

# *WHERE THE DOG STAR NEVER GLOWS*

## *Book Club Readers' Guide*

and Q&A with Tara L. Masih

*Plus! Recipe for Coconut Kisses*

1. While books should not be judged by their covers, what were your expectations before reading *Where the Dog Star Never Glows*? Did the image lead you to expect certain stories would follow? Does the symbolic imagery in the photo match well with the book as a whole?
2. The book opens with a simple quote from A. R. Ammons' ground-breaking nature poem—"Corsons Inlet." Read the whole poem (it can be found online); consider the book within the poem's context. Why might Tara Masih have picked this poem, and then narrowed the epigraph down to this one line? Was the quote effective in setting the tone for the book?
3. The praise for Masih's book often mentions the element of surprise. Did you find any of the stories surprised you? If so, why?
4. Masih is bicultural—her father is from India, her mother is of European descent. Her parents gave her a bicultural name as well. Did her foreign name have any influence on your expectations for what the stories might contain? In what ways do you think her ethnic background influenced her settings and characters?
5. Masih takes us all over America, and all over the world in her stories. Have you been to any of these places? If so, do the stories capture any part of your experience? If not, have any of the stories broadened your perspective on a people or a place?
6. Some stories are of standard length, some are short shorts. Does mixing these genres work? Why or how?
7. Masih experiments with nontraditional writing techniques. Did they lend anything new to your reading?
8. These stories are narrated by both sexes and by writers of many nationalities. What do they have in common? What themes keep reappearing?
9. In the title story, "Where the Dog Star Never Glows," what does the star imagery symbolize? Can you find more than one example?
10. In "Suspended," why does the character cry in grief at the end of her ordeal?
11. Both "The Dark Sun" and "Champagne Water" deal with marriages in trouble. At the end of these stories, did you imagine that the couples stayed together? Why or why not? Should they?
12. Which characters do you most empathize with, and which stay with you the most?

## *Q&A with Tara L. Masih*

**Q: This is your first complete story collection. How long did it take to compile these stories?**

**TLM:** Someone made me laugh recently when they asked this same question. They followed it up with, are they from the last few years? The first published story in this collection dates back to 1992. So, it's a result of almost two decades of writing. My output is not as great as other writers. It never has been, never will be, and I've come to accept that. I'm the type of writer who needs to be inspired to write something. I can't sit at my desk and will a story to happen, or write myself into one. I've tried. I only enjoy writing and develop a good story when something catches me creative attention—a fragment of dialog, a color, a scene, a voice I hear. Once I'm captured, the writing takes over and the story tends to flow. I'm also in a place now where my writing does not get rejected or snapped up immediately. It tends to sit in the final cut pile for sometimes a year, even more. So, from the time a story is written, edited, ready to be released, then submitted multiple times, it can be several years before a quality story is accepted by the right journal. Plus, I divorced in 1999, and raised a toddler on my own. So, for about a decade, I just concentrated on survival. I'm in a place now where I can pay attention to this side of me again and work toward getting books published. It's a demanding job, like any other.

**Q: Where did the ideas for these stories originate? Have you been to all the places you write about?**

**TLM:** I've been to all the places I've written about, but for the coal town in Pennsylvania and to Appalachia. I relied heavily on research and my knowledge of woodlands for those stories. Where do these stories originate? From without and within. I get inspiration from scraps of news, from conversations I have or overhear, sometimes simply from within my imagination. A few times I've been lucky enough to just be walking around and suddenly hear this voice speaking in my head, usually the opening of a story. The first page of "Asylum" came that way, where the character begins with "You'd think with a name like Bliss that I had a good life, wouldn't you?"

I do rely heavily on traveling for inspiration. I rarely get inspired by my everyday surroundings. I find I love visiting new places, and getting to know that place in a much more intimate way than do most travelers. Thinking I might get a story out of a vacation or trip forces me to pay greater attention to the surroundings, peoples, foods, sights, smells. I just get a lot of satisfaction out of imagining I am someone else, and doing it successfully enough that someone believes the character is me.

**Q: Has that happened to you? Have you ever been confused with a main character?**

**TLM:** Yes, I actually had one journal return a fictional story that I submitted as fiction, saying they liked it but only publish fiction. I guess they thought it was memoir! I took it as a compliment. I've been told my strength is in creating voice. And because most readers tend to confuse the writer with the narrator, that happens even more so in my case.

**Q: Outside of place, is there any other theme or themes running through your work?**

**TLM:** I think this is up to the reader to decide for him- or herself. I do tend to write about outcasts, hermits on the fringes of society. They intrigue me. And I was surprised myself to come across so much tree imagery

in this collection. I just wrote a new story, and there is a tree figuring largely in it again! This is a new revelation to me, that I have this thing about trees. I can only assume it has to do with the fact that I grew up on a piece of property that was literally right next to the woods, and we had trees on our property that my brother and neighborhood friends and I spent many hours clambering and swinging off of. Like the kids these days in front of the screens, we were in the meadows and trees. I think those early landscapes never disappear from your conscious or unconscious.

**Q: What do you most want a reader to get out of reading your collection?**

**TLM:** My characters are from all over the United States and all over the world. I like it that way. As someone who is bicultural, I always see two sides to everything, even if I don't agree with both. I hope to give glimpses to readers, who may not have traveled or been exposed to different cultures, of what other cultures are like, and how other cultures may function or think or live. I hope it opens their world a bit to see that there are certain commonalities, as the character in "Memsahib" discovers, that we all share. Art simply reflects our world back to us, and hopefully, in doing so, illuminates it in some way. Some of my writing is on the dark side, but that's because I think the topics are important and often neglected. So I might disturb a reader, make them a bit uncomfortable and take them out of their comfort zone, but hopefully they will take the ride and feel like they've seen something new.

**Q: Can you share with us the recipe for Delight's Coconut Kisses from the story "Delight"?**

**TLM:** Sure. Here you go. They are called *Besitos de Coco* from Puerto Rico.

Ingredients:

2 cups grated fresh coconut  
1 cup water  
1-1 ½ cups turbinado sugar

Combine the coconut and water in a saucepan with a heavy bottom. Bring to a boil. Add the sugar. Reduce heat to low and cook for 30 mins. Stir occasionally or until mixture becomes thick and sticky. Drop by tablespoons onto a greased cookie sheet. Let cool completely. Optional: can drizzle with chocolate or dip in melted chocolate. For a crispier kiss, bake at 350 degrees for 10-15 mins. till golden brown around the edges.



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