

We Only Save Ourselves

Harper Perennial

By Alison Wisdom

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Introduction

"Alison Wisdom's addictive, down-the-rabbit-hole debut reads like *The Girls* by way of *The Virgin Suicides*, with an extra dash of Cheever's unsettling suburbia. The result is sinister and surprising: a novel I couldn't put down, and one that I kept thinking about long after I'd reached its unexpected, chilling end." —Emily Temple, author of *The Lightness*

One of *Newsweek*, *Bustle*, and *LitHub*'s Most Anticipated Books and Goodreads' "Debut Novels to Discover in 2021," *We Can Only Save Ourselves* is the story of one teenage girl's unlikely indoctrination and the reverberations in the tight-knit community she leaves behind.

Alice Lange's neighbors are proud to know her—a high-achieving student, cheerleader, and all-around good citizen, she's a perfect emblem of their sunny neighborhood. The night before she's expected to be crowned Homecoming Queen, though, she commits an act of vandalism, then disappears, following a magnetic stranger named Wesley to a bungalow in another part of the state. There, he promises, Alice can be her true self, shedding the shackles of conformity.

At the bungalow, however, she learns that four other young women seeking enlightenment and adventure have already followed him there. Her new lifestyle is intoxicating at first, but as Wesley's demands on all of them increase, the house becomes a pressure cooker—until one day they reach the point of no return.

Back home, the story of Alice's disappearance and radicalization is framed by the first-person plural chorus of the mothers who knew her before, who worry about her, but also resent the tear she made in the fabric of their perfect world, one that exposes the question: Isn't suburbia a kind of cult unto itself?

Combining the sharp social critique of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* with the elegiac beauty of Emma Cline's *The Girls*, this is a fierce literary debut from a writer to watch.

Questions for Discussion

1. The novel begins with a brief prologue in which Bev and April, two mothers in the neighborhood Alice left behind, discuss the new streetlights. Why do you think the author chose to begin with this scene?



2. At the end of the first chapter, as Alice is cheering at the pep rally, she wonders “What else is there to want when you had all this power?” Power—the possession, loss, and transferal of power—is an important thematic concept in the novel. Where do you see evidence of this in the early chapters? What about later in the novel?
3. If Alice had won the title of Homecoming Queen, do you think she still would have left with Wesley? Or was she destined to go no matter what?
4. How do the parenthetical intrusions of the chorus of neighborhood women enrich or deepen the story? How would this novel be different without them?
5. When Wesley takes Alice to the party in the hills, she tells Wesley that “everyone here wants [him.]” Do you think is true? If so, what draws other people to him? Conversely, what does Wesley find attractive in a person?
6. As soon as Alice arrives at the bungalow, she begins trying to rank the girls in a hierarchy and understand where she might fit in. Does such a hierarchy actually exist in the bungalow, and if so, who sits where in it?
7. During Alice’s first drug trip at the bungalow, Apple points out that Wesley always takes a smaller dose than the girls do. What other methods or tactics does Wesley employ to retain control over Alice and the other girls?
8. The women in the neighborhood hold Mrs. Lange at a distance after Alice disappears. Why do you think that is? What does she represent for them?
9. Why does Wesley share something different with each of the girls during the confession game? What kinds of things do you imagine he would have shared with Janie and Kathryn?
10. When Christine Pittman reads the story of the little mermaid to her elderly neighbor Earl, he remembers a different, unhappier ending than the one the child’s book depicts. Christine’s mother assures her that there can be two endings, two stories, and both can be true. How does her statement relate to the story of Alice Lange?
11. How does the plot hinge on Wesley’s rejection at the gallery? Do you think the author intends the reader to see Wesley as a good artist?
12. Alice loves all the girls in the bungalow, but her relationship with Apple is perhaps the most complicated. What do you think makes their relationship especially fraught?
13. This novel is concerned with myth-making, how certain stories and figures become legends. What purpose do myths serve in general, and what purpose do the novel’s myths (Rachel Granger, the driving man, and Alice herself, for example) serve in the world of the book?

14. Why do you think Alice decides to tell Wesley about Apple and the man next door?
15. At the end of the novel, Bev imagines moving away from the neighborhood and starting afresh. What parallels do you see between Alice and Bev? What parallels do you see between Wesley's group of girls and the women in the neighborhood?
16. What does this novel have to say about safety and security, about conformity and independence? Do any of these characters provide a model for living?