Fireweed
Lauren Haddad

"Haddad's debut novel shows off her mastery of prose and physical description, infusing each page with believable realism." *—Associated Press*

"[A] spiky and unnerving thriller." *—The Brooklyn Rail*

"Unflinching and quietly devastating." *—The Seattle Times*

ASTRA HOUSE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The events of *Fireweed* take place in and around the isolated city of Prince George in Canada. How does the landscape of the city and its surrounding areas inform the storytelling? How does the economic status of the city come into play? How would you describe the atmosphere of the setting at the beginning of the novel?

2. In one sense, the plot of *Fireweed* is straightforward: Jenny, a white woman, takes it upon herself to investigate the disappearance of Rachelle, an Indigenous woman. But as Jenny's naivete about the modern-day plights of Indigenous women unfold, did you find yourself doubting Jenny's approach to her solo investigation, wondering what her true— if subconscious—intentions were? Can you see yourself or any of your friends or family members in Jenny? How does that make you feel?

3. In *Fireweed,* the author attempts to subvert the traditional detective story, where Jenny seems to be getting nowhere in her increasingly desperate search for Rachelle. What is the impact on the reader? Did you feel frustrated or satisfied at the end of the novel? And why? What does that say about our reading habits?

4. The author uses Rachelle and Jenny's near-identical houses as a catalyst for making comparisons between the two women. What do you think the purpose for drawing parallels and identifying differences is? What do they have in common? How did it help you understand the place and the culture where *Fireweed* is set?

5. Before Rachelle's disappearance, Jenny's main concern stems from her inability to get pregnant. Why do you think the author made this choice? What does this tell us about expectations for women in place like Prince George?

Q & A WITH LAUREN HADDAD

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1. **Why did you choose to set the book in Canada rather than the US? What was it about Prince George in particular that spoke to you?**

    The starting point for the novel was the Highway of Tears and this image of an unlit highway in the remote north of Canada where women vanish, it'd seem, into thin air. *Fireweed* is set in Canada because the Highway is the nexus, the vena cava of the story.

    Prince George is the starting point of the Highway of Tears and is said to be the capital of Northern BC. When I first started researching the Highway of Tears, I kept being drawn back to PG. Having grown up in metro Detroit and having lived in northern Michigan it felt like a cross between those two places—at once so wild that it's not uncommon to see a black bear crossing the street, and so industrial that it's one of the most polluted cities in Canada.

    My parents are both from blue-collar backgrounds and I'm drawn to this social milieu. All of the power structures that can be more covert in more middle-class circles are laid bare. PG felt like an exciting place to explore gender and racial dynamics in North America precisely because there's no window dressing, it's all out there.

2. **What drew you to narrate the book from the perspective of a white woman from Prince George, rather than a member of the First Nations community?**

    So the starting point of *Fireweed* was the Highway, but that's not the whole picture. When I first learned of the Highway and the fact that its victims are predominately Indigenous—and the fact that, for decades, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police ignored reports of women and girls who'd gone missing on the Highway precisely because they were Indigenous—it elicited a really strong emotional response. Anger at the injustice of it all, grief for the Highway's victims, heartbreak. How could the RCMP be so callous? The Canadian government so overtly racist? It was all so ugly, so unfair.

    The satisfaction that comes with these types of stories is twofold. First, it titillates, the way true crime often does. Makes your heart go pitter-patter. You feel alive through someone else's gruesome end. And secondly, it confirms your own Goodness. Sets you apart from other's moral failings. You could never be so racist. You wouldn't have just stood by. You're righteous. You're pure.

    Fireweed is an exploration of this response, the way we make other people's tragedies about ourselves. We could think of this response as a mirror.

    In "bookclub fiction" we often come across this mirror—authors offer what I term as a "benevolent" one to their readers. The whole town is racist, but not our narrator. Not us. I wanted to do the opposite.

    By narrating from Jenny's perspective I sought to fashion a more unsettling reflection. This could have only been possible through a character like Jenny.

3. **What challenges did you face in constructing Jenny's voice and backstory? What did you aim to achieve/avoid here?**

The way I write I often feel like I'm transcribing. A character will arrive, fully formed, and it feels similar to channeling, it's my work to just get it all down. So, in some senses, this work isn't exactly a conscious choice.

That said I knew that Jenny would be a controversial narrator. She stands in opposition to a lot of contemporary narrators. More often than not, I come across narrators who are either fully righteous ("benevolent mirror" types), or "unlikeable" in extremely similar ways (what I term as the "bowel-voiding genre"). Jenny feels, to me, to be more complex. She's ignorant, but not intentionally hateful, her fears and desires are subterranean and, at once, painfully clear.

It would've been easy to write the same story as satire. To have Jenny be completely abhorrent. To some readers, she might be. Again, Jenny serves as an unsettling mirror—reflecting the uglier parts of (in my opinion) our shared human experience, the parts that we seem, currently, to want to bury.

In general I try to write from a place of curiosity and compassion versus cynicism. It was my aim to create a character that could exist in all her complexity without judgment from me as an author.

4. **Tell us about the research you did in writing the book. What aspects did you aim to root in reality and where were you more comfortable inventing?**

I first started researching online. Documentaries, podcasts on the Highway of Tears. Prince George's Wikipedia page. Videos of the city on Youtube. I always knew I would eventually go to the place and in the fall of 2017 I did.

The plot was outlined and I'd written about 200 pages before my first visit there. I had lived in Vancouver for a year in 2014 and used that time as a reference point in writing a Canadian voice but the story was missing the particular texture you can absorb from a place.

I drove the nine-hours from Vancouver to PG. Like Jenny I didn't have any plan. My intention was to get a feel for the place, its people, to foster a relationship. Angelique Merasty's Native Center for the Arts was my entryway into that. Part gallery, part ad-hoc community space right in the heart of PG's downtown, it was there where I met Nicole Fox, who'd serve as my unofficial guide.

I was able to return to PG in the fall of 2018 and stayed in contact with the people I met there throughout my writing process (and, as many relationships turned into friendships, am still in contact with to this day).

It was important to me to capture the reality of living in the industrial North. A place that feels hidden, in some ways—like the industries themselves. I wanted *Fireweed* to include details from the Highway of Tears' history, but it was important to me not to exploit its victims so I say that those stories run parallel to reality. For example, it is true that the Highway first received national attention when the first white woman went missing, but I changed some details of this disappearance to respect Nicole Hoar, a real person whose memory deserves to be honored and not churned into entertainment.

5. **How would you describe the relationship between your work as an herbalist and your writing?**

Symbiotic. I learn so much from plants—not only about health and healing, but also about the human experience, our relationship with the world. Our history when we fostered a relationship with plants, when we kept our hearts open to receiving their teachings is far older than our current timeline, where we mow, weed, clearcut, and excavate.

I love the moment in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* where she details an Anishinaabe prophecy. That, at a certain point, there will be a fork in the road, a choice between two paths toward our future. One blackened—of scorched earth, leading to the destruction of humanity, and one grassy—of respect and reciprocity for all creation, "a worldview shaped by mutual flourishing".

Part of this path is a return to the old ways of knowing, of living, once again, in relationship to plants.

I knew plant medicine would be an important part of *Fireweed*, which could otherwise be a bleak experience. A teacher of mine once said that the plants we need most are the ones growing in our front yards, and I kept thinking of this quote when I drove around Prince George, all its roads blessed with the fuchsia of fireweed.

Fireweed is a plant that grows in "devastated" areas—after wildfires, clearcutting. In herbalism it's known as a vulnerary, or a plant that heals wounds.

There's this really simplistic metaphor I use in the novel: the difference between a plant and a weed all depends on your perspective. It's Jenny's introduction to unpacking her racism, and could be viewed as being totally inane. One love, I don't see color, etc., etc., this sort of thinking that lacks nuance and can feel like bypassing but at the same time is also true. I love these types of dualities.

The novel had a different title when I was researching in Prince George and when I first sent it to Nicole Fox to read. It wasn't until I shared the news of publication with Nicole that I learned the name of the clan she belongs to: Fireweed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LAUREN HADDAD is an Iraqi-American from metro-Detroit who currently lives and works as an herbalist in a small village in Switzerland. Pursuing the question of why she would be drawn to a place of tragedy, Haddad followed the pull to Prince George's paradoxical wilderness and industry, expanding still-ongoing conversations with the indigenous community there into a grant-sponsored photo-journalism project, "Medicine Tree", which in collaboration with photographer Lucas Olivet received an honorable mention for Duke University's Dorothea Lange–Paul Taylor Prize. Haddad studied holistic nutrition in Vancouver, herbalism in Williams, Oregon and is a graduate with honors of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Her essay on Prince George will be featured in the forthcoming Skinnerboox publication *Medicine Tree*.