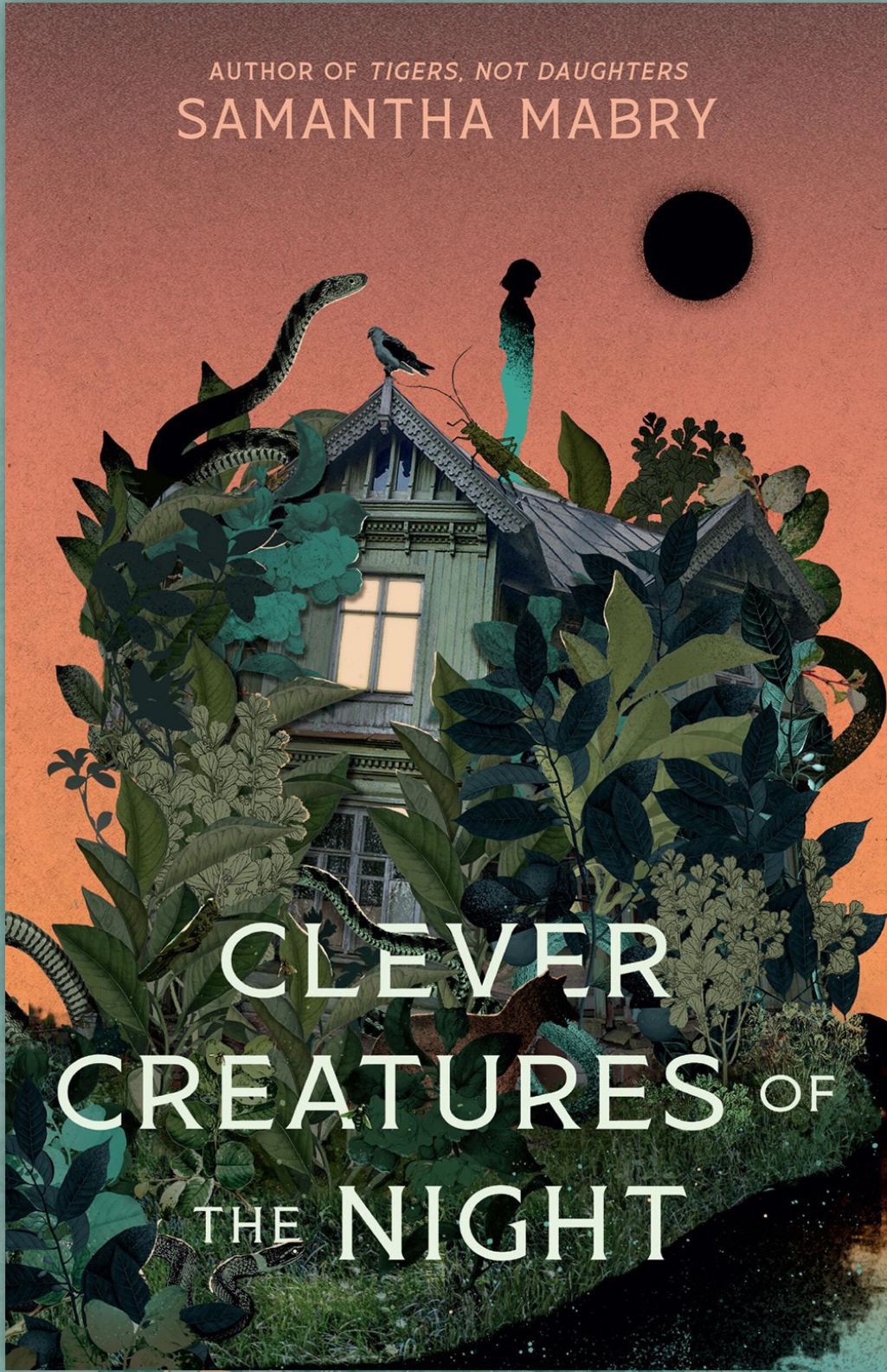


BOOK CLUB KIT

AUTHOR OF *TIGERS, NOT DAUGHTERS*
SAMANTHA MABRY



A Note from the Author

Dear Readers,

A few years ago, my husband and I bought a small farmhouse on five acres of scrubby land in a rural county west of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. We managed to fix up the house just in time to spend most of our pandemic days there with our young son, who, at the time, was just learning to walk.

Even out in our own isolated world, I lived in fear of so many things. There was the virus, yes, but also grass fires that tended to occur during dry summers—usually caused by someone tossing a lit cigarette from a moving car. I was afraid of my son accidentally toddling into bed of ants or overturning a rock to find a scorpion. Also, there were hogs. They were tramping through our fields, leaving deep gouges in the dirt and trails in the tall grass. I prepared myself to fight them, if necessary.

It is beautiful out there in the country, but during those days, I was focused mostly on my fears—of things both real and imagined—and *Clever Creatures of the Night* emerged from that state of mind.

Sort of. Initially, anyway.

Soon into drafting, I realized I didn't want to write a book solely about fear. It would be a miserable experience both for me as a writer and for any potential reader. But more than that, I'm a true believer in the idea that every good story is, at its core, a love story. So, while *Clever Creatures of the Night* takes place in a world in which many things are going wrong and all kinds of things are creeping around in the underbrush, I wanted to focus most on the places where beauty could be found: in the greenest-green color of a grasshopper, the crunch of a chocolate-dipped ice cream cone from Dairy Queen, a perfect slant of bright sun coming through a window, the smell of fresh bread, the unexpected kindness of a stranger, or the endurance of a true friend.

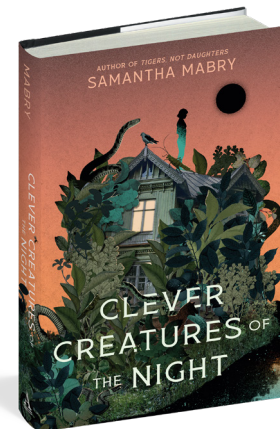
I'd like to think that, in a time of fear and isolation, I would be like Drea or Bryan, the big-hearted ones able to find and focus on those beautiful moments in the darkness, but, sadly, I think I'm more like Kendall—muting my fear by obsessively fixating on the execution of daily tasks and attempting to hunt down trespassers.

I am still—*always*—working on finding the love.



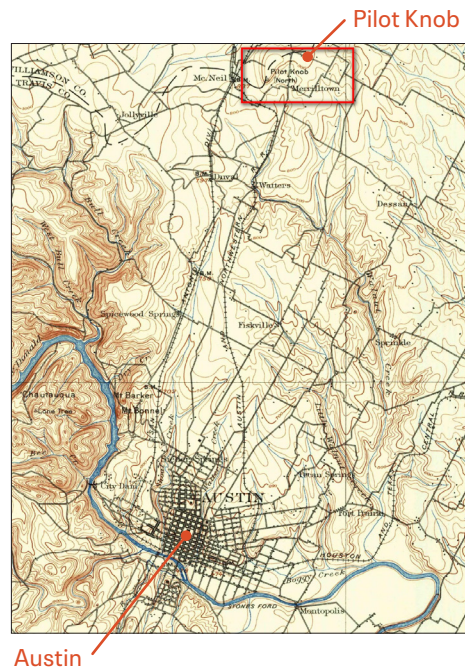
Discussion Questions

1. *Clever Creatures of the Night* borrows from several different categories of literary genres and traditions, including gothic, horror, thriller, the epistolary novel, post-apocalyptic, the Western, and even noir. Which of these genres and/or traditions do you feel fits best?
2. The setting of *Clever Creatures of the Night* resembles a set of concentric circles. First, at the center, is the house, which is surrounded by the acreage of the property, which is surrounded by the Palo Pinto County. Speak to how the setting(s) serves to “ground” some characters yet unsettle others.
3. At a hidden spot in the woods, Drea has left behind an old, empty ice chest full of “treasures” that seem to encapsulate her character. If someone were to come across an abandoned ice chest of *yours* hidden somewhere, what would it contain that would truly encapsulate *you*?
4. Readers only know Drea through the writing and objects she’s left behind and from what the other characters remember and say about her. How do the other characters “create” Drea to suit their purposes? In what ways do these accounts complement and in what ways do these accounts conflict?
5. There are, throughout the novel, various iterations of the story of White Sky. How do these iterations overlap and also possibly conflict with one another? What narrative purpose do these stories serve within the plot of *Clever Creatures of the Night*?
6. Troy, Drea, Abby, Kendall, and Steph all react to tragedy and isolation in different ways. Which reaction, if any, do you feel most aligns with you and why?
7. Case describes herself as a “simple” person. Why might she say this? Is this a fair characterization?
8. The main cast of characters hold various economic and ethnic identities. How do these identities, along with their respective upbringings, affect their interactions with and perceptions of each other?
9. The text uses various metaphorical and physical images of the four elements—fire, water, earth, and wind or sky. In what ways does the author use this imagery within the story and what purpose or purposes does it serve?
10. The animals in *Clever Creatures* hold literal functions within the plot but are also commonly used as metaphors. Choose an animal that appears in the story and discuss what symbolic purpose it may serve.
11. At the very end of the novel, Case hears a group of search dogs barking as one, as if they’ve “found” something near the river. What do you think (or hope!) those dogs have found?



The Real Texas Volcano

In the spring of 1815, Mount Tambora erupted in Indonesia, spewing lava, ash, and pumice into the sky. It still remains the largest volcanic event in recorded human history, and the massive debris cloud Tambora produced caused atmospheric anomalies worldwide. The mid-day sky turned orange. There was pink snow in June, and 1816 came to be known as “the year without summer,” given the eruption’s massive impact on weather patterns. Crops failed. Livestock died. Reportedly, there were even people who suffered from severe crises of faith because the world as they knew it had been plunged into darkness. In fact, Lord Byron wrote a poem at the time inspired by Tambora aptly named “Darkness,” and the grim and lingering aftermath of the eruption was said to have been one of many inspirations for Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.



What sets the plot of *Clever Creatures of the Night* into motion before we ever get to the opening page is the eruption of a different volcano, Pilot Knob. In reality, Pilot Knob is the eroded core of an extinct volcano that last erupted something like seventy-five million years ago, helping to create the network of cave systems for which Central Texas is known today. Pilot Knob is situated almost smack-dab in the middle of Austin, Texas, and the odds of it erupting again are . . . slim. For this novel to work, however, I needed something unexpected to happen in the middle of Texas that would shake things up—like, shake *everything* up. The sky would be different. The people would be different. The animals would be different. I needed something like a Mount Tambora, so imagine my surprise when I looked up “Texas volcano” online, and there was Pilot Knob.

—Samantha Mabry

The Creatures of Palo Pinto

