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Discussion Guide: The Grip of It

By Jac Jemc

About the Author

Jac Jemc teaches creative writing at UC San Diego. Her story collection *False Bingo* won the Chicago Review of Books Award for fiction, is a finalist for the Lambda



Literary Award for LGBTQ Speculative Fiction, and was longlisted for The Story Prize. Her novel *Total Work of Art* will be published in 2022 by MCD x FSG. Her novel *The Grip of It* was released from FSG Originals in August 2017, receiving starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus* and *Library Journal*, and recommended in *Entertainment Weekly*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Marie Claire*, *Esquire*, *W*, and *Nylon*.

Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming from *Guernica*, *LA Review of Books*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Southwest Review*, *Paper Darts*, *Puerto Del Sol*, and *Storyquarterly*, among others. Jemc is also the author of *My Only Wife* (Dzanc Books), named a finalist for the 2013 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction and winner of the Paula Anderson Book Award; *A Different Bed Every Time* (Dzanc Books), named one of Amazon's Best Story Collections of 2014; and a chapbook of stories, *These Strangers She'd Invited In* (Greying Ghost Press). Jac received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has completed residencies at the Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus, Hald: The Danish Center for Writers and Translators, Ragdale, the Vermont Studio Center, Thicket, and VCCA.

In the Author's Words

Interview with Chelsea Voulgares of Fiction Southeast:

Chelsea Voulgares: *The Grip of It* is about a haunted house, or at least a house that appears haunted to the couple who buy it. Can you tell me what drew you to this subject?

Jac Jemc: I have always liked ghost stories and haunted houses specifically. The setting is an automatic tension builder—in the structure of the house, you have the frame for everything that's going to happen. In this book I do stretch beyond that frame at various points. When I give myself a constraint, I often give myself excuses to work beyond that constraint as well. But it's a nice place to start.

When I think back to the ghost stories and haunted house stories I like most, they're domestically minded. I like the resonance that builds between the people who try to co-exist together in the structure, what's happening around them, what's happening between them, and how you distinguish between those things. So, having a literal expression of those uncertainties felt like a natural progression of a theme I

keep returning to in my work, which is that gap between human beings. Even when you're really close to someone, in what ways are you still missing each other?

CV: Your first novel, *My Only Wife*, explored similar themes, but was written as realism. Did using the horror genre allow you to explore things you couldn't in a more realistic setting?

JJ: I think it allowed me to have more fun with those questions. When I started working on *The Grip of It*, I don't think I had any idea I was writing a story that was anything close to *My Only Wife*. I don't know who said it, but a writer ends up writing the same thing over and over again. But yeah, using the horror genre, there was no limit to what I could make happen to this couple.

In the final version of the book, so much has been stripped away from early drafts. I was introducing some new elements of the haunting in almost every chapter. I ended up boiling down those elements to what was going on between the couple and in each of the individuals' lives.

CV: I was reminded of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* as I read the book. Did you have that novel in mind as you wrote?

JJ: In terms of *Hill House*, I read it a long time ago. I'm almost afraid to go back to it, and I haven't revisited *A House of Leaves* [by Mark Z. Danielewski] either, which is another one of my favorite haunted house stories. I was afraid to find out how much I unconsciously absorbed. If I had to pick something—I've thought more about Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, than I did of the *The Haunting of Hill House*. The way the characters cover for each other in that book. The sense of family really stuck with me. I think I did have that in mind, because of the way James and Julie try to normalize what's happening, between each other, and then to outsiders. They want to share what's happening. They'll often step back and revise their story, so it doesn't seem as extreme as their first-hand experience.

CV: Did you have any other models, either books or films, as you were writing?

JJ: I love Kelly Link. Her story "Stone Animals" is one of my favorite scary stories of all time. There's so much going on. Movie-wise, I was thinking about *The Orphanage*, this Bayona film. It's Spanish horror, and it's really beautiful. It's possibly the most beautiful horror movie I've ever watched. You leave the movie and you wonder how much actually happened because not everything is explained.

I'm also a big fan of Hitchcock. There are two stories that come to mind. One is *Rear Window*, the idea of a character watching his apartment complex from the outside, trying to figure out what is going on around him. In addition to being a ghost story, I think *The Grip of It* ventures into the territory of a Whodunit. Hitchcock has a much earlier movie called *The Lady Vanishes*. In that, some people are traveling. One woman disappears, and everyone convinces the protagonist that there was no woman traveling with them at all. It's all to cover up a plague.

CV: *The Grip of It* alternates between first person accounts by James and Julie. How did you arrive at that point of view?

JJ: Yes, some chapters come from James and some from Julie. What they're experiencing sometimes overlaps, sometimes it departs, and sometimes they forget what they've told each other about what's happening. That level of uncertainty is always there.

There was a third narrator for a while. The next-door neighbor, Walt, was a voice in the book as well. I went back and forth on his voice as a character. Finally a very generous friend said, "I think you need to cut him," and I realized that friend was right. I needed to get rid of Walt as a narrative voice because he diluted the effects of the novel, of trying to decide who to believe and what to trust. There wasn't a good reason to have his voice confusing things, but I was attached to him; he delivered a lot of information. I still needed to deliver all the information he provided for the reader, so it was a really big overhaul to get all the facts or versions of stories that he passed on into the hands of James and Julie.

CV: The epigraph of the book is composed of two notes by Wittgenstein. Can you talk a bit about why you chose that epigraph?

JJ: The *Zettel*, the book those comes from, particularly that section, is about uncertainty and figuring out how to both trust what is true or what has been presented to you as a fact, while also remaining open enough that you can still question the things that aren't necessarily facts.

Just to remind myself, the first is 410, "A person can doubt only if he has learnt certain things; as he can miscalculate only if he has learnt to calculate. In that case it is indeed involuntary." And for 411, "Imagine that a child was quite especially clever, so clever that he could at once be taught the doubtfulness of the existence of all things. So, he learns from the beginning: 'That is probably a chair.' And now how does he learn the question: 'Is it also really a chair?'"

These notes speak so closely to the way we look for answers. In terms of the book, we've already talked about interpersonal relationships, the way couples can give each other the benefit of the doubt, but then also try to maintain an outcome of self-protection and safety. In a haunting, you might say, I swear I saw this thing with my own eyes. But I have to be open to the idea that what I saw happened only in my brain, and not necessarily in the material world. You can say, I know those things could be true. As unusual as it would be for your brain to lie to you, or your eyes to lie to you, it's possible you've imagined everything.

CV: On a similar note, both Julie and James have moments of doubt, moments where they're not sure whether they can believe what they see and hear. Those moments left me wondering, as a reader, whether or not the house is actually haunted or whether the couple is suffering from possibly a shared mental illness. At the same time, Julie suffers real physical effects, including bruising and infection. I was wondering how much you intended for the book to be an exploration of illness, whether that be either mental or physical illness, or both.

JJ: Now that I've finished writing the book, I can see I started working on it because of some distrust that was developing in my family around diagnosis. My dad was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis—a very aggressive form of it—it looks so much unlike any other multiple sclerosis I've ever heard of. It came on

quickly and it has been so irreversible. The doctors gave him this diagnosis, and it didn't fix anything. They said there's no medicine that can change any of this. This is just how things are from now on. All the doctors seemed fine with the fact they couldn't explain half the symptoms, and it was frustrating. I know his diagnosis was in my mind when I started to work on the novel.

CV: Identity, in particular identity confusion and double identities, seem to be important themes in this book. There are moments when Julie, for example, can't tell whether her hands are her own hands. They seem different, and alien. Can you tell me more about that?

JJ: I was interested in taking the level of distrust in reality down to the individual, personal and psychological level. James and Julie are distrustful of each other, and of the people they're closest to. I wanted that sense of uncertainty to extend to their first-hand experience. They feel removed from their own senses, and their own thoughts. I was thinking about identity in the way that we have this idea of who we are. So what happens when we behave in a way that's different from how we think we are? How does that look?

CV: Your first two books were published by Dzanc Books, which is a smaller independent press, and *The Grip of It* is being put out by FSG Originals. How was the transition to a larger press?

JJ: The transition has been good. Dzanc has been supportive and in particular, Dan Wickett, who has become a little less involved with Dzanc, is still such a champion. Guy Intoci, the editor over there, totally understood when I said, "You know, I think I'm going to try to see if I can go a little bit bigger with the next book." He said he absolutely understood. And FSG has been incredible to work with and are very supportive of smaller press books, too.

I will say that, before submitting this book to a larger publisher, my agent worked diligently with me for close to three years. I gave her what, to me, was a second draft of the book, and then she would go back and forth with me, asking me to make changes. I would think I'd made them, but she would think something bigger needed to change.

She's given me an education in how to structure a story and make a literary project that might appeal to a little bit wider audience. For so long, I had the idea I was an experimental writer, so I didn't need to worry about plot, or with chasing the character development in the same way. This was me playing with the form. I think I was in deep denial about how much mastery I should have over the form before I started playing with it. I skipped the mastery part and tried to play with it. Not that I think I've mastered it now, but I think this book is structured in a more traditional way than *My Only Wife* was.

Then once the book sold to FSG, my editor Emily also gave me a larger request for edits. They were all so smart and so astute and often uncovered issues that I—somewhere in my gut knew they needed to be addressed but couldn't identify what the thing was that needed to change to make the book stronger. So, I will say that working with both Claudia my agent and Emily, the editor at FSG, much more changed with this manuscript than ever changed for the other two books. With both of these spectacular women, they

asked a lot of me and I was really grateful to try and do the work. I feel like I learned a lot. They're both such incredible, smart readers.

CV: I saw on your website that you'll be spending some time in Germany to do research on your next project?

JJ: Yes. The project I'm working on right now, though I'm not sure it will be the next thing that sees the light of day, because it's more work than I thought it would be. It's a historical fiction project, based around Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria, who was alive from the 1840s to 1880s and basically did a really bad job.

He spent all of his time paying for Wagner's Operas and building big, frothy castles rather than trying to protect Bavaria from being swallowed-up by Russia and the German Empire. So, eventually his cabinet gets so frustrated that he cared so little about actually governing, they have him disposed of by declaring him insane, even though the doctor who signs the medical note never met him. They have him put in an asylum and then within a couple of days, he's found drowned in the lake outside the castle.

There's much to be connected, I think, between *The Grip of It* and this project. I can still see a very clear interest from my end. It's still domestically-minded because much of it is set in these symbolically rich houses, these castles that he's building. There are still questions of reliability, both with him and with the people who are either supporting him or trying to take his power away. I should also say in the periphery, there are four different female characters who act untraditionally, as far as women's roles for that time. It's a much bigger logic puzzle to figure out how to tell all these stories than I anticipated when I started working on it. I'm still trying to convince myself I'm qualified to write a novel set in a different country, in a different time, that takes the lives of real human beings as fodder for my fiction. I'm enjoying trying to figure it out, but it might take some time before anyone else gets to read it.

CV: Are you working on anything else?

JJ: I'm always working on stories. I also have this strange, I don't even know if I can call it a novel, but I'm working on a project about shopping, which is such a departure from my normal subject matter. It's about anxiety around the way we consume things. Right now, it's fictional but a lot of it is being pulled from real life. I don't know—we'll see. That might get scrapped, and just turn into a therapy journal.

CV: What have you been reading lately?

JJ: Let's see, I just finished [George Saunders'] *Lincoln in the Bardo* and enjoyed it. The whole time I was reading it, I thought of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, which is a radio play. Not just because of the form, because it reads like a play in some sections, but also because characters speak for each other all the time. The same thing happens in *Under Milk Wood*. I have a soft spot in my heart for the Thomas piece, so *Lincoln in the Bardo* also really appeals to me. I enjoyed reading it, too, because I'm working on this crazy, historical fiction project, so it was interesting to watch what Saunders did with form.

I also just read Catherine Lacey's *The Answers*, and loved it. She's such a smart writer, and she asks big questions about humanity in her books and is willing to realize those questions in weird ways. The book is about a woman who needs money and takes on a job acting in this thing called the "Girlfriend Experiment," where she is the "emotional" girlfriend. There are other women cast as the "anger" girlfriend and the "intelligent" girlfriend and so on. This male celebrity is at the center of it, and each woman only has to play her one role. It was a strange, quick read. I really loved it.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you agree that Julie and James were to blame for their own haunting?
2. Did you feel that the haunting created new problems in their relationship or exasperated existing issues?
3. Did this book scare/unnerve you or was it easy to predict?
4. What ideas or themes was the book trying to convey?
5. Did this book remind you of another story?
6. If you could change anything about this book, what would it be?
7. Do you feel that this book reads like a movie?