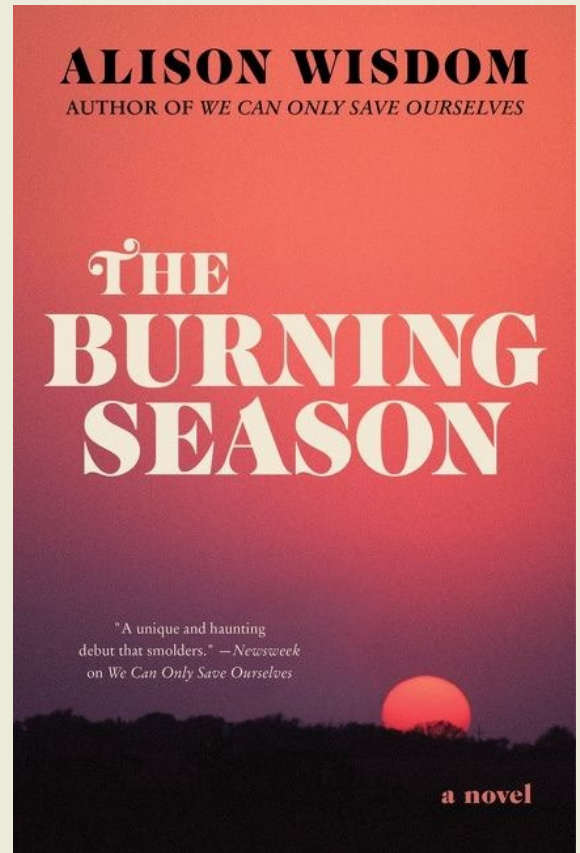


THE BURNING SEASON

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What kind of symbolic weight do fires hold? How did Wisdom use fires both literally and metaphorically to drive the story?
2. What sort of rules are observed and enforced in Rosemary and Paul's pre-Dawes world? How does Rosemary break those rules, and is she punished for doing so?
3. Are you a part of any tight-knit communities, religious or secular? What do they provide in your life that modern society may not?
4. Do you think that Paul and Rosemary would have been able to stay together if they hadn't joined the Church of Dawes?
5. What do you see as the source of Papa Jake's power? What might break his hold on his brethren?
6. The story Julie tells about Papa Jake in Nicaragua transfixes Rosemary. What is your takeaway from that tale?
7. What is the purpose of exercises like the one in which Rosemary drapes herself in the barrel? Are they effective?
8. Why do you think the Church of Dawes, and many institutions, have male leadership? What do these organizations provide for the women who take part in them, and what do they take away from these women?
9. Many of the characters have more old-fashioned names, like Rosemary, Lily, and Caroline, or Biblical ones, like Paul, Jake (Jacob), and Matthew. What do you think the author might be trying to convey about these people?



An urgent and unsettling story of religious fanaticism and cult behavior from the acclaimed author of
WE CAN ONLY SAVE OURSELVES

10. The novel concludes with an epilogue that goes back in time to a trip that Rosemary and Paul took before they were married. Why do you think the author chose to end the novel this way? What does it illuminate about the characters or themes of the novel?
11. What do you think happens to Paul at the novel's end? What do you think is next for Rosemary?

“Where does faith end and fanaticism begin?
... In a stark and haunting tale, Alison
Wisdom has written her way to the core
of belief and submission.”

—**RACHEL YODER**
author of *Nightbitch*

A CONVERSATION WITH ALISON WISDOM ABOUT *THE BURNING SEASON*

*(1) In **The Burning Season**, you take on fanaticism in a small and sheltered religious community. What sparked your interest in this topic?*

I went to college at Baylor University, a small, private Baptist school in Waco, Texas, where almost every student was a white, wealthy Christian. Suddenly, I was around a lot of people who claimed the same faith as me, but their practice of it looked very different. My first weekend in Waco, I visited a church where there was speaking in tongues, dancing in the aisles, and audible weeping as people were moved by the Holy Spirit. Though I knew immediately this was not the place for me, I was fascinated that there were people for whom this was the place. My primary intrigue was anthropological, not theological, and I loved hearing stories about the healings and miracles and prophecies that purportedly took place under the church's guidance. At first I laughed about it, finding it odd but harmless, but throughout my college years, I heard more problematic and troubling accounts. It was a strange and bad feeling to see something sustaining to me—my own faith—distorted, and I felt both protective of religion in general and critical of the practice of it. This was a breeding ground for, in my opinion, a very dangerous kind of belief. Years and years later, I started writing about it.

*(2) In **the Church of Dawes**, there's a strong focus on childbearing as a means of building and maintaining a community and in tribute to God. You finished the novel well before the recent Supreme Court news about *Roe v. Wade*, but were you conscious of the rollback of women's bodily autonomy as you wrote?*

Isn't it wild that no matter when a person writes about a woman's bodily autonomy, it's always relevant? As women, we grow up with constant awareness of our body in relation to others and to the world in general, how our bodies do or don't fit into that world, how our bodies can and cannot be controlled by the powers that govern it—and anything that can't be controlled is a threat. But growing up, I certainly didn't see it that way. Instead, I felt like if something couldn't or wouldn't be controlled, it was a personal failure. In many Christian circles, this idea is echoed, with people believing that the Bible tells them that women are second to men, submissive to them in all things, that a woman's body should be in service to her husband. Many young women growing up in the Church are told that their bodies are dangerous simply for existing, their breasts and bare legs and arms stumbling blocks for boys who are just trying to be godly men. How much autonomy can a person have if she is taught that her body is valued not for simply existing but how it exists in relation to a man? So my answer is that fear of a woman's body is systemic, it's in the air, and we're all breathing it in. I didn't set out to write a novel about it, but when something is so pervasive in a culture, no wonder it comes out in the art we create.

“Evokes the gothic tradition of Brontë and du Maurier while remaining utterly fresh and contemporary.”

—**DAN CHAON**
author of *Sleepwalk*

(3) Is the Church of Dawes based on a specific church or theology?

Not a specific one. But years after I graduated, I learned that a college classmate founded a church in a tiny town that sounded suspiciously like a cult: they were isolating members from their families and old lives, promoting fundamentalist beliefs, and rejecting of the outside world. That year, they made the news because their forbidding of medical intervention led to the preventable death of a newborn baby in their community died. I couldn't shake the thought that I had known this person now overseeing this group, and that people my age, men and women in their twenties and thirties were just up and moving to the middle of nowhere. I had also learned about a different church with an emphasis on miracles, wonders, and healings. Part of being a Christian means believing that miracles can happen. But the miracles this particular church traffics in feel inauthentic to me, in a way that can be dangerous and destructive. One of my old friends took his wife, who was dying of cancer, there. They had visions of her “whole and restored” and promised my friend that his wife would live. She didn't. But he believed that she would be resurrected. She was not. I don't know how you would get over that, emotionally, of course, or spiritually. It's cruel to speak these words over desperate people; that, too, is something I've never been able to shake.

(4) Why did you decide to set this novel in your home state of Texas, after giving your first novel (We Can Only Save Ourselves, Harper Perennial, 2021) an ambiguous setting?

I wanted *We Can Only Save Ourselves* to feel almost mythological, removed from a specific place and time. I felt the particular places the characters inhabited should be specific (for example, the bungalow the girls live in, Alice's old neighborhood), but the greater setting didn't really matter: the issues Alice, her mother, and the neighborhood women face are universal and timeless, and to have the novel less rooted in place and time, I hope, reinforced that.

I am answering these questions in May, the day after the Uvalde school shooting, and I think about how the danger is always closer than you think it is, how as a mother, there is so much you can't protect your children from, and that was true a hundred years ago, is true today, and will be true a hundred years from now, in every part of the world. I knew from the beginning that *The Burning Season* would be a Texas novel. Part of that is because I grew up in Texas and live here still, and I know it intimately, the good and bad of it. But the setting also feels crucial to the plot of the book. This cult is born of its place. The Church of Dawes' values are not exclusively Texan, but they are part of Texas culture: an emphasis on faith, on tradition, on freedom to follow what you think is best. There's a running joke among Texans about seceding from the rest of the United States, and that is essentially what the Church of Dawes has done: seceded from the world, retreated from it.

(5) What do you want readers to take away from the book?

I hope that readers will think about the way the communities they live in shape the choices they make and what they believe and investigate if there is anything detrimental about that involvement. What voices are you listening to, and what are those voices telling you? What lies are you being told? What truths? Particularly now, we have to be discerning.

I also hope people will interrogate their interest in cult stories. Cults occupy a liminal sort of space between completely alien and wholly human, and that space is both fascinating and frightening to consider. These communities spring from beliefs that often seem bizarre, and it seems impossible that a person would fall for those beliefs—or more specifically, we want to believe that we wouldn't. But people are complex creatures and, in many ways, fragile, and we are all desperately trying to wring meaning and purpose from our days. We want to feel safe from the things that frighten us; we crave both comfort from the grief of living and shared joy from the gift of living. Cults speak to a tender part of who we are, a needy part. We think that it could never be us, but it could, and I hope people will carry that awareness with them and offer empathy to those they might previously have dismissed.

“Dark and ruthlessly compelling... asks big questions about religion, community, and love in all its various—and twisted—forms while also being a hell of a good read.”

—RACHEL HAWKINS

author of *Reckless Girls* and *The Wife Upstairs*