

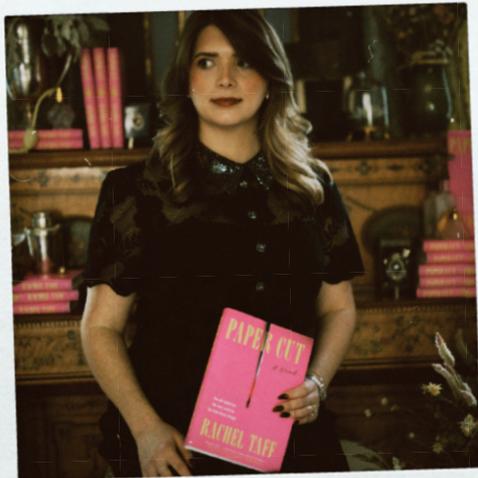


# PAPER CUT Book Club Kit

*wm*  
MORROW

# A NOTE

from **Rachel Taff**



Dear Reader,

*Paper Cut* was born out of my fascination with women's stories, particularly those the world consumes eagerly for entertainment, oftentimes with unfair cruelty and unchecked sensationalism. The novel aims to interrogate the industries that sell those stories — media, true crime, and entertainment — and consider what might be left on the cutting room floor.

Throughout the novel, Lucy Golden is relentlessly caught between who she really is and the person the world tells her she must be, towing the fragile line between victim and perpetrator. I've always been curious about the delicate moment a girl comes of age when she's not yet aware of the power she wields. At that pivotal moment, she is an ideal target for anyone who promises her validation. She might just be willing to believe anything to belong.

As you read, I invite you to sit in the discomfort of Lucy's complex choices and desires, interrogate the seductive lure of fame and hero worship, and weigh the cost of owning your narrative no matter the consequences. *Paper Cut* is not just about a cult. It's about the many ways, big and small, in which a woman can be manipulated, and the mountain she must climb to reclaim her agency.

Thank you for spending your precious time with a tale that's so close to my heart. I hope it's one that stays with you and inspires conversations about the stories we tell ourselves to survive.

With gratitude,  
Rachel Taff

 [@RachelTaff](https://www.instagram.com/RachelTaff)

# PAPER CUT

## Discussion Guide

1. Lucy Golden profited from the story she told in *Rattlesnake* for two decades. What does she gain from this narrative and what does it cost her? How does she navigate the opposing roles cast upon her — victim, villain, survivor, man eater, muse? Which of these identities ring true as the novel progresses?
2. The novel explores the commercialization of women's trauma. Where is the line between survival and exploitation? Does Lucy cross it? Does participating in the documentary grant her more control or take it away? What did you make of Isaac's "process?" How else have you seen women's trauma being sensationalized for public consumption?
3. What function do the Fowlers serve in Lucy's journey? What does her idealized view of them and the pink house reveal about her own longing and desire?
4. What makes Lucy particularly susceptible to Diana, Arthur, and Max's influence? How do their various manipulative tactics work on her?
5. Lucy's identity is rooted in performance. When is she the most authentic and with who? Did you trust her narration in the present day? In her interviews with Isaac? How about in *Rattlesnake*?
6. Diana and Max both exhibit narcissistic behavior to varying degrees. How does narcissism operate across the novel? Does Lucy inherit this trait or break the cycle?
7. Diana, Odette, and Judy model different kinds of fame and ambition. How does each woman reflect the traps and temptations of success for Lucy? What do their experiences expose behind the curtain of fame and Hollywood? How does Lucy's confrontation with Judy serve as a "wake up call" in the gradual acceptance of her own complicity?
8. Lucy grows up with a fractured view of sex. How do her early sexual experiences affect her adult relationships and self-worth?
9. Lucy learns that being a muse can be intoxicating, and at times, dangerous. How does the novel frame the power imbalance between an artist and a muse, particularly in Lucy's relationship with Isaac? Arthur? How about between Diana and her ex, Jesse or her subjects, like Judy and her daughters?
10. "From the outside, we must look like just another pair of Hollywood hopefuls, drunk on our delusions." Lucy and Sloane bond over their ambition, but they both harbor ulterior motives. Are they ever really friends? Or is their relationship purely transactional?
11. The unveiling of TexWatson86's identity is a pivotal turning point for Lucy. How does this twist affect your perception of true crime fandom and the stories of victims that don't make the headlines?
12. In the Oasis, women's bodies are considered vessels and the children, products of Max's ideology. How does *Paper Cut* challenge or reinforce the patriarchal systems that control, silence, and exploit the female experience? How does Lucy reconfigure her memories of belonging in the Oasis? What did you make of Diana's rose-colored glasses perspective of the Oasis she remembers?
13. Arthur's fate exposes the cracks in the cult's logic. How does his evolution strike you? Do you see him as a victim, a perpetrator, or something in between? What was your reaction to the Oasis 2.0?
14. Lucy harbors shame around being a cult survivor, constantly anxious about being pitied, dismissed, or blamed. How does her journey affect your perspective about the survivors of high control groups and the stigma they face upon reintegrating into society? How about other figures in true crime whose most traumatic moment becomes a major asset with financial benefits?
15. When Lucy finally reveals her truth, does it redeem her? Does her confession compel you to empathize with her or judge her choices? Should she be forgiven? Why does Lucy ultimately decide to tell the truth? Is it out of genuine compassion to protect to those in danger or to guarantee her more time in the spotlight? Or both? What does the final secret she keeps to herself tell you about her as a character? Does Isaac deserve the crowd's applause in the end? Does Lucy?

# THE PLAYLIST

Listen on Spotify now!

Here's some of the music that played in my ears as I wrote *Paper Cut*.

1. Darker Than Death by Indigo De Souza
2. Californian Soil by London Grammar
3. Liquid Smooth by Mitski
4. Coast by Gone Gone Beyond
5. Comeback Kid by Sharon Van Etten
6. Pristine by Snail Mail
7. Leave the Light On by Overcoats
8. Nighttime Hunger by Overcoats
9. By the Way by Red Hot Chili Peppers
10. Buzz by Maddie Medley
11. Young Fools by Small Million
12. What I Had In Mind by The Wild Reeds
13. Monster by Lola Kirke
14. Stay Soft by Mitski
15. The Chain by Kerala Dust
16. teeth bared by BIIANCO
17. Bravado by Lorde
18. Mother of the Water by Alexa Sunshine Rose
19. Bite the Hand by boygenius
20. Rockstar by Mallrat
21. RAGE by Samantha Margret
22. Pool Party by Abby Sage
23. Sacrilege by Yeah Yeah Yeahs
24. Shut Up Kiss Me by Angel Olsen
25. Seventeen by Sharon Van Etten

[bit.ly/PaperCutPlaylist](https://bit.ly/PaperCutPlaylist)



# DIANA'S

## Martini Recipe

*"I never thought I would like martinis, but since Mom moved in, it's become our little ritual. I've adapted to the bitterness of the olive, but I'm still adjusting to this kind of intimacy with her. It, too, is intoxicating."*

Figuring out your martini preferences is an art and it's not for the faint of heart. Just ask Diana Golden. Impress your cocktail party guests (or your bartender) by using the correct terminology. You have some choices.

- **SPIRIT** Gin or vodka.
- **STYLE** Up (martini glass, no ice) or on the rocks (rocks glass, with ice).
- **GARNISH** Olive, with a twist (lemon peel), or make it a Gibson (cocktail onion).

### FAQ

- What does it mean to have a dry martini? Less vermouth.
- How about dirty? Add olive juice.
- Shaken or stirred? Fun fact: According to my bartender sister, all martinis should be stirred because they don't contain citrus juice. However, many people who drink vodka martinis prefer them extra cold, so shaking vodka martinis is okay. Always stir gin martinis.
- Wait, what does James Bond order? Technically, not a martini. It's a vesper. Author Ian Fleming invented the recipe. Want to try it? 3 oz gin, 1 oz vodka, ½ oz Lillet Blanc, with a lemon twist. Shaken, not stirred.

Curious to know my preferences? Gin martini. Dry *and* dirty.

### TIPS FOR CHOOSING YOUR SPIRITS

- Pick a dry gin for a dirty martini. My favorites are Bombay Sapphire or Tanqueray.
- For martinis with a twist, go for something botanical like Hendrick's or The Botanist.



### INGREDIENTS

- 2 ½ oz gin or vodka
- ½ oz dry vermouth
- Your choice of garnish

### TOOLS

- Mixing glass or shaker
- Martini glass

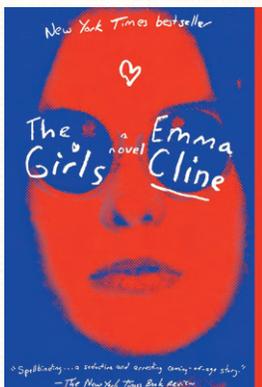
### STEPS

1. Add in a mixing glass or shaker.  
*Optional: To make it dirty, add ½ oz of olive juice.*
2. Shake or stir with ice and strain into a martini glass.
3. Garnish with your heart's desire.
4. Enjoy at your own risk.

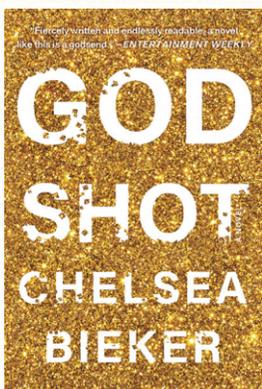
# RACHEL'S

## Recommendations

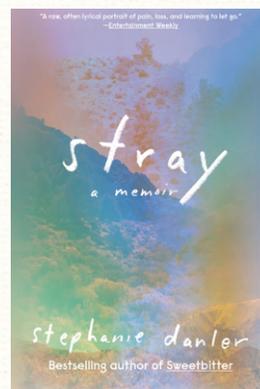
Here is a collection of books (and a few onscreen tales) that stayed with me during my creative process and have loomed large since my final edit. They are stories about power, manipulation, resilience, belonging, and the dangerous bargain of being told you who are.



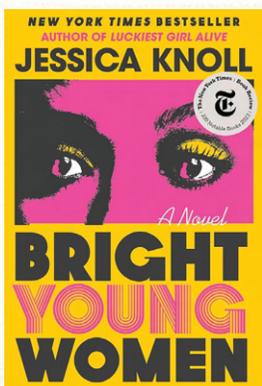
In her stellar debut, literary darling Emma Cline reimagines the story of the Manson family. Instead of focusing on the cult leader's prowess, she zooms in on the kind of relationship that can feel like a religion of its own: the bond between two teenage girls. At fourteen, the most intimate and precious relationship a girl can have is with her new best friend and vulnerable, lonely Evie finds exactly that with the older, mysterious, free-spirited Suzanne. Infatuated, Evie tags along for the summer and finds herself newly indoctrinated into a northern California cult that culminates in an infamous act of violence. The kind that reverberates throughout Evie's adulthood as if it only happened yesterday. Whenever I recommend this book, which I do often, I tend to convey my desire to eat Cline's sentences. Her prose, though sharp with plenty of bite, is just that delicious.



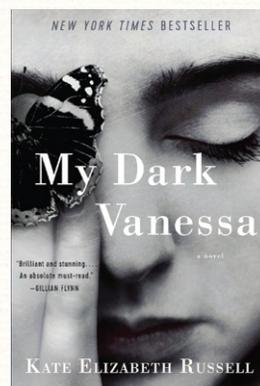
Bieker's gorgeously written debut takes place in the Central Valley of California, a fictional town in a community plagued with a drought and steered by Pastor Vern. Mother-daughter relationships run through much of Bieker's work (a tour de force in her recent *Madwoman*), and Lacey's story is no exception. When Lacey's mother abandons her, her whole world shifts and what ensues is a meditation on groupthink, faith, and the gnawing desperation to be chosen.



*Stray* is an engrossing memoir exploring Danler's life after the success of *Sweetbitter*, when she's pulled back to Southern California to contend with her complicated family life. She divides the memoir into sections of Mother (alcoholic, disabled, and dependent), Father (drug-addicted, absent, and charming), and Monster, a toxic romantic entanglement she just can't shake. As Danler attempts to individuate from these narcissistic figures in her life, she examines her own psyche in the mirror and learns to parent herself to make her children's upbringings easier than her own.



Knoll's 2023 retelling of the Ted Bundy murders takes back the narrative and puts the reins in the hands of the women involved in the case. The media machine spent so much time focusing on Ted Bundy's charm and supposed good looks that these women and the impact the violence had on their lives was dangerously overshadowed. It'll make you reconsider the mythology we consume and perpetuate about the monsters that live among us.



When I think about displays of coercive power, *My Dark Vanessa* races to the top of my list. This is an intimate story about the devastating sexual relationship between a young girl and her teacher. In retrospect, the narrator reexamines the story she told herself to survive this act of grooming and captures the painful process of seeing your life clearly for the first time.

# BONUS

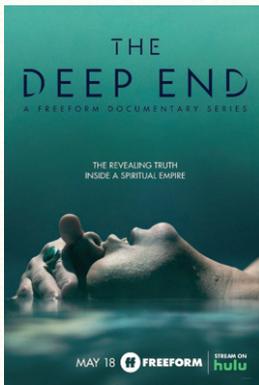
## Viewing and Listening



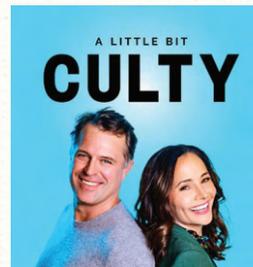
I've seen my fair share of cult documentaries, but this one has stuck with me. What makes it so compelling is Director Hannah Olson's access to current believers still committed to Amy Carlson, and the restraint in which she does not exert judgment over them but gives them space to share their experiences unfiltered. There's a rare moment in which Carlson questions her divinity in a flash of clarity and it's her followers who lead her back to the story she created, which eventually leads to her disturbing demise. That scene still haunts me.



Fresh out of NYU drama school, Elizabeth Olsen gives a stunning performance as a young woman reentering civilization after her time in a cult. Her disquieting portrayal of a woman who struggles to embrace her freedom is incredibly moving. The cast is also stacked: Julia Garner, Christopher Abbott, Hugh Dancy, Sarah Paulson, and John Hawkes round out the ensemble. Durkin made the short film, "Mary Last Seen" as a proof of concept to get the feature financed and the prequel is just as intoxicating as the final cut.



Teal Swan isn't your average cult leader. She's striking, internet-savvy, and fully aware of marketing strategies. Her following serves as a warning of what can happen when belief goes digital and the art of persuasion turns algorithmic.



Whistleblowers of the Keith Raniere cult, NXIVM, Sarah Edmondson and Nippy Ames' podcast unpacks the strategies of cult leaders. Every episode, Sarah and Nippy talk to cult survivors and experts, while reexamining their pasts with reflection, curiosity, and empathy. The two-parter with behavioral science expert Laura Richards detailing the early signs of coercive control and the battles law enforcement face when trying to prosecute these cases should be mandatory listening.