



Lakewood by Megan Giddings

Discussion questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?



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5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?
7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?
9. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?
10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

Source: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com/when-no-discussion-guide-is-available-fiction>



An Interview with Megan Giddings Aram Mrjoian

April 20, 2020

<https://www.southeastreview.org/post/an-interview-with-megan-giddings>

Megan Giddings' first novel, *Lakewood*, was published in March 2020. More about her can be found at www.megangiddings.com.

I always get excited when I pick up novels set in my home state of Michigan. There's something comforting in reading about a familiar landscape imagined through someone else's words. In *Lakewood*, Lena, a Black college student who must help her mother make ends meet in the wake of her grandma's death, is invited to participate in a lucrative research study in the rural town of Lakewood. Lena puts her academic life on pause and relocates, telling friends and family she has taken a desk job at Great Lakes Shipping Company, a front for a clandestine laboratory. In that facility, Lena and other people of color become subject to an array of traumatic experiments controlled by a white and apathetic staff. The more Lena tries to figure out what's going on at Lakewood, the more she learns about the troubling history that brought her there.

If the genres of horror and psychological thriller often challenge readers to imagine something unreal, part of what makes Giddings's novel a brilliant debut is that many of its most suspenseful and eerie moments are all too recognizable. Giddings and I emailed back and forth in early April. This interview has been lightly edited.

Aram Mrjoian: In your acknowledgments, you note that you first started working on *Lakewood* in a novel-writing workshop. I'm always curious about process. Can you talk a little bit about how the project evolved from an initial idea to a published novel?

Megan Giddings: I started first out of necessity; I think it was ninety pages had to be written that semester with the idea that it would stop us from doing the thing that I think keeps a lot of projects stagnant, just noodling on those first thirty pages. I knew in the class I was writing about bodies; I was writing about the tension you see in a lot of small Midwestern towns where things can be very picturesque, but all the ranges of the human experience are still there. It didn't take until several drafts where I realized, oh I'm writing about research studies. And then oh, I'm writing in some ways about experiences I've had with our medical system.

AM: One aspect of *Lakewood* that really stood out to me is its remarkable pacing, the organic ways it builds and builds suspense. There's both constant tension in each moment and a desire to know what happens next. As someone who is working on my first novel, I've found it difficult to think about where chapters begin and end and how to keep that momentum going, so I was curious how you were thinking about things like chapter structure, acute and chronic tension, and creating suspense?



MG: This was really hard for me to do, so I'm super flattered that you felt like I did it well. I read a lot of things that keep people reading, from the literary (Sally Rooney's novels) to YA novels like the *To All The Boys* trilogy by Jenny Han and even books like *Twilight*. If someone said they found the book hard to put down or that it was propulsive, I read it. I wanted that Pringles feeling for this book, you open the can, start slow, and by the end you're kind of in a daze of chip dust. I think what all of these different books made me think about is that—at least what kept me reading—there needs to be layers in a tension that kept me asking different questions.

The other helpful thing is I felt like most chapters of books that I loved did act a lot like short stories. Sure, there are some details and knowledge that you need and a build from a chapter to chapter, but in general, for me as a novelist, I took a lot from the short story: something has to happen, something has to be revealed about life or character, the difference is instead of building toward a climax or understanding or explanation, I worked toward a mixture of questions and answers.

AM: *Lakewood* takes place in Michigan. I love how you navigate the state's various settings: the major cities, campus towns, expansive forests, and rural in-between. Do you think there are any esoteric challenges in writing about the Midwest? How did you think about developing juxtaposing settings? How were you thinking about how Lena, as a Black woman living in a so-called purple state, occupies and navigates different geographical, cultural, and political spaces?

MG: It used to annoy me when people acted like the Midwest was this niche place. Now I think it's kind of hilarious. I mean, you caught the essence of it in how you framed this question: everything is in the Midwest. The issue is that there's this coded language about "the Midwest" that has gotten worse over the past ten years: are we talking about the actual geographic area or are we discussing a construct that means a place where nice white churchgoing people live who are actually still middle class and they feel resentful about the coasts and their lavish lifestyles because they feel all Americans should be at home eating casseroles. There's an esoteric challenge to talking about the latter because that Midwest only truly exists in a vacuum that's used in service of an America that exists if you obliterate history and context to make a facile point.

I didn't think much about the juxtaposition of settings because that's Michigan. I feel like we've talked a little bit about this before, but I think of Michigan as a microcosm of the United States as a whole. You have major cities, very rural small communities, resort towns, farming, cabins, college towns. We've both lived in Ann Arbor which, while not dense, is like a lot of major cities where you walk down the street, someone is in dire straits and needs money while a Tesla is backed up in downtown traffic next to it and everything is either branded or coded as luxury or as "the real version of the town." You drive an hour one way, you're in a very small community where, except for the iPhones everyone has, and the Starbucks, it looks like it's 1985. You drive another hour a different way, you're in the metro Detroit area. So, to me, it was just writing the state as I understand it.



Sometimes, I think the closest Lena comes to me as a person is learning how to navigate those experiences. I grew up in a small town and I learned how to, by the time I was eighteen, read a lot of social situations. Then, I went to Michigan, and beyond the college education I was receiving, I received an education in what it was like to be in a very, very liberal space where people thought because they had generally progressive values, they didn't have work to do when it comes to issues of race and gender and class. And that's a very different set of power dynamics that made life exhausting in new, unexpected ways.

AM: The last quarter of the novel, part two, transitions from close third-person to the epistolary form in unsent letters Lena writes to her friend and former dorm roommate Tanya. Was that a natural shift that came about as you were writing or did you decide to make this change after seeing the full shape of the novel?

MG: I made the change after seeing the full shape of the novel. A lot of the last part of the novel was written in third person for many drafts, and I realized during a revision with my agent that I needed to give Lena the last word. In the third person, I think readers would want even more a big resolution, something reassuring, a *we did it! the problem is solved!* But the epistolary style was supposed to show someone still trying to figure out in small and big ways the things that had happened to her. This might be a really old-fashioned idea, but I think of letter-writing as a place to be vulnerable, to allow yourself the intimacy of showing the line of your thoughts to another person. Unless you're crap at it, it's not just a relaying of what you ate or did. It seemed really necessary that the readers of *Lakewood* felt some intimacy with Lena after everything she went through.

AM: Hiding the violent and horrifying experiments, the facility at Lakewood is fronted as Great Lakes Shipping Company. One thing I found interesting is that there's still a sense of mundane workplace culture scaffolding the whole operation. In these quotidian instances, Lena faces as much blatant racism as when she's in an experiment, and each day Lena gets a little card summarizing her fake workday. I think it's problematic to look at it too much like a scale, but how were you thinking about these professional layers, that is to say the typical scripted workplace problems, the unchecked racism and classism Lena deals with in the more routine parts of her job, and the much more terrifying ways Lena is treated as a human lab subject?

MG: Well, wait, why do you find it problematic to look at it as a scale? This isn't a gotcha question! I'm genuinely interested.

I think I'm asking about the scale because I think for a lot of white people sometimes that's how it seems like racism is to them. There's a scale that usually begins and ends with something blatant, a slur usually or a big gesture that is unassailably wrong for them to acknowledge oh shit, this is happening.



And I think a lot of writing that deals with racism works on that matrix because it is usually written with a white audience in mind, a white editor; it's probably been in a mostly white workshop space where you, the writer of color, spend a lot of time having to listen to people who probably have never thought deeply about issues of race on a regular basis talk about your work and decided that, because everyone in it is black or a black and white person interact, it's about race and race only.

Now that I'm away from them, I have the luxury of thinking a lot about how most graduate-level creative writing workshops are creating an atmosphere that conflates issues of craft with issues of someone is talking about something that makes me uncomfortable and I have to find a way to be an authority on the thing that makes me uncomfortable while critiquing this work. And I'm not saying that I'm above this. I'm a product of these spaces for better and for worse.

I didn't set out to write *Lakewood* as a book about racism or inequity or gender discrimination. I think of it as a book about grief and family and sacrifice and horrors with these other things impossible to cleave away from the characters and story being told. But I think that as long as someone is writing something that takes place in the contemporary United States in some way, they are still writing about racism and inequity and gender issues. It's just depending on who you and how you're viewed, the big issues might get to be subtext.

AM: You mention several real long-term human experiments in the novel, particularly the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. With the way characters regularly mention the funny taste of the water, I also thought a lot about the Flint water crisis. What did your research process look like for *Lakewood*?

MG: I read a lot of redacted CIA files, I read about Tuskegee, I read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I enrolled in research studies as a participant, I read different news articles and ACLU reports on medical experimentation still happening or recently happening. The water thing is a mixture of things. On a very basic level, a lot of water in Michigan tastes weird. And throughout the whole writing process, I've had siblings living and working in Flint. Flint was and is on my mind a lot. How and why the water crisis happened, how people talk about it, especially when they act like money can fix everything. I think all of these things congealed in *Lakewood*.

AM: You've published short fiction here at SER and also participated in our editorial round table talking about your masthead experience at *The Rumpus* and *The Offing*. As a writer and editor, seeing both sides of the process, what advice do you have for emerging writers?



MG: Well, grain of salt, I think most writing advice out there is really unhelpful. Either because it says more about the giver or reflects an idea of a writing life that has been historically available only to the rich (Four hours on that desk! No interruptions! A Vera to bring the meals!). But I would say that at least for me, the most important writing I've done in my life have been the failures and the things that I'm now deeply embarrassed to have written. So much of writing is learning how to say something and it takes hours and hours and failures to figure it out. *Lakewood* is I think 288 pages now. But to me, it's thousands and thousands of pages. I sometimes forget what stayed and what was cut because I did so many revisions. But all of that was so necessary for the final book.





About the Author

Megan Giddings

Megan Giddings is a features editor at *The Rumpus*, a channel of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and a contributing editor at *Boulevard*. She is a recipient of a Barbara Deming Memorial Fund grant for feminist fiction. Her short stories have been published in *Black Warrior Review*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Iowa Review*. Megan holds degrees from University of Michigan and Indiana University. She lives in Michigan.



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