

# Wicked Girls

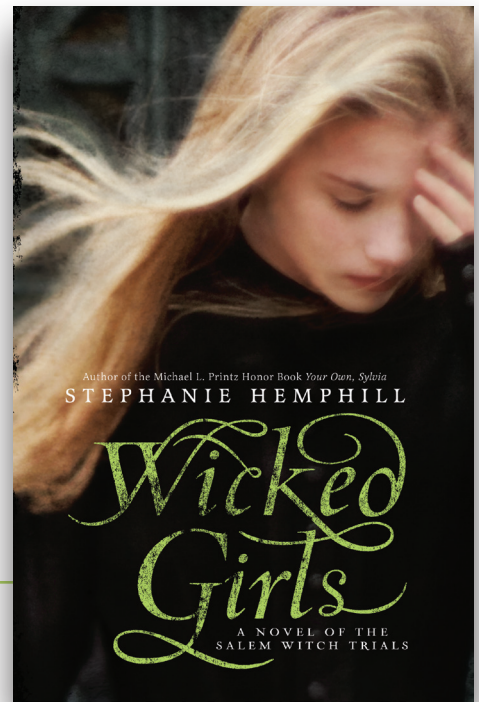
A NOVEL OF THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

By Stephanie Hemphill

## POETRY WORKSHOP & DISCUSSION GUIDE

### About the Book

What started out as girls playing games became one of the darkest periods in United States history. *Wicked Girls*, a fictional account of the Salem witch trials of 1692, is told from the perspectives of three of the seven bewitched girls—Ann Putnam Jr., Mercy Lewis, and Margaret Walcott. Ann is the queen bee who sets in motion the horrific chain of events. Mercy is the beautiful servant who seizes her one chance at safety. And Margaret is the jealous friend who is torn between loyalty and pursuing her dreams. In this exquisite novel in verse, Stephanie Hemphill reimagines a real historical event to explore what it means to be a young woman floating between childhood and adulthood, trying to find her place, making mistakes, and discovering the consequences of her actions.



### About the Writing: In Stephanie's Own Words

Writers are often asked why they write, and I suppose it comes down to a lifetime of influences and some sort of genetic predisposition. But primarily I write because I wouldn't know what else to do with myself. It may sound somewhat contrived, but when you are fortunate enough to stumble upon something you love that you can also do for a living, then it seems foolhardy and wasteful not to pursue it with all your heart. Writing books gives me an opportunity to inhabit worlds and create lives, and by taking readers along for the ride I am held to much higher standards of imagination and discovery. In other words, no one wants to go on a lousy trip, so as the writer I must provide a story worth reading. I have always loved poetry because of its brevity and music. Poetry demands that each word count. The cool hybrid form of the novel in verse combines narrative conventions with the economic and linguistic demands of poetry. And it reads fast!



### About the Author

**STEPHANIE HEMPHILL** is the author of three novels in verse: *Wicked Girls: A Novel of the Salem Witch Trials*; *Your Own, Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath*; and *Things Left Unsaid: A Novel in Poems*. *Your Own, Sylvia* received a 2008 Michael L. Printz Honor. Stephanie lives in Los Angeles.

# STEPHANIE HEMPHILL'S POETRY WORKSHOP



## Getting Started Writing Poetry

- Find a quiet place because poetry needs the potential to be read aloud.
- Use paper and pen. The brain seems to translate poetry best manually as full words, not mechanically punctuated as letters individually typed. Use computers later for editing.
- Be ready to be fearless.
- Let go of your critic.
- Let go of your need to rhyme (please).

## Writing Prompts

- **FAST WRITING.** Set a timer for five minutes. Have someone give you a word or randomly flip to a word in a book, for instance, *ketchup*. Begin by writing the word on your page. Do not stop your pen from moving for the entire five minutes; just keep writing whatever comes into your brain, and if you get stuck, just repeat the word you are on. So in the ketchup example, it is possible that you would write: *ketchup ketchup ketchup ketchup*. But most likely you would at least write: *ketchup ketchup is crimson and clumpy. . . .* When you are finished with the five minutes, go back and read over what you have written, and you will most likely be surprised to find at least one image or idea that you like or can use for a story or poem. Or at least it will clear the junk in your head and settle you in for the writing that you want to do.
- **MIX THE SENSES.** Use synesthesia in your writing. For example: *a staccato aroma* or *fingers whispering at a funeral*.
- **WRITE A HAIKU.** A haiku is a seventeen syllable poem: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, five in the last.  
*Swan curls back into  
her feathers gliding alone  
on the silent lake.*
- **IS OR IS NOT.** Write a poem in terms of what something is or is not.  
*A good friend is not a loaded gun.  
A loaded gun is not respect.  
Respect is not a kick in the grits.  
A kick in the grits is not silent.  
Silence is not the kick of a loaded gun.  
A gun is no silence, no grits, no kicks.  
A gun is no good friend.*
- **FOUR WORDS IN TWO LINES.** Write down an object you would find in your bedroom. Write down an object you would find at an airport. Write down an object you would find on a farm. Write down how you felt about your mother this morning. Today my words are: dress, mobile phone, piglet, exhausted. Now write a two-line poem using all four words. Yikes!  
*Note to Exhausted Self  
Last night's escapade equals  
lost mobile phone, torn dress, me bloated as a piglet*  
P.S. Cheating with a title is totally legitimate!

# STEPHANIE HEMPHILL'S POETRY WORKSHOP



## Revising and Editing

- Try revising on a computer so you can see what your lines will look like typed out.
- Read your poem aloud. And after you feel secure enough about it, read your poem to someone else you trust to be kind and helpful.
- There is a difference between revision and editing: Revision is re-envisioning your work, whereas editing is tweaking and getting rid of typos, examining line breaks, etc. It is important to know what stage you are at. For example, for every poem that ends up in a book of mine, I throw away three or four perfectly good poems entirely—that is revision.
- Do not be afraid to lose your favorite line in a poem. Often you have to let go of “your baby” to make a poem work. This is so tough, but is often for the best.
- Begin strong, but most importantly, end a poem well. Leave an impression, an image and a thought, a strong resonant emotion.
- In revision, look at how you end your lines, especially in formal poetry. A reader should almost be able to understand what your poem is about just by reading the words that end your lines. In the instance of many formal poems, that would mean that all of the rhyming words tell the story of your poem. They are not just there because they serve the rhyme pattern.
- If possible, have a writing group—even an online group works well—because we all need sounding boards and feedback. I have never believed that poetry is meant to be confusing. It can have special meanings depending on the reader, but if you are writing a love poem and your reader believes it is about your dead hamster, you probably need to do some revision. One way or the other.

## STEPHANIE'S SEVEN TIPS FOR WRITING POETRY

1. **HAVE FUN.** Poetry gives you freedom to play with words and images and language.
2. **PUSH YOUR IMAGES A LITTLE FARTHER THAN YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE—INTO DANGEROUS.** That is where you might find something truly original. After all, the grand goal in poetry is to speak of the world better or more clearly or more beautifully than anyone else has ever done before, to make people say, “Yes, exactly,” and understand with precision what you are describing.
3. **WRITE OUTSIDE THE MARGINS.** This is not like think outside the box—that is a cliché. Be messy, write faster than your pen. Try not to overanalyze. Find the child inside you who thought everything he or she did was great. Be confident. Don't worry if it's not good. Just tell the truth.
4. **BE HONEST AND OBSERVANT.** Really take time to look at things, to delve deeply into yourself. There are no bad poems, but there are weak, dishonest ones, thinner than the paper that contains them. Even if you are creating a fantasy poem, be consistent and honest inside whatever world you create.
5. **LEARN NEW LANGUAGE.** Increase your vocabulary and then use it appropriately.
6. **AVOID CLICHÉS.** If you use a loaded concept word, like “love” or “happiness,” bring it to earth with images and reality and specifics so it becomes meaningful.
7. **READ.** Read books and poetry, read nonfiction, read anything that interests you that increases your knowledge and understanding of yourself and the world and others. Think about what you know and feel and observe, and then if you are so inclined, write it down and share it.



# Wicked Girls

## DISCUSSION GUIDE



### Discussion Questions

1. Who are the wicked girls and why are they wicked? As you read, make a list of these girls along with their ages, social standing, and any factors that you feel are pertinent to their motivations.
2. Are there any adults in the story who are wicked? Create a similar list of the wicked adults, citing their misdeeds. Do you find evidence of adult manipulation or coercion of the afflicted girls?
3. When and where does this story take place? What are the differences between Salem Village and Salem Town, and how are these differences significant to the historical events? Salem Village had fewer than 600 people in 1692, but more than 141 people were arrested and about 20 died. What do you think of these statistics?
4. What is witchcraft and what makes someone a witch? Can men be witches? What are the touch and water tests? What is the witch's teat or mark? Are there modern scientific tests for witches? Do you believe in witches? Why or why not?
5. In general, how did seventeenth-century Puritan men regard women? How might this attitude have influenced the wicked girls?
6. What do Ann, Mercy, Margaret, and the other girls gain from their accusations? What do they lose? How do they select their targets? Do their targets seem to be possessed by the Devil?
7. Why do the townspeople believe the accusations? Is there any proof that the accused were in fact witches? Why do you think no one steps forward to put a stop to the accusations?
8. What are the interrelationships among Ann, Mercy, and Margaret? What motivates each girl to take part in the accusations? Do you detect signs of jealousy, power struggles, desire for romance, desire for attention, signs of fear, or signs of anger among them? Cite passages from the text to support your opinions. What do you think of Isaac as a person and as a potential boyfriend or husband?
9. Which of the three main characters do you most relate to? Why?
10. Do Ann, Mercy, and Margaret regret their actions? Do you feel sympathy for any of them? If so, which ones and why? What do you think the Salem witch trials were *really* about? What other factors could have influenced the need for these witch hunts?
11. How did the Salem witch trials end, and why did they stop so suddenly? Did anything good come out of this sad story?
12. What would you have done in 1692 if you had been accused of being a witch? What course of action would—or could—you take today if you were falsely accused of wrongdoing?
13. How does the novel's verse format function as a means of relating the story and the history? How does the triple-narrator structure affect your interpretation of the characters and events? Are there additional characters' perspectives you wish you could have read? In what ways is the novel like a play?
14. How are events from more than three hundred years ago still significant today? How is *Wicked Girls* a modern interpretation of the Salem witch trials? In what ways is it a timeless rendering of the events?

# Wicked Girls

## DISCUSSION GUIDE



## Extension and Research Activities

1. **TELLING THE STORY IN VERSE.** Stephanie Hemphill interprets the events of the Salem witch trials in verse. Prior to the nineteenth century, great literature was often in verse form. Research famous tales, epics, plays, and stories told in verse from ancient to modern times. Read one of these verse narratives or dramas. Are there patterns to the structure of the verse? Select a story you know well and write several verse poems about it from the points of view of at least two major characters. Do you find it difficult to write narrative verse?
2. **PURITANS AND POWER.** Who were the Puritans? Where did they come from and why did they settle in the American colonies? What were their religious beliefs? How powerful were their ministers? Who were Increase and Cotton Mather and what did they write? When we say people are “puritanical,” what do we mean? What remnants of Puritan beliefs are found in our culture today?
3. **WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT.** Research the history of witchcraft and superstitions, starting in Europe during the Dark Ages until the present day globally. What was the book *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) and why was it significant? What are the characteristics of witches, and do they exist today? Do you see the world as being in constant conflict between good and evil, God and Satan? Is there both white and black magic? Is fortune-telling evil? Is it real? Why are people superstitious throughout history, and why do they continue to be so? What are you superstitious about?
4. **MODERN WITCH HUNTS.** The Salem witch trials took place at the end of the seventeenth century and were shocking both then and now. Can you think of any modern witch hunts? Why do witch hunts happen, and what conditions facilitate them? Read *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. Then compare and contrast it with Stephanie Hemphill’s *Wicked Girls*. How do the two works interpret the same historical events to different ends? What other retellings of the Salem witch trials can you find? Consider literature, film, theater, and music.
5. **TOURIST IN SALEM.** Plan a trip to Salem, Andover, and Danvers, Massachusetts. What famous locations and sites mentioned in *Wicked Girls* would you include in your itinerary? What artifacts remain? What would you tell those who accompany you about the Salem witch trials so that they would understand the true significance of the trip? Read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* or *The Scarlet Letter*, the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, or the actual transcripts of the Salem witch trials to gain perspective and insight into witches and seventeenth-century New England. How are the conditions of that period different from or similar to those of today?

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