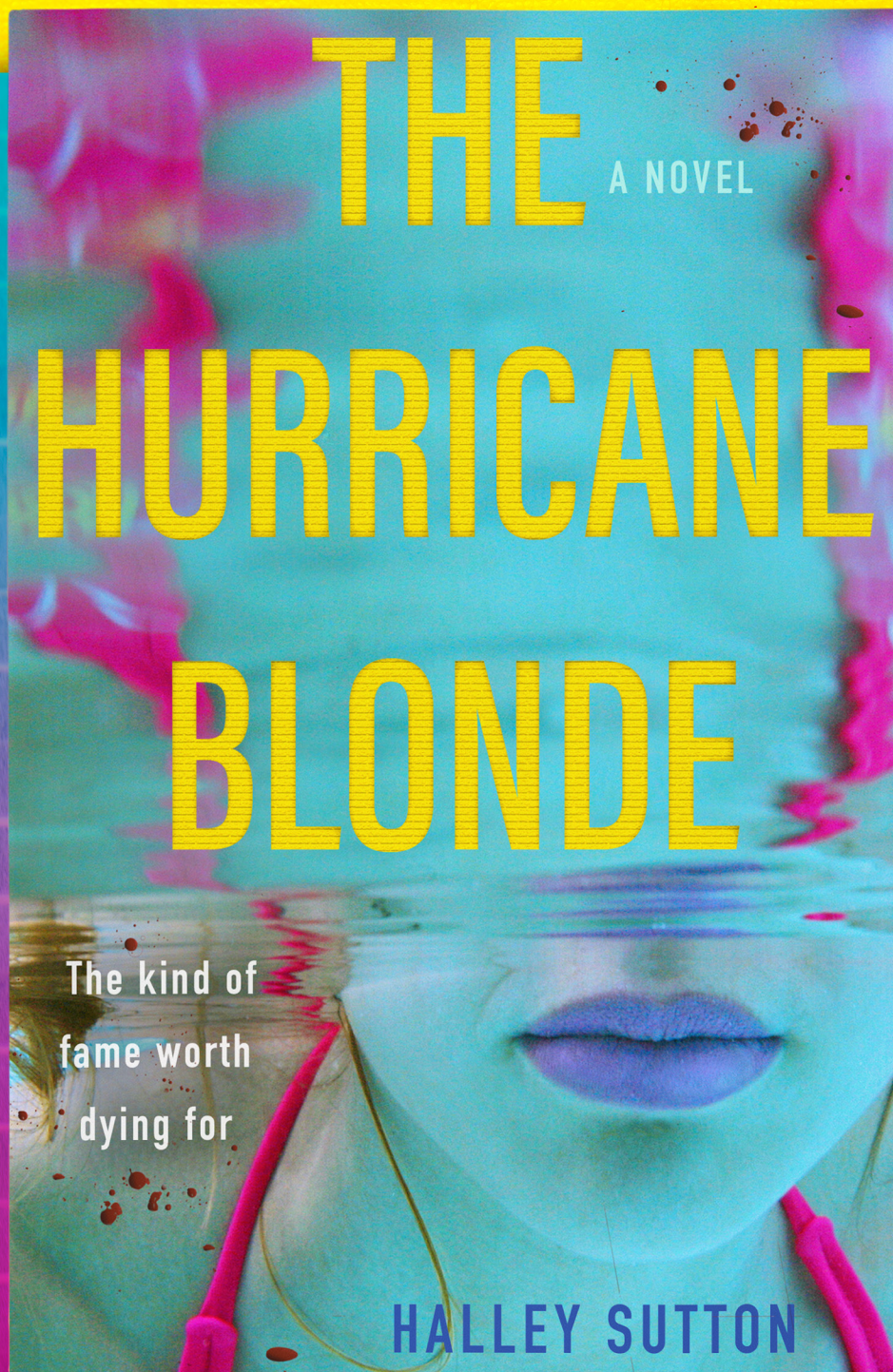


# Book Club Kit



PUTNAM



# Discussion Guide

1. *The Hurricane Blonde* is narrated in the first person, and we as readers have an intimate look at Salma's suspicions and feelings. How did that perspective impact your reading experience? Did you find Salma to be a reliable narrator?

2. Discuss the interplay between the past and the present in the novel, particularly looking at the flashback chapters and how they interact with the narrative. Is Salma stuck in the past? And is her recollection of the past accurate? How does history change the way the story in the present day unfolds?

3. Who is the true villain in *The Hurricane Blonde*? Is there more than one? Consider the ways that both action and inaction harm various characters in the novel. Look also at the ways that characters are punished for their crimes—if they are.

4. The end of the novel is ambiguous regarding how Salma will choose to move forward in her professional and personal life. What choices do you imagine she makes? What do you think her life will look like after the novel's end?

5. Why do you think that Salma chooses to run the Stars Six Feet Under tour? Why does she remain submerged in the world of fame and cinema, even after her sister's murder? What do you think the stories of the women portrayed in the tour represent, and how do they parallel the modern day?

6. The novel explores both the danger and the draw of Hollywood. How far are each of the main characters willing to go in order to remain in the orbit of fame? Is it ultimately worth it?

7. Take a look at Salma's reputation and how it changes throughout the course of *The Hurricane Blonde*. What does it show about the standards women in Hollywood are held to? How does Salma both live up to and defy the stereotype that the public has placed upon her?

8. Why do you think the public continues to be obsessed with Tawney's short life and her death? In particular, why do you think Ankine is so devoted to taking on Tawney's persona? And what are the dangers she faces in doing so?

9. Take a look at the role of the media and tabloids in *The Hurricane Blonde*. How much power does the media hold? How do the narratives told by the press take on a life of their own and impact events? Does the "truth" truly matter, or do the stories shared by the media become a form of truth?

10. Discuss the meaning of the title. Aside from referring to Tawney's nickname, does "The Hurricane Blonde" summon other themes or images from within the text?



# In conversation with HALLEY SUTTON

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**Where did the idea for *The Hurricane Blonde* come from? When did you first think of it?**

The more experience I have with writing novels, the more it seems to me my ideas for novels are both quick—all of a sudden, I put something together in a new way and attach to it—and also the product of several years of obsessions and vague what-ifs mashed together. When I was considering premises for my second book to pitch to my editor, I didn't really have a concrete idea in mind. My agent, the phenomenal Sharon Pelletier, recommended that I send her a list of premises to consider. The very last idea on my list—I don't remember the others!—which I added in a sort of why-the-hell-not? attitude, was: *Murder-bus tour guide discovers a body on her tour*. Sharon immediately pointed to that as something fresh, so that was really the spark.

But that idea also came from my experiences when I first moved to LA as a grad student and would take weekend true-crime bus tours to get to know various parts of the city. It was a really unique way to look at some of the history—or even, the dark mythology—of Los Angeles, and an interesting education for a burgeoning crime writer.

And in grad school, I fell in love with the weird mythology of Hollywood. This was facilitated by a wonderful professor of mine, a poet (who also wrote noir poetry) and translator named Paul Vangelisti. Paul had worked at *The Hollywood Reporter* back in

the 1970s and had all these great behind-the-scenes stories of Hollywood big shots (buy me a drink at a reading sometime and I'll spill the dirt, very much off the record). I loved his stories—I believed him—but I also just liked the modern mythology of it all. Around the same time, I read *Hollywood Babylon* by Kenneth Anger—not the most humanitarian of books but a lot of soapy, insane, libelous fun.

Once I had that thread of a premise—murder-bus tour guide, etc.—these other obsessions started to coalesce. What if the tour guide was a flamed-out child actor? What if she came from an epically famous family whose fame was also concealing a terrible secret?

**What was your experience of writing *The Hurricane Blonde*? This is your second novel, following your debut, *The Lady Upstairs*. Did the writing process differ from book to book?**

With *The Lady Upstairs*, I had Jo's voice spring into my head almost fully formed, and then I spent about three and a half years workshopping, rewriting, reenvisioning her story. But I always knew exactly how she felt. And I had all the time in the world to figure out her story and get it right.

With *The Hurricane Blonde*, I was really getting to know Salma as I wrote the book. I knew where I wanted the book to go, and I knew what I wanted the book to explore.

I even knew huge biographical portions of Salma's life: her childhood, her place in her family, her deepest shames and secrets. But it took a couple of years for me to get to know her voice, how she experienced the world.

Everyone warned me that writing a second book is very, very hard—and that was before the pandemic. As it turns out, everyone was right. But I'm also so proud of this book—it was such a labor of love, and I learned so much about myself and my own writing process writing it.

**Why did you decide to set the novel in Hollywood? How did Hollywood lore impact your writing? Were there any particular Hollywood true-crime cases that inspired you?**

I'm fascinated by Hollywood mythology. It's American folklore, in some sense: You have these impossibly glamorous beings made immortal through film, and the archetypes—the seductive blonde, the girl next door, the handsome rogue, the overlooked hero, even the villains—that basically get embodied by new people every few years. I'm fascinated by that. Not just the truth of their stories—but how we tell their stories

and why. What does it facilitate for us to read celebrity gossip, to root for or against certain marriages or life choices? It's not unlike, in my opinion, our fascination with true crime—whatever catharsis of emotion we

experience in taking on these other stories as our own, as personal to us.


In terms of true crime, I was inspired by a variety of cases, including Dominique Dunne, who was strangled to death by an ex-boyfriend on her lawn in broad daylight when she was twenty-two years old. (Not so fun fact: Her murderer was sentenced to six and a half years for her murder, and released from prison after serving three years, seven months, and twenty-seven days of his sentence. When I first heard that, I was so mad. I'm still mad.) And Rebecca Schaeffer—a young actor who was shot and killed at her front door by a stalker in the 1990s. The women that Salma includes on her tour are almost all based on real crimes or events, and I spent time delving into their stories, researching cases, and reading books that covered these events from a more mythological, even prurient, standpoint: Amber Tamblyn's *Dark Sparkler*, *Death in Hollywood* by Peter Underwood, *The Tales of Hollywood the Bizarre* by John Austin, and many, many more. I also spent a fair amount of time researching bad behavior by men in Hollywood—Phil Spector, Robert Blake, Roman Polanski.

**Why are you drawn to writing thrillers? Are there certain elements of the genre that lend themselves to the stories you want to tell? Do you have any other favorite thriller authors?**

I'm drawn to telling stories about people exploring the darkest parts of their hearts, that most human of human impulses. I think I'm drawn more toward noir-tinged stories than thrillers explicitly. Two of my favorite definitions of noir really sum up big interests of mine in the stories I write. The first is from Laura Lippman: "Dreamers

**"Once I had that thread of a premise—murder-bus tour guide, etc.—these other obsessions started to coalesce."**





become schemers.” I mean, isn’t this more or less the story of America in a nutshell?! And the second comes, I believe, from Steph Cha, and I’m paraphrasing: In noir, getting to the truth always carries the heaviest price. I think that is such an artistically interesting concept

to consider and resonates when you think about crime—both fiction and factual crime. Knowing the truth does not put the world back together again. That’s especially a theme I had in mind for *The Hurricane Blonde*.

Truly, there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to considering crime writers working today: Megan Abbott, Layne Fargo, Wendy Heard, Megan Collins, Attica Locke, Wanda M. Morris, Barbara Bourland, Ivy Pochoda, Ashley Winstead, Steph Cha, Kellye Garrett, Laura Lippman, Alex Segura, Tod Goldberg, Vicki Hendricks, Sara Sligar, S. A. Cosby, Rachel Howzell Hall, Sara Gran, Amy Gentry, Eliza Jane Brazier, Tana French—I could go on and on and on.

I am in serious awe of these people and am very much not cool about it when I cross their paths at readings or conferences (or even on Instagram, yeesh).

**This novel has both past and present plotlines. Why did you choose to tell the story this way? Were there any challenges in depicting the past? Did you do research for those particular sections of the book?**


Once I figured out that the crimes at the center of *The Hurricane Blonde* would span decades, it seemed to me that showing select moments from Salma’s past was the best way to give full weight to her story. In this

book, as in life, all the actions of the present are impacted by the weight of things that have come before—both extremely literally, in terms of Tawney’s murder, but also in terms of Salma’s tabloid past informing who she is, why she does what she does, and the coping mechanisms she’s adopted to deal with her grief and shame. It didn’t seem to me like I could fully flesh out Salma’s story without the reader seeing some of those specific snapshots looking into her past.

I grew up in the ‘90s, so some of the research I did for the book involved looking backward at my own past. But the truth is, Salma and I grew up very differently, so I did more research into what her life would have been like as a child actor, what forces would’ve shaped her. I spent time researching tabloid culture in the late nineties and early aughts, the rise of the paparazzi, and the casual misogyny of the press during the nineties. (There’s a podcast called *You’re Wrong About*, which had a series of episodes on reconsidering maligned women of the nineties—I consider Tawney to be the fictional sister of these ladies.)

The bulk of the research I did for the book was in fact into Hollywood history; basically, every part of the book is informed by things that have come before. Vivienne’s acting studio is based on actual businesses; even the crimes themselves are patterned (at times, loosely) on real Hollywood events and true crime. I did a lot of research on Hollywood lore, paying not total attention to what was factually true, but also to what stories made it into the cultural narrative and why.

***The Hurricane Blonde* examines the dynamic between powerful men and the women who work with them. Did current events have an influence on**





### your writing?

Yes and no. Yes: We're absolutely in a moment—have been for a few years—where these stories are surfacing more publicly. But also—that doesn't mean these stories are new. There's a story Salma tells about Clark Gable and Loretta Young in the book—that's a true story. The idea of the "casting couch" is a term we've used to refer to the rampant abuses of power in a sexual arena, and that was around long before Harvey Weinstein's trial. Some of the greatest directors in cinematic history are guilty of terrible abuses of power—sexual or not—in the name of "art." All of Cal's alleged misdeeds with his actors are based on actual incidents and the demands of directors on their talent.

I think the difference with current events is that we're naming these things and hopefully taking them more seriously. Hopefully. And one of the things I was interested in exploring in this book are the degrees to which women are oftentimes complicit, or made to be complicit, in these abuses of power—whether out of fear, or ambition, or a belief that that's simply how things are done. And that's, unfortunately, not exclusive to Hollywood power dynamics.

### Were there any characters or scenes that you particularly enjoyed writing? Or any that were uniquely challenging?

This entire book was uniquely challenging, but one of my biggest challenges was getting to know Salma. With Jo, in *The Lady Upstairs*, I felt like she arrived fully formed. Salma was more cautious, less splashy. I worried about her more, I felt more protective of her. I would say the scenes I most enjoyed writing tended to be the flashback scenes

of Salma's past. Those tended to be the ones where I could lean most heavily into my favorite parts of Hollywood lore and rumors. Threading those into the narrative in little ways was like a fun game of hiding Easter eggs that I was playing just for my own amusement.

Honestly, it was hardest to write the scenes of Salma grieving. Maybe it was just the collective grieving and horror of the past three years, but that was a painful place to spend time in emotionally. But her grief for, and love of, her sister is so central to the book that it was inescapable.

### What's next for you?

I'm at work on a fictional, scripted thriller podcast for Audible with Megan Collins and Layne Fargo, and I'm so excited to be trying a new way of storytelling! I'm finding the constraints of a new medium really fun for creativity, even as it has its own challenges. I'm not sure when that will wind up being released.

I'm also at work on my next book, which will take us out of Los Angeles and abroad to some fabulous locations. Coming out of COVID, I want to write a book that is exceptionally fun and global (because I'm dying to travel) and wild and big. I'll say more when there's more to say! ★



# Stars

# SIX FEET UNDER

## Los Angeles

## HOLLYWOOD



- 1 *Thelma Todd*
- 2 *Dorothy Stratten*
- 3 *Marilyn Monroe*
- 4 *Dominique Dunne*
- 5 *Rebecca Schaeffer*
- 6 *Peg Entwistle*
- 7 *Ellen Howard*
- 8 *Beth Short*
- ★ *Tauney Lowe*



# Stars SIX FEET UNDER



## Thelma Todd (1906—1935)

"The Ice Cream Blonde," Thelma Todd, was known for her comedic roles and appeared in 120 films in her life. She shared the screen with the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, and Jimmy Durante. On the morning of December 16, 1935, Todd was discovered in the garage of her lover's ex-wife, dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.



## Dorothy Stratten (1960—1980)

Stratten was an up-and-coming actress, model, and Playmate of the Year, before she was murdered by her estranged husband. At the time of her death, Stratten was involved with director Peter Bogdanovich, who wrote a book about her murder entitled *The Killing of the Unicorn*.



## Marilyn Monroe (1926—1962)

Born Norma Jeane Mortenson, Monroe is one of the most emblematic and enduring Hollywood actresses. Known for her iconic films *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *Some Like It Hot*, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and more, she passed away of a barbiturate overdose at the age of 36.



## Dominique Dunne (1959—1982)

The daughter of writer Dominick Dunne (and niece of Joan Didion), Dominique Dunne was an actress who appeared in *Poltergeist*, *CHiPs*, *The Shadow Riders*, and more. She was strangled to death by her ex-boyfriend John Sweeney on October 30, 1982. Sweeney was sentenced to six years in prison for Dunne's murder.



## Rebecca Schaeffer (1967—1989)

Schaeffer was an actress and model who appeared in *Guiding Light*, *One Life to Live*, *My Sister Sam*, and *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills*. She was murdered by a stalker who came to her home and shot her at point-blank range when she opened her front door.



## Peg Entwistle (1908—1932)

A British stage and screen actress, Entwistle starred in her first and only credited film role in 1932: *Thirteen Women*, which also starred Myrna Loy and Irene Dunne. Entwistle committed suicide by jumping from the H of the Hollywood sign.



## Ellen Howard (1992—2016)

Howard was an aspiring actress who got involved with mega-producer Hiram Klein shortly before her death. Howard's and Klein's bodies were discovered in an abandoned car in the Hollywood Hills; Klein was shot before Howard was strangled with a seat belt. For more about Ellen Howard, read *The Lady Upstairs*.



## Elizabeth Short (1924—1947)

Known as "the Black Dahlia," Short's death is one of LA's most notorious unsolved murders. Short was found murdered in Leimert Park in 1947, bisected below the waist. Her last confirmed sighting was at the Biltmore hotel days before she was found murdered.



## Tawney Lowe (1974—1997)

Known as "the Hurricane Blonde," Lowe was the daughter of Academy Award-winning actor Dave Lowe and actress Vivienne Powell, of the Powell acting dynasty. She starred in several films, including Lowe's *Long Midnight*, directed by Lowe's ex-fiancé, Cal Turner, before she was found strangled at her pool at age 23. The murder remains unsolved.



# I'm Ready for My Close-Up

A mocktail designed to keep you ready for that 5 AM call time

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## Ingredients

One bunch of thyme (for simple syrup and garnish)  
Juice of one blood orange  
Juice of one orange or mandarin  
Juice of one lemon  
Sparkling water (Topo Chico recommended)



## Directions

1. Make the thyme simple syrup. Heat equal parts water and sugar over a stovetop to boiling and until the sugar dissolves. Once the sugar has dissolved, add a bunch of thyme sprigs to the simple syrup. Steep at least an hour; the longer it steeps, the more you can taste the thyme flavor.
2. Juice the citrus into a glass filled with ice. (You can juice into a cocktail shaker and strain over the glass, if you don't want pulp.) Feel free to vary the citrus—substitute a grapefruit or pomelo for the blood orange, etc.
3. Top with sparkling water.
4. Add a tablespoon of thyme simple syrup (or to taste). Stir.
5. Garnish with a sprig of thyme and enjoy!