



## A READING GROUP GUIDE FOR

# KEPT ANIMALS

A NOVEL

by **KATE MILLIKEN**

*This reading group guide for KEPT ANIMALS includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

## INTRODUCTION

It's 1993, and Rory Ramos works as a ranch hand at the stable her stepfather manages in Topanga Canyon, California, a dry, dusty place reliant on horses and hierarchies. There she rides for the rich clientele, including twins June and Wade Fisk. While Rory draws the interest of out-and-proud June, she's more intrigued by Vivian Price, the beautiful girl with the movie-star father who lives down the hill. Rory keeps largely separate from the likes of the Prices—but, perched on her bedroom windowsill, Rory steals glimpses of Vivian swimming in her pool nearly every night.

After Rory's stepfather is involved in a tragic car accident, the lives of Rory, June, and Vivian become inextricably bound together. Rory discovers photography, begins riding more competitively, and grows closer to gorgeous, mercurial Vivian, but despite her newfound sense of self, disaster lurks all around her: in the parched landscape, in her unruly desires, in her stepfather's wrecked body and guilty conscience. One night, as the relationships among these teenagers come to a head, a forest fire tears through the canyon, and Rory's life is changed forever.

*Kept Animals* is narrated by Rory's daughter, Charlie, in 2015, more than twenty years after that fateful fire. Realizing that the key to her own existence lies in the secret of what really happened that unseasonably warm fall, Charlie is finally ready to ask questions about her mother's past. But with Rory away on assignment, Charlie knows she must unravel the truth for herself.

## TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. Why is Rory drawn to the view outside her bedroom window? Why does she tell June about it?
2. *Kept Animals* is a multigenerational narrative told through Rory's daughter, Charlie, as she discovers her origin story. How do you think this structure influenced your experience of the novel's events as they unfolded?
3. How does Rory feel about Gus before the accident? What does the aftermath of the accident reveal about their relationship?
4. What did you feel Gus gained from Sarah's letters to him? What do you think he would have written to her, if he knew where to send a letter?
5. Do you think Gus enjoys taxidermy? Why does he pick up the fox the day he does?
6. If you could relieve one character of their grief, which character's grief would you relieve? Why? When?
7. June's and Rory's different backgrounds are evident in their experiences at the stables and at home. What do you think draws them together? Did you feel race or class played a role in how they related to one another? If so, how?
8. Vivian begins to reflect on her childhood, before her father's fame. What was it like? How does it compare to her adolescence, in terms of money, comfort, success, and intimacy?
9. What happens to Journey in Fresno? Who do you believe is responsible, and what are the consequences?
10. Vivian has an inappropriate relationship with her former teacher. What insight does this relationship give you into Vivian?
11. What causes the shift in Rory's relationship with June and Wade? Do they respect her, resent her, or something else entirely? How do their respective differences affect these relationships?
12. Why is Rory drawn to photography? Why does she choose to photograph Vivian? Do you think Rory's photographs crossed a line at any point? If so, how?
13. Throughout *Kept Animals*, Rory is exploring her sexuality without insight or advice from the adults in her life. If she had had a supportive adult, how might her story been changed?

14. Describe the relationships between animals and humans in this novel: Rory and Chap, the Fisks and their horses, Gus and the fox, Tomas and the horses, Charlie and the foals she weans.
15. What do you think of Mona, as a wife, mother, and individual? What are her motivations? How do you think her relationship with Rory might have affected Rory's relationship to Charlie?
16. Why does Rory agree to breeding her mare? What are the consequences, practical, emotional, and symbolic, of the interaction between Chaparral and the stallion?
17. Every character--Rory, Vivian, Tomas, June, and Charlie—come of age in different ways. Discuss which coming of age story you resonate with the most. Why do you think it's important to have these different representations of childhood in the novel?
18. Why does Sonja tell Rory about Tomás's father? What does that story mean to Rory, then and later?
19. What happens the night of the fire? Do you know what caused it? Who shares the responsibility?
20. At the end of the novel, Charlie makes a decision. Do you understand what she's looking for, and why? Do you think she'll find it?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

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1. Read Kate Milliken's book of short stories, *If I'd Known You Were Coming*.
2. Pick another novel set in California, like Lydia Kiesling's *The Golden State*, Brit Bennett's *The Mothers*, Emma Cline's *The Girls*, Dana Spiotta's *Innocents and Others*, Claire Vaye Watkins's *Gold Fame Citrus*, Tommy Orange's *There There*, and Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*. Read it as a book club and discuss the book in conversation with *Kept Animals*.
3. In her interview with Hunter Mclendon of Bookslut, Kate elaborates on the many themes she wanted to engage with in *Kept Animals*. Once your group has finished the novel, read through this interview together and discuss how it gives you more context for *Kept Animals*: <https://www.thebookslut.com/post/in-conversation-with-kate-milliken>.