



# The God of the Woods

## by Liz Moore

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does "The God of the Woods" compare to other mystery or thriller novels you've read? What made it unique?
2. The novel explores two missing children cases in the same family. How did this dual mystery impact the story and your reading experience?
3. Discuss the class divisions portrayed between the wealthy Van Laar family and the working-class townspeople. How did these dynamics influence the events and characters' actions?
4. What did you think of Barbara as a character? How did her rebellious nature and punk aesthetic contrast with her family's expectations?
5. The book is told from multiple perspectives. Which character's viewpoint did you find most compelling or insightful? Why?
6. How does Moore handle themes of power, privilege, and corruption throughout the novel?
7. Discuss the role of women in the story, particularly focusing on characters like Detective Judy Luptack and Barbara's mother Alice. How does Moore portray their struggles and strengths? How are they products of their time period and in what ways do they resist those constraints?
8. The second disappearance is set in 1975. How does the time period influence the events and characters' behaviors?
9. Discuss the significance of the Adirondack setting. How does the wilderness backdrop impact the mood and plot of the story?
10. After reading this book, what are your thoughts on the impacts of generational wealth and privilege on families and communities?
11. Without spoiling the ending, what did you think of the resolution to the mysteries? Were you satisfied with how Moore wrapped up the various storylines?

## Author Interview

**SCOTT SIMON:** Liz Moore's new novel, "The God Of The Woods, " opens with a jolt - not something that appears, but someone who is missing. It's dawn in August 1975 in the cabin of a summer camp in the Adirondack Mountains, and we'll ask the author to pick up that moment.

**LIZ MOORE:** (Reading) The bed is empty. Louise, the counselor, 23, short limbed, rasp voice, jolly, stands barefoot on the warm rough planks of the cabin called Balsam and processes the absence of a body in the lower bunk by the door. Later on, the 10 seconds that pass between sight and inference will serve to her as evidence that time is a human construct, that it can slow or accelerate in the presence of emotion, of chemicals in the blood. The bed is empty. Louise turns slowly in a circle, naming the girls she can see - Melissa, Melissa, Jennifer, Michelle, Amy (ph), Caroline, Tracy (ph), Kim - eight campers, nine beds. She counts and counts again. At last, when she can no longer defer it, she lets one name bob to the surface of her mind, Barbara.

**SS:** "The God Of The Woods" is the latest novel from Liz Moore, author of the bestseller "Long Bright River." She joins us now from our member station WHYY in Philadelphia. Thank you so much for being with us.

**LM:** Thank you, Scott. It's truly an honor to be here.

**SS:** What a book. The missing camper is Barbara Van Laar. She's from a prominent family. And her older brother, Bear, disappeared 16 years before.

**LM:** Yeah, that's right. So this story functions kind of as a dual mystery with an upstairs-downstairs theme at the heart of it because the wealthy dynastic Van Laar family - who are fictional - own basically a mansion in the wilderness that they built in the late 1800s, and they also own a summer camp just down the hill from that house.

So at the start of the novel, as you heard, their 13-year-old daughter goes missing from that camp. But she's not the first child of theirs to go missing because earlier, her older brother, Bear, also went missing from the same grounds. So there are lots of questions about whether this prominent family had something to do with the disappearance of both of their children.

But there's also a lot of local people who come from the working-class community nearby and who staff the camp who also come under suspicion. And so everybody's sort of asking, did both children go missing for the same reason or by the same force? Or was it two different things that caused them to go missing? And, of course, where are they now?

**SS:** And there's a looming presence of a guy called Slitter, isn't there?

**LM:** There is, yeah. So Jacob Sluiter, whose nickname is Slitter - it functions as a kind of like living ghost story for all the campers and the counselors in the 1970s. And he's fictional, but he's based on a real serial killer named Robert Garrow, who haunted the Adirondacks in the

1970s and who kind of haunted my imagination as a kid, although he died just before I was born.

**SS:** Your father used to invoke him, right?

**LM:** Yeah. My mother's family - my maternal ancestors - come from the Adirondacks. And my mother was born and raised just south of there. My dad is not from there, but he loves to tell a ghost story. And he has no problem - or he had no problem when I was growing up, scaring his children and now his grandchildren. And so he delighted in telling us all about the scary things that happened in the Adirondacks for many generations, including Robert Garrow, this real-life serial killer who escaped incarceration and for whom there was a manhunt not once but twice. And that's who the Jacob Sluiter character was based on.

**SS:** As the story goes on, we learn that young Barbara did not have a happy home and family life, did she?

**LM:** No. Her family has very, very rigid ideas about everything from gender roles to social class. And Barbara is an outlier. She has embraced the world of punk music very, very early. It's 1975, so just the very beginnings of the punk movement are occurring. And she dresses in a way that looks very strange, especially to her mother, who has really specific ideas about femininity and the way that her daughter should look and act.

And unfortunately, she's seen as sort of a replacement for the child who went missing, who was a golden child in the Van Laars family. He was 8 years old. He was outdoorsy. He was a beautiful child. He was everything the Van Laars could have wished for. And when he disappeared, they had another child in their grief, but she has gone in the complete opposite direction. So she's really struggling within her family.

**SS:** Tell us about one of the officers assigned to the case, Officer Judy Luptack.

**LM:** Yeah, I did a little bit of research in the writing of this novel about the first crop of female investigators in New York state was also the first crop of female investigators in the nation. And so Judy is a fictional character, but she's based on the women who were among the first to be promoted to the rank of investigators in the state police of New York. And her brother teasingly calls her the nation's first.

She, like many of the women in this book, is up against certain expectations about the way she should look and act. But also, by virtue of the fact that she's a woman, she's able to access certain information that some of her male colleagues are not able to access. And certain characters in the book trust her in a way that they don't trust the men.

**SS:** Help us understand the divisions between the camp families and the townies.

**LM:** Yeah, I became really, really interested in the history of the creation of the Adirondack Park Preserve, which happened in the late 1800s. For many years, the Adirondacks were kind of ravaged by the logging industry and were fairly unprotected from an environmental standpoint.

Only when very wealthy families like the Roosevelts, the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers began to discover the beauty of the Adirondacks and began to make summer homes in the Adirondacks did the government of New York state suddenly become interested in environmental conservation, which, of course, was a morally complex issue because it put pressure on the many working-class people who had made their living off the land.

And so the book aims to tell a really good story, but underneath it is this theme of class tension. And so the Van Laars represent this wealthy family who've made a home of the land and who embrace the environment and who embrace conservation but only insofar as it serves them, whereas some of the more working-class characters have suddenly found themselves out of work after generations of making a living from the land. All of that is kind of at play in the background of the novel.

**SS:** You, very skillfully, settle suspicions on a number of characters within the course of a story. And I found myself thinking - especially in this time of the popularity of true crime stories - people can convince themselves of many possibilities, can't we?

**LM:** Yeah, it's a fun exercise for me to never outline a novel. That's my practice because it lets me discover things at the same time that the reader does. Of course, I go back and draft and redraft and redraft. But I love hearing from readers that certain twists were a complete surprise to them, but that they felt earned or that they didn't feel implausible.

That's my great ambition whenever I write a mystery - is to keep people guessing and to have them feel the sensation of surprise but also to feel satisfied that oh, this could really happen. And the best way that I know to do that is by not knowing the answers myself as I enter the writing of a book.

**SS:** Liz Moore's new novel, "The God Of The Woods." Thank you so much for being with us.

**LM:** Thank you, Scott. It's been a joy to talk to you.

## Author Biography

Liz Moore is a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction.

Her first novel, *The Words of Every Song* (Broadway Books, 2007), centers on a fictional record company in New York City just after the turn of the millennium. It draws partly on Liz's own experiences as a musician. It was selected for Borders' Original Voices program and was given a starred review by Kirkus. Roddy Doyle wrote of it, "This is a remarkable novel, elegant, wise, and beautifully constructed. I loved the book."

After the publication of her debut novel, Liz obtained her MFA in Fiction from Hunter College. In 2009, she was awarded the University of Pennsylvania's ArtsEdge residency and moved to Philadelphia.

Her second novel, *Heft*, was published by W.W. Norton in January 2012 to popular and critical acclaim. Of *Heft*, *The New Yorker* wrote, "Moore's characters are lovingly drawn...a truly original voice"; *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote, "Few novelists of recent memory have put our bleak isolation into words as clearly as Liz Moore does in her new novel"; and editor Sara Nelson wrote in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, "Beautiful...Stunningly sad and heroically hopeful." The novel was published in five countries, was long-listed for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and was included on several "Best of 2012" lists, including those of NPR and the Apple iBookstore.

Moore's short fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in venues such as *Tin House*, *The New York Times*, and *Narrative Magazine*. She is the winner of the Medici Book Club Prize and Philadelphia's Athenaeum Literary Award. After winning a 2014 Rome Prize in Literature, she spent 2014-15 at the American Academy in Rome, completing her third novel.

That novel, *The Unseen World*, was published by W.W. Norton in July of 2016. Louisa Hall called it "fiercely intelligent" in her review in *The New York Times*; Susan Coll called it "enthraling . . . ethereal and elegant . . . a rich and convincing period piece" in her review in the *Washington Post*. *The Unseen World* was included in "Best of 2016" lists by *The New Yorker*, the BBC, *Publishers Weekly*, *Vox*, Google Play, and Audible.com, among others.

Moore's fourth novel, *Long Bright River*, was published by Riverhead Books in January 2020. It was an instant *New York Times* bestseller and has become an international bestseller as well, with translations to be published in 21 territories to date. *Long Bright River* was a Book of the Month Club pick and the January selection for the Good Morning America book club. In addition, it launched the *New York Times's* Group Text monthly feature. Barack Obama selected *Long Bright River* as one of his favorite books of 2020.

In July 2024, Moore's fifth novel, *The God of the Woods*, was published by Riverhead Books and again became an instant *New York Times* bestseller. As of this writing, it has remained for twenty-nine weeks on the bestseller list. It also debuted as the #1 bestseller among

independent bookstores across the United States; was once again selected by Barack Obama for inclusion on his Summer Reading List; was chosen by Barnes & Noble as their national book club choice for July 2024; was selected by viewers of The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon as their choice for the Summer 2024 Fallon Book Club, for which Liz Moore made an appearance on the show; and has been sold for translation in twenty-eight foreign territories to date.

A limited-series adaptation of *Long Bright River*—co-created, executive produced, and co-written by Moore, and starring Amanda Seyfried—will premiere on Peacock in 2025. Both *The Unseen World* and *The God of the Woods* have been optioned by Sony Pictures Television, with Moore in a writing/producing capacity.

Liz Moore lives with her family in Philadelphia and is Director of the MFA program in Creative Writing at Temple University.

From: <https://www.lizmoore.net/about>

## Reviews

Many years after her older brother, Bear, went missing, Barbara Van Laar vanishes from the same sleepaway camp he did, leading to dark, bitter truths about her wealthy family.

One morning in 1975 at Camp Emerson—an Adirondacks summer camp owned by her family—it's discovered that 13-year-old Barbara isn't in her bed. A problem case whose unhappily married parents disdain her goth appearance and "stormy" temperament, Barbara is secretly known by one bunkmate to have slipped out every night after bedtime. But no one has a clue where's she permanently disappeared to, firing speculation that she was taken by a local serial killer known as Slitter. As Jacob Sluiter, he was convicted of 11 murders in the 1960s and recently broke out of prison. He's the one, people say, who should have been prosecuted for Bear's abduction, not a gardener who was framed. Leave it to the young and unproven assistant investigator, Judy Luptack, to press forward in uncovering the truth, unswayed by her bullying father and male colleagues who question whether women are "cut out for this work." An



unsavory group portrait of the Van Laars emerges in which the children's father cruelly abuses their submissive mother, who is so traumatized by the loss of Bear—and the possible role she played in it—that she has no love left for her daughter. Picking up on the themes of families in search of themselves she explored in *Long Bright River* (2020), Moore draws sympathy to characters who have been subjected to spousal, parental, psychological, and physical abuse. As rich in background detail and secondary mysteries as it is, this ever-expansive, intricate, emotionally engaging novel never seems overplotted. Every piece falls skillfully into place and every character, major and minor, leaves an imprint.

"Don't go into the woods" takes on unsettling new meaning in Moore's blend of domestic drama and crime novel.

From: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/liz-moore/the-god-of-the-woods/>

## **Read-Alikes**

### **When the Stars Go Dark by Paula McLain**

Anna Hart is a seasoned missing persons detective in San Francisco with far too much knowledge of the darkest side of human nature. When unspeakable tragedy strikes her personal life, Anna, desperate and numb, flees to the Northern California village of Mendocino. She spent summers there as a child with her beloved grandparents, and now she believes it might be the only place left for her to heal. Yet the day she arrives, she learns a local teenage girl has gone missing. Anna is in no condition to become involved with the search--until a childhood friend, now the village sheriff, pleads for her help.

### **The Last House Guest: A Novel By Megan Miranda**

Littleport, Maine, has always felt like two separate towns: an ideal vacation enclave for the wealthy, whose summer homes line the coastline, and a simple harbor community for the year-round residents whose livelihoods rely on service to the visitors. Typically, fierce friendships never develop between a local and a summer girl--but that's just what happens with visitor Sadie Loman and Littleport resident Avery Greer. Each summer for almost a decade, the girls are inseparable--until Sadie is found dead. While the police rule the death a suicide, Avery can't help but feel there are those in the community, including a local detective and Sadie's brother, Parker, who blame her. Someone knows more than they're saying, and Avery is intent on clearing her name, before the facts get twisted against her.