

the WRITING RETREAT

A NOVEL

JULIA
BARTZ

Reading Group Guide

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the WRITING RETREAT

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*This reading group guide for **the WRITING RETREAT** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **JULIA BARTZ**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

The Plot meets *Please Join Us* in this psychological suspense debut about a young author at an exclusive writer's retreat that descends into a nightmare.

Alex has all but given up on her dreams of becoming a published author when she receives a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: attend an exclusive, month-long writing retreat at the estate of feminist horror writer Roza Vallo. Even the knowledge that Wren, her former best friend and current rival, is attending doesn't dampen her excitement.

But when the attendees arrive, Roza drops a bombshell—they must all complete an entire novel from scratch during the next month, and the author of the best one will receive a life-changing seven-figure publishing deal. Determined to win this seemingly impossible contest, Alex buckles down and tries to ignore the strange happenings at the estate, including Roza's erratic behavior, Wren's cruel mind games, and the alleged haunting of the mansion itself. But when one of the writers vanishes during a snowstorm, Alex realizes that something very sinister is afoot. With the clock running out, she must discover the truth—or suffer the same fate.

A claustrophobic and propulsive thriller exploring the dark side of female relationships and fame, *The Writing Retreat* is the unputdownable debut novel from a compelling new talent.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At the start of the novel, Alex sees a pair of high school friends on the subway. Viewing them makes her feel the loss of her friendship with Wren like “a penknife in the ribs,” and she feels sad at seeing the high schoolers’ “shared world. Their undeniable certainty that they were a team” (3). How do Alex’s feelings of loss influence much of the resulting action in the novel?
2. How might Viv’s and especially Joshua’s lives have played out if this story were set in a Nazi-occupied region of Europe during World War II?
3. What characteristics make Roza such a terrifying and successful adversary?
4. Compare and contrast Roza’s personality with Alex’s. How are they alike? How are they different? Does this change over the course of the novel?
5. Describe Blackbriar estate. In what ways is the mansion a character, too?
6. Alex and Wren have a complicated history, all of which comes into play when they are forced together at the writing retreat. Were you surprised by any elements of their relationship? How did their relationship change under these extreme circumstances?
7. Consider the parallels between the writers and the subjects or themes of their novels. How do these ties enhance your understanding of the women?
8. What twist shocked you the most? What about it was so surprising and effective?
9. In the last scene from *The Great Commission*, Daphne chooses a new name, Elizabeth. “She was leaving her old self behind” (299). Consider who at the writing retreat is trying to leave their old selves behind and why. Does anyone do so successfully? If so, at what cost?
10. While tense and atmospheric, the novel’s tone is also quite funny and satirical. What lines made you laugh the most?
11. Daphne Wolfe is loosely based on Hilma af Klint, a Swedish painter born in 1862 who many consider the true inventor of abstract art. She was also a spiritualist and formed a group with other women to contact spirits. When one spirit asked Hilma to channel a “great commission,” she accepted and painted some of her most famous works. Why do you think the author included elements of af Klint and female spiritualists? How is writing fiction a form of channeling?

12. Who would you cast in a film adaptation of *The Writing Retreat*? What scenes or details would you especially want to make sure made it from book to screen?

13. How does Alex learn about her queerness through her interactions with other characters in the book, including Wren, Roza, and Taylor? Why might it have taken her until her thirties to realize she's bisexual? Have you heard of other stories of women coming out after 30? How do you see them framed?

14. How do issues of consent and power arise in this book? How did you feel reading about Wren and Alex's sexual encounter in their apartment? Would you have felt differently about it if Wren were a man? How about the encounter between Alex and Taylor in the basement? What are other ways that this book explores themes of power and domination?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. There are many page-turning thrillers and suspense novels about writers, including *Misery* by Stephen King, *The Stranger Diaries* by Elly Griffiths, *The Plot* by Jean Hanff Korelitz, and *A Slow Burning Fire* by Paula Hawkins. Pick one as a group and read it together, comparing and contrasting the way the two authors portray the writing life.

2. Choose a key scene to reimagine through the point of view of another one of the attendees. How would she react to events? How would she feel? What would change about the moment?

3. Host a (more fun, less intense) writing retreat of your own! Have everyone bring a short piece of writing they've worked on and kindly critique it. Once you've had time to revise, collect all the pieces together and print it out as a keepsake of your book club.



A CONVERSATION WITH JULIA BARTZ

Q: Where did the idea for this book come from?

A: I had to go back through my files to figure out when I first started this book, and I was surprised to see that I wrote the first iteration during NaNoWriMo in 2014! (NaNoWriMo is National Novel Writing Month, in which an online community attempts to write 50,000 words of a new piece in a single month.) In that early draft, Alex fled New York after her friend breakup with Wren, but she ended up in Montana. She started sleepwalking, and Roza came to her in her dreams—but in this version, she was actually an alien deciding whether or not to save mankind. The idea was fun, but didn't totally gel for me. Several years later, I was sitting outside on my lunchbreak from my office job, and the idea of writing about a writing retreat landed on me. It felt like a download: I grabbed my phone and scribbled down notes. The characters from my original draft shifted into place. I knew this would make a great story.

Around this time, I was working with an agent on another book: a “dystopian” novel in which Roe v. Wade was overturned. (It was depressing to realize how quickly my nightmarish tale would turn into reality.) After working closely together on several new drafts, she decided to part ways with me. Later, I found out that this isn't all that uncommon, but at the time it felt devastating. I'd written two novels that hadn't found representation. Did I want to start the process over a third time? Writing a novel takes so much time and energy, and I didn't want to be disappointed yet again. However, the story felt urgent, like it wanted to be told.

Ultimately, I decided if I was going to write this book, I needed to focus on the process instead of the outcome. I wanted to use it as an opportunity to explore my feelings around being a stuck and disillusioned writer. And I also wanted to enjoy creating a book that I would want to read: complex, suspenseful, and disturbing. I'm glad I did finish it, because this was the book that ended up being picked up by an agent and publisher.

Q: What was it like writing novels-within-a-novel?

A: Writing about books within the book was really a character exercise: what would Wren write about? Or Keira? Or Taylor? It was fun to play around with different ideas and see what felt right for them. It was a similar process with Roza, figuring out what stories she would be interested in sharing with the world. With Alex's book, I wanted to more deeply show the process of writing and how it feels: sometimes a vivid image (such as the ghost standing over young Daphne's bed) can jump-start your imagination. I also wanted to demonstrate how writers are affected by what's happening in their own lives. For example, after Alex is betrayed by Roza and Taylor, she writes about how Daphne's friend Abigail deceived her. Finally, I wanted to explore the idea of channeling; oftentimes writing

fiction does feel like that, when you see scenes in your head and hurry to capture them on the page. Sometimes, a character will even do something that startles you. It's both eerie and exhilarating.

Q: How did your career as a therapist influence your novel?

A: I decided to become a therapist after the writing didn't seem to be working out, at least career-wise. I started therapy myself around this time, and I found it so helpful that I became excited at the idea of providing this space for other people. Interestingly, I found that becoming a therapist helped to deepen my writing. It allowed me to more clearly define the dynamics between people (for example, Alex and Wren's codependent relationship), as well as understand the characters' motivations, which are affected by their past, their family, and various forms of trauma, including societal and generational trauma.

I also found my therapy background helpful because I was able to use the book to explore my own shadow parts. These are parts of ourselves that we repress early on when we're told they're not "acceptable." For women, these parts can often include anger, jealousy, aggression, and sexuality. It was fun to write Roza because she's so fully in touch with her shadow parts—although to a dangerous degree.

Q: What were the themes or messages that you'd most like people to take away from *The Writing Retreat*?

A: There was a lot I wanted to include in this book—possibly too much! But the major backbone of the book was the question: What does it mean to be a writer? Part of this question involved exploring the idea of social conditioning and how it affects writers' identities and motivations. In the US, there is such a focus on becoming rich and famous—those are two ideals that are pushed on us all the time. But the fact is that it's really difficult to be a paid artist in a society that doesn't always support its creatives—especially those who are BIPOC, queer, trans, or otherwise marginalized. And yet there's this false narrative of: Just follow your dreams and you'll succeed! We need to be aware of the realities and the toll that constant hustling can take. I put so much pressure on myself to succeed that when my first two books didn't get published, I became depressed. It was helpful to decide to try to find fulfillment in other areas of my life, including changing careers. This outlook also lowered the pressure of becoming a published author, which was really out of my control.

In the book, Alex goes through a similar process: feeling deeply envious of her friend Ursula, becoming depressed and unfulfilled, and losing joy in writing to the point where she gets writer's block. In a way, Roza helps Alex become excited about writing again. At the same time, Roza uses the attendees by dangling exactly what they've been told to want over their heads: a huge book deal and instant celebrity. She also pits them against each other. In the end, the ones that survive do get that fame and fortune, but not necessarily because of their talent. For Alex, though, this doesn't matter. She knows that whatever happens, she's a writer, and she's able to find fulfillment in the work—once she finally gets her next idea.

Q: Are there any authors that you idolize? Do you think it's dangerous to hold someone in such high regard as Alex did with Roza?

A: One of my earliest heroes was Natalie Goldberg. I picked up one of her books about writing (*Wild Mind*) as a pre-teen and became instantly in awe of her. She really felt like a mentor to me. Many years later, I was running the book blog BookStalker and I got the opportunity to interview her. I remember being nervous about our call, but it was somewhat anti-climactic. She was eating and just acting so casual that it brought her back down to earth for me. It was still a cool experience, but it reminded me that writers are just people. And oftentimes they don't realize the level of connection people feel towards them via their books. There were times in the past where I tried to connect with authors at events; sometimes they were game and other times they didn't seem interested. And that is totally fair: they were probably exhausted from being interviewed and from signing dozens of books! So I think it's important to remember that all authors are imperfect, human, and often quite busy.

Q: What's your writing process? Do you have any tips for writers?

A: I was a "pantser" (someone who writes by the seat of their pants) for my first two books. But with *The Writing Retreat*, I became a firm plotter. I think if you want to write a page turner, you have to know the three-act structure; it's embedded in our psyche and so it feels really satisfying to hit all the points. I highly recommend the book *Save the Cat Writes a Novel*, which breaks down the structure. It's not to say I figure everything out at the beginning—I might just plot the first act or the first half. But I have a giant bulletin board and I literally write scenes on notecards and pin them up to try to figure out the structure.

In terms of when I write, I try to write first thing in the morning. If I push it to later, so many other things come up and it might not happen. Typically I'll write around an hour or two, depending on my schedule. It doesn't seem like a lot, but you'd be amazed how much you can get done if your brain knows that you only have that amount of time available. I'm also flexible on frequency. I think it's good to work every weekday if you can, but if you need to stop and think, or maybe research, I think it's fine to follow your intuition. Sometimes it's helpful to take a few weeks off and let your unconscious work on the story, especially if you feel stuck. Freewriting—meaning writing whatever comes to mind—can also be a good way to get ideas flowing.

Q: Did you attend writing groups or a writing retreat before you wrote your novel? What were your experiences like?

A: I did not! I always felt a little bewildered about how to go about it. The well-known retreats and residencies were so competitive, and the others seemed to require too much research, time, and money. I did go on other retreats, though, mainly affordable yoga and meditation retreats that I'd hear about at my yoga studio. Since I usually went alone, I often found the experience a little destabilizing, to be dropped in a group of people I didn't know. It takes a little time to figure out the dynamics: who might be an ally or friend, and who might not. I traveled to a yoga teacher training in 2016 and there were five of us, and the other four paired off immediately. We all ended up becoming friends, but that initial feeling of alienation definitely fed Alex's experience.

Q: What books and other media inspired *The Writing Retreat*?

A: There were a lot of books that inspired *The Writing Retreat*. I wanted Blackbriar to feel like a haunted house because of my love of the genre, particularly: Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, which provides such great symbolism about the mental state of the main character; *The Shining*, which explores a writer's breakdown; Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, which contains a near-constant feeling of dread; and Tananarive Due's *Good House*, which brilliantly explores generational and racial trauma. I was also inspired by books that focus on the act of writing in the midst of disturbing circumstances, particularly *Misery* by Stephen King and *The Plot* by Jean Hanff Korelitz.

Another inspiration was works that explore mentorships and relationships with those who are at the very least sociopathic, including the movies *Silence of the Lambs*, *Whiplash*, and *Basic Instinct*, and the show *Killing Eve*. These relationships can be toxic, but they're always fascinating, and sometimes (in the case of *Silence of the Lambs*) even helpful.

And finally, this might be more subtle, but I wanted to pay tribute to the fun, campy YA novels I used to read as a pre-teen and teen, particularly those by Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine. Those books were so great at suspense, even if the chapter cliffhangers didn't always pan out in a satisfying way. They had some pretty memorable villains, too!

Q: What is your dream writing retreat?

A: I love the idea of the cabin-in-the-woods type of retreat, but I think at this point I'd just love to hit a spa. Preferably one with world-class dining. Treatment, write, eat, chat, repeat. I can't think of a better experience than that!

Q: What are you working on next?

A: I'm working on a new novel. I can't say too much about it yet, but if you enjoyed *The Writing Retreat*, then I think you'll definitely like this one, too!