

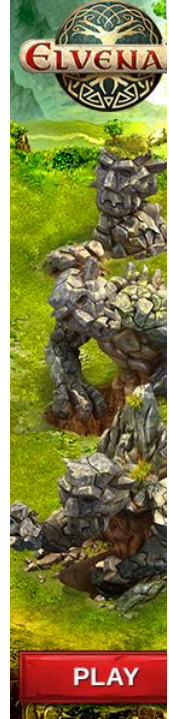
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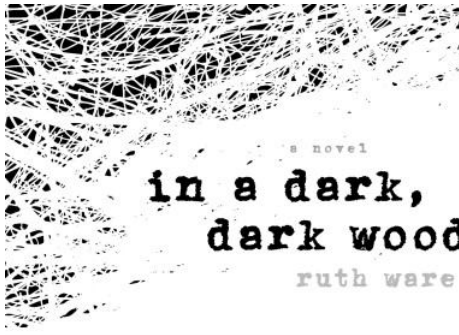
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THRILLER

In a Dark, Dark Wood by Ruth Ware
Scout Press
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Pub. date: August 4, 2015
320 pages



"Ware stays a step ahead of us, tantalizing us with hints of something sinister on the horizon"

BOOK REVIEW: People Who Stay in Glass Houses

BY KIM KANKIEWICZ

British writer Ruth Ware's debut thriller *In a Dark, Dark Wood* is the kind of book that keeps you reading deep into the night with the covers pulled up to your chin. Narrated by protagonist Leonora Shaw, the novel takes place during a weekend "hen do" (that's "bachelorette party" to readers on this side of the pond) at a house in the woods of northern England. Leonora, a crime writer who goes by the nickname Nora, hasn't seen bride-to-be Clare in ten years and is surprised to be on the weekend guest list. The narrative repeatedly alludes to some significant event that occurred when Nora and Clare were school friends, precipitating Nora's transfer to another school and the end of her friendship with Clare.

We know from an introductory chapter and several subsequent scenes set in a hospital that the weekend is destined to end in violence. Even without those scenes, the setting portends danger from the moment of Nora's arrival. The house and surrounding woods are portrayed as vividly as the characters who gather there. A summer vacation home

owned by the aunt of Clare's maid of honor, the house stands vacant in November when the story takes place. The maid of honor, Flo, says her aunt considers the setting too isolated to spend much time there in the dark winter months. It's easy to see the aunt's point as Nora describes the view from the house, with its walls made almost entirely of glass:

I stared out into the woods. It was growing dark, and somehow the shadows made it feel as if all the trees had taken a collective step towards the house, edging in to shut out the sky.... Suddenly, so much farther north, it felt like winter had come overnight. It wasn't just the close-growing pines shutting out the light with their dense needles, nor the cold crisp air with its promise of frost to come. The night was drawing in, and the house felt more and more like a glass cage, blasting its light blindly out into the dusk, like a lantern in the dark.

Add to the claustrophobic setting a dead phone line and a mysterious set of footprints outside the house, and our spines are tingling before the characters feel anything more than social tension.

That tension, though, is no small matter. It's as dense as the forest surrounding the house. Nora is increasingly on edge as Clare and her guests dredge up secrets from the past. There's an ongoing power struggle concerning Nora's name; despite repeated protestations, Clare persists in calling Nora by her childhood nickname of Lee, and soon everyone is using the old name. The group is a volatile assembly of strong personalities: Clare is self-possessed and subtly manipulative. Flo is emotionally reactive and intensely devoted to Clare. Nina, a mutual school friend with a biting sense of humor, enjoys stirring up conflict and sitting back to witness the fallout. A preoccupied new mother named Melanie and a hedonistic playwright named Tom round out the guest list.

Hunkered together in the woods, the characters are like the cast of a horror movie or an Agatha Christie novel. Ware acknowledges as much with playful references to slasher films and "Agatha Effing Christie," as well as to *Single White Female* and Chekhov's gun. As long as the characters are in the glass house, Ware stays a step ahead of us, tantalizing us with hints of something sinister on the horizon.

The recurring hospital scenes, which are intercut with the action from the weekend, are slightly less satisfying. These scenes serve as narrative checkpoints as the hen weekend progresses. Discovering that she has been in a car accident and suffered temporary memory loss, Nora attempts to reconstruct the weekend's events. Her need to remember becomes more urgent when she spots a police officer outside her door and overhears a reference to murder. She deduces from the oddly shaped bruise on her shoulder that she has recently fired a shotgun. Lying in her hospital bed and questioning her own involvement in the weekend's events, Nora is set up as an unreliable narrator in a psychological thriller.

But we're not quite sure why Nora, a quiet person who shies away from conflict, believes herself capable of violence. As she pieces together her memories, she becomes less a cohesive character and more a vehicle for readers' speculation.

And speculate we do, about distant as well as recent events. To keep us from arriving too quickly at the truth about the present, Ware withholds information about the past until late in the novel. The risk of this approach is that it's difficult to empathize with Nora without understanding what motivates her. Why is she so desperate to impress Clare, someone she hasn't seen in a decade? Why is she so agitated when the conversation turns to the past? Facing cruelty from people she barely knows, why does she refuse an opportunity to leave the party midway through the weekend? Without the story of what happened ten years ago, we're left to imagine the most shocking possible answers to these questions.

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What actually happened may be mild compared to what we have guessed. Even when we've learned the missing details, Nora remains a bit opaque. The key event in her past was certainly distressing, but we don't know enough about her inner life to understand why she's been unable to move forward.

When Nora finally identifies the killer, the moment feels anticlimactic — and not necessarily because we've arrived at the solution before she does. With so few guests on the weekend roster, we're bound to have suspected the culprit at some point. The big reveal is a letdown because our incomplete access to Nora's inner life leaves us uncertain of the scene's emotional stakes and unable to share fully in Nora's triumph.

By contrast, the book's return to the woods in the final pages feels both inevitable and rewarding. Nora revisits the glass house literally and again speculatively, picturing the house "far away, in the stillness of the forest," its walls "reflecting the dark shapes of the trees." Like the closing shot of a Stephen King movie, the image is unsettling. It leaves us wanting more of Ruth Ware at her atmospheric best.

For Fans Of: SJ Watson, Paula Hawkins

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 **sdm54** — I disagree. If you are referring to Blind Spot I thoroughly enjoyed it. the story, the character development. A good read I thought.

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INTERROGATION: David Mark

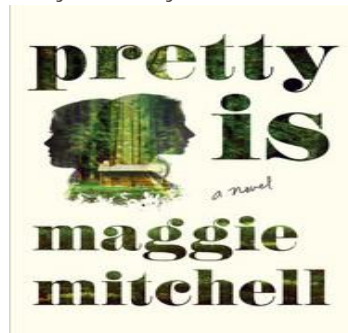


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BOOK REVIEW: Pretty Is as Pretty Does

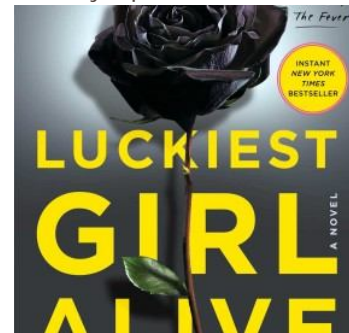


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