



Book Club Kit

Inside this kit is material to aid in your book club discussion, and to add a bit of flavor. After all, "a little decadence is good for the soul."

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Praise for *The House at the End of Hope Street*

★ “Bright and hopeful . . . a celebration of feminine strength and accomplished women through the ages.”
—**BOOKLIST**, starred review

“Beguiling and bright, van Praag’s novel delights with deft writing and charming characters.”
—**KIRKUS**

“Fans of Alice Hoffman and Sarah Addison Allen should like.”
—**LIBRARY JOURNAL**, Fiction Previews, Apr. 2013

“When Alba Ashby arrives at *THE HOUSE ON THE END OF HOPE STREET* in despair, it’s clear that some very unusual things are about to happen. The people she meets—both earthly and unearthly—help her to uncover the secrets that have haunted her all her life. The story offers a wonderful mix of all-too-real problems in a fantastical setting. And who couldn’t use a Hope Street at some point in her life?”

—Juliette Fay, author of *Deep Down True* and *Shelter Me*

“I entered *THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET* and was enchanted—literally under the spell—of Menna van Praag’s tender, playful, beautiful writing, and the ghosts that inhabit the house and the pages. These are wise and sensible ghosts who know the secrets of a woman’s heart—I wish I could borrow a few from this lovely novel. It fulfills my book lover’s dream of an English literary landscape, in the most surprising and magical way.”

—Luanne Rice, author of *The Lemon Orchard* and *Little Night*

“Menna van Praag has created a magical book about an enchanted house and the notable women who inhabit it, both living and dead. Richly atmospheric, literary, and textured, *THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET* casts an enthralling spell, giving both characters and readers not only what they most want, but what they ultimately need.”

—Brunonia Barry, *New York Times* and bestselling author of *The Lace Reader* and *The Map of True Places*

“This fresh, whimsical book is as full of heart as the house at its heart is full of fascinating women. We should all have such friends and such a refuge!”

—Marisa de los Santos, bestselling author of *Falling Together* and *Love Walked In*

“With its magical house and yet feet-on-the-ground realism, this exceptional novel enchanted me from the first beautiful page. If only I could stay a spell myself at the house at the end of Hope Street.”

—Melissa Senate, bestselling author of *The Love Goddess’ Cooking School*

“*THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET* is a sunrise of a novel, so fresh and lovely, whimsical and original that it will enchant and surprise even the most jaded of readers. I am besotted with this house, and with Menna van Praag, and you will be, too.”

—Barbara O’Neal, author of *The Garden of Happy Endings*

The Colors of Alba's World

BRIGHT GREEN Truth and Strength

ROYAL BLUE Sorrow

SKY BLUE Kindness and Friendship

SILVER Hope

BRIGHT RED Lust

VIOLET Joy

MAGENTA Desire

PUCE Passion

RICH ORANGE Insight

BRIGHT YELLOW Inspiration

WHITE Belief

DARK RED Obsession

GOLD the color of ghost's words and the color of contentment

SCARLET Dedication

DEEP PURPLE Wisdom

BLACK Complaints and Arguments and Lies

DIRT GRAY Disgust

DARK BROWN Boredom

FIRE Zoe's words when she talks about love

RADIOACTIVE EGG YOLKS Ridiculous Optimism

Recipes

SPECIAL SPICY CHOCOLATE CAKE

To Ensure Wishes Come True

~Recipe from the author ~

"I love chocolate cake for breakfast, it sets me up for the day. A little decadence is good for the soul."

INGREDIENTS

190g self-rising flour
200g caster sugar
200g chocolate (70%)
200g salted butter
4 medium eggs
Rind of one lemon
3 tbsp. ground almonds
2 tbsp. Cinnamon
1 tsp. nutmeg
100ml hot water
100ml almond milk
1 pinch of powdered Passionflower (*faith*)
2 pinches of dried Bells of Ireland (*good luck*)
5 drops of Witch Hazel (*a spell*) Oil

DIRECTIONS

Melt chocolate, butter, almond milk, lemon rind and hot water in a heat-proof bowl over simmering water. Remove when chocolate & butter have melted and add sugar. When cooled, add eggs (lightly beaten) and mix well. Add the rest of the ordinary ingredients and beat well. Sprinkle in the powdered flowers &, when you add the witch hazel, whisper your spell. Pour mixture into cake pan. Bake for 45 minutes at 170°C (340°F).

HOPE STREET BUBBLY (21+)

Host's Note: Please drink responsibly.

INGREDIENTS

Champagne (silver, the color of hope)
St-Germain liqueur
Thinly sliced cucumber
Fresh mint (bright green, the color of truth and strength)

DIRECTIONS

Fill a tumbler with ice. Fill the glass $\frac{3}{4}$ full with champagne. Garnish with a cucumber slice and fresh mint. Top it off with St-Germain.

Discussion Questions

1. In *The House at the End of Hope Street*, Alba encounters many famous women (all deceased) who inspire her. If you could meet three literary heroines, who would you choose and why?
2. The house is, arguably, the main character in the novel. If you could design a magical, healing house, what specific features would it have?
3. The character of Blake has divided readers. Some are sympathetic, recognizing that his mother's abandonment led to his inability to give another woman his heart, others just think he's a love rat. How do you feel?
4. Before coming to the house, Greer has been pursuing a life-long dream to become an actress. She lets it go to find another dream instead. Alba also finds a new dream, one she doesn't find easy, but she pursues it until she succeeds. When do you think it's a good idea to change directions in life and when should you keep going, no matter what?
5. Do you think that sometimes people have to hit rock bottom – when they've entirely given up hope – before they can really transform their lives?
6. Agatha Christie stays at the house for eleven days in 1926. In real she disappeared, after discovering that her husband was in love with another woman, for 11 days but the mystery of what happened and why has never been solved. Theories range from a broken heart to a publicity attempt to out-of-body-amnesia. Do you have any ideas?
7. If you had to spend eternity with two people – just as Virginia Woolf, Beatrix Potter & George Eliot must – who would they be?
8. If *The House at the End of Hope Street* was a film, which celebrities would you cast in the starring roles?

A Conversation with Menna Van Praag

In the novel, those who visit the house on Hope Street are allotted ninety-nine days to heal from a trying life event. Is there any significance to this number of days, and do you quantify your own, personal healing by the amount of time that has passed?

Initially I allowed the characters to stay at Hope Street for a year but then realized that it was too long. It's so easy to procrastinate and put things off, we all do it every day, and suddenly years have passed and you still haven't done that life-transforming thing you wanted to do. I thought of those incredibly inspiring people who, given a few months to live, suddenly do all the amazing things they've always dreamed of - literally living every day as if it was their last until it really is. I chose ninety-nine days as a period short enough to light a fire under these characters and long enough that they'd have time to do what was needed. For myself, I've certainly learnt not to endlessly postpone my dreams, to do what I want today because I might not have tomorrow. When I was in my twenties I discovered particular practices of learning to live in the moment, specifically a practice called Instantaneous Transformation which, as the title suggests, is about healing being able to take place in a moment rather than over years. It's certainly influenced my writing as well as my life.

Was there a real Grace Abbott? If not, what inspired you to write a story about a sanctuary for women who have run out of hope?

I love Grace, I wish she was real, but as it is she's born out of love, desire and imagination - inspired by several real people in my life. The story for *THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET* was in turn inspired by a dream I have to buy a big house and give grants to aspiring artists (writers/painters/singers/actors etc.) to live there for one year and do nothing else but study and promote their craft. When I graduated from Oxford I waitressed full-time while writing at night, so I know how hard it is to fulfill an artistic passion while holding down a day job. Anyway, since I can't yet afford to make that a reality I created the fantasy version first.

***THE HOUSE AT THE END OF HOPE STREET* is a work of magical realism. What do you think it is about suspending logic and the constraints of reality that bring us closer to some nugget of truth? Why are you drawn to this genre?**

I've always loved magical realism, ever since I started reading. I suppose I never lost my childhood sense of wanting to believe in fairies hiding in the bottom of my garden and the possibility of Narnia at the back of every wardrobe. I still look for the magic in every day life, it's what make reality extraordinary. It's sometimes easier to connect with spiritual truths through magical realism. For me this genre is a metaphor for faith, not necessarily religious, but faith that there is more to the world than just what we can see, touch and feel.

Is there any significance to the novel's Cambridge setting?

I live in Cambridge and love it better than any place I've ever been. I knew the protagonist, Alba, was a brilliant academic so it absolutely made sense she'd be studying at Cambridge University. Everything else fell into place after that. Funnily enough, though I've lived here for 35 years, I didn't know there was a Hope Street until after I finished the book. The title was merely metaphorical so I was delighted to discover it was actually a physical place. Then something very spooky-cool happened. I'd picked the number 11 for the house, as it's a significant number for me, and (as you already know if you're reading this, the house in the book is invisible except to those who need it) then a reader told me there isn't a number 11 on the real Hope Street in Cambridge. That gave me goose bumps!

Are there any elements in the novel that you think an American audience might miss?

I did have some funny moments with my editor while we were “translating” the novel from English into American. She wasn’t sure what a “council estate” was. The closest thing I could think of was “the projects” but that wouldn’t work for the book at all, so I had to cut it. Similarly, Albert was compulsively clothed in tatty jumpers, but that word has a different meaning in American too, so now he wears cardigans. Our education system is quite different as well, though I tried my best to explain it without being overly expositional. In terms of describing Cambridge, I hope my writing has done our beautiful town justice.

On your website, you posted a video explaining how you’d wanted to be a writer ever since you could remember, but had little success until you self-published your first book. What advice would you give to an aspiring writer? Is being a writer as fulfilling as you imagined?

I adore writing. No matter if I’d never been published I would have written for the rest of my life. I love words. I love sentences so beautiful and true they take my breath away. Getting paid to write is heaven and I’m very grateful for it. But you can’t count on that, it can’t be the reason you write. Allow me to quote some of the women in Hope Street:

“I write because I cannot NOT write.” —Charlotte Brontë

“I write because I’ve always written, can’t stop. I am a writing animal. The way a silk worm is a silk-producing animal.” —Doris Lessing

“I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else.” —Virginia Woolf

“I write only because there is a voice within me that will not be still.” —Sylvia Plath

Now, if you feel the same way about writing then I believe it’s very likely you also have some innate talent for it. You may, and probably will, have to study your craft for many years before being published but, if you write simply because you must, then I suggest you shouldn’t give up trying to get published until you succeed.

What is unique about women being healed by women? Do you find most of your emotional support comes from the relationships you have with other women?

Women have a unique understanding of each other although, of course, not that all women are the same or even very similar. But some of the things we might go through, like menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding and the like can’t possibly be understood by men. I think there is something particularly special, primitive and mystical, about female healing. Perhaps because of the ancient bond of motherhood and the feminine traditions such as midwifery and nursing.

Someone pointed out to me recently that my books always contain an older woman who’s a source of wisdom and inspiration. And she’s often my favorite character. In Hope Street this is Peggy, the eighty-two-year-old landlady of the house who adores cream and has lovers and takes great care of all the women under her charge. My own primary source of emotional support is my husband. We’ve been together for fifteen years and he knows me better than anyone. With a single look or word he can tell what’s going on in my head. But I have several close female friends with whom I share my heart and I find these relationships enriching in a unique way.

Which character’s stay at the house resonates the most with you? Why?

The main character, Alba, because she is rather similar to me, especially when I was her age: a timid, bookish type who wants to connect with other people but fears rejection. I’m much less shy now, but I can still remember those days quite well!

What surprised you the most while working on the book?

The murder scene. I knew it was coming but I didn't know if I'd be able to write it, at least not as effectively as I hoped. I'd never written anything so dark before and I put it off until I couldn't put it off any longer. I went for a walk and, before I reached the end of the street, the first four lines of the scene dropped into my head. I turned around and ran home. I sat down and wrote the whole scene in an hour. Writing it was one of the most shocking, exciting experiences of the entire book. I still have no idea where it came from.

In what ways does your own home resemble the house at the end of Hope Street?

I wish my home resembled the house at the end of Hope Street! I live in a rather small flat, not an infinitely expanding mansion with changeable rooms inhabited by the spirits of historical women, more's the pity. Although, in essence my home is - at least for me - as comforting and beautiful as the house. Writing this character - for the house is certainly a character in the book - was certainly an act of wish fulfilment. I imagined everything I could possibly want in a home and created it. Imagine stepping into your hallway and being greeted by Florence Nightingale and Virginia Woolf. Imagine the books on your shelves changing according to your whims. Imagine walking into your garden to an explosion of butterflies. I can only dream of such a house.