

MY MEN
VICTORIA KIELLAND



READING GROUP GUIDE

ASTRA HOUSE

BOOK SUMMARY

A [New York Times Book Review](#) Best Crime Novel of 2023

A [Wall Street Journal](#) Best Mystery Book of 2023

A [Chicago Review of Books](#) Favorite Book of 2023

A [CrimeReads](#) Best International Novel of 2023

Based on the true story of Norwegian maid turned Midwestern farmwife Belle Gunness, the first female serial killer in American history, *My Men* is a fictional account of one broken woman's descent into inescapable madness.

Among thousands of other Norwegian immigrants seeking freedom, Brynhild Størset emigrated to the American Upper Midwest in the late nineteenth century, changing her name and her life. As Bella, later Belle Gunness, she came in search of not only fortune and true faith but, most of all, love.

From Victoria Kielland, a rising star of Norwegian literature, comes *My Men*, a literary reimagining of the harrowing true story of Belle Gunness, who slowly but irreversibly turned to senseless murder for release from her pain, becoming America's first known female serial killer. In pursuit of her American Dream, Kielland's Belle grows increasingly alienated, ruthless, and perversely compelling.

Raw, visceral, and altogether hypnotic, *My Men* is a brutal yet radically empathetic glimpse into the world of a woman consumed by desire.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- 1** *My Men* begins with real newspaper quotes from the early 1900s and then the narrative jumps forward to 1915, where we meet Belle smoking calmly near a fireplace. She is in California, and all seems well. Then we return to 1876, at Rødde farm in Norway and encounter our protagonist as a young woman, burning with love and desire. But at the end of that chapter something terrible happens to her, setting the tone for the novel. What do you think of this unconventional opening? How do you picture Brynhild and her reaction to what happens? How did you expect her story to unfold?
- 2** From the very first paragraph, Victoria Kielland's prose is succinct yet detailed: "tongues of flame flickered in the fireplace, hot and silent. Belle needed a window to rest her cheeks on, to cool her skin, glowing red, fresh as dew, calm and hot." It is also very physical. How would you describe the author's voice? Does it feel familiar? How does it make you feel about Brynhild now and later about Belle? How does the voice affect you, as the reader, even as her choices become increasingly volatile?
- 3** Brynhild changes her life in response to a terribly violent experience. How does this change your perception of her, especially in light of what we know she will do?
- 4** How does your perception of Belle change over the course of the novel? At what point do you realize what she is doing? Is the framework of revenge acceptable or immoral?
- 5** How does Belle's fate speak to the contemporary reader? Specifically, how does it relate to the collapse of the American Dream and the experience of immigration? How does the author explore the impulse to change a name and an identity to restart anew after trauma?
- 6** Does the title, *My Men* feel provocative given the circumstances? Or is it a nod at dark humor?
- 7** What do you make of the men in the novel? Even as secondary characters, are they sympathetic? Do they appear to understand Belle and her predicament?
- 8** How would you interpret and summarize the themes and purpose of this novel? Check your answer against Victoria's at the end of the Q&A!

Q&A WITH VICTORIA KIELLAND

Q: Where did you first discover Belle Gunness? Did you know immediately that you wanted to write about her?

A: A lot of people have asked me this, but the thing is, I don't remember exactly. In Norway in the summertime we have something that can roughly be translated as *cucumber time*. It refers to the warm and slow holidays, when the newspapers have nothing important to write about, and tend to report random small stuff. I must have read about Belle in one of those culture pieces, and I remember thinking: *why haven't I heard of this woman before?!* After that, I encountered her name and her story everywhere and became obsessed with writing a story about her. I spent five years writing the book, and also took a long time finding the form of how this story could be told without becoming speculative. All in all, I guess I first encountered her about 8 to 10 years ago.

Q: Who is Belle and why did she decide to emigrate to America?

A: Belle grew up in a poor family from Selbu, she worked as a maid, and emigrated to the USA at the end of the 19th century. History and rumors say that she emigrated because of a violent breakup with a man she was in love with. She has now become best known as America's most infamous female serial killer. However, there are few written accounts about Belle, so much of her story has been pieced together from oral sources.

Q: Was it an easy decision to opt for fiction, or were you also tempted by the idea of writing a factual historical portrait?

A: The story of Belle Gunness has been told many times in the form of nonfiction, and adapted to popular genres such as musicals, revues, shows, and records, but she has also been portrayed in radio plays and films. In general, a lot of slapstick comedy has been made of her story. But surprisingly, as far as I can see, there have been no fictional and literary attempts to tell her story, not in Norwegian or any other language in fact, which is precisely why this story was so appealing! No one had gone into the material with a desire to take Belle Gunness seriously. What happens if we try to understand this horrendous story? Without humor, without jokes, without exaggerations, or exaggerated descriptions of how fat and ugly she may have been. What happens if we zoom in on her, her emotional life, and try to understand some of what must have been going on inside her?

Q: Your prose is very instinctive, it reads like a physical experience as we truly travel into Belle's mind and body. How difficult was it for you to snap out of it and say, cook dinner?

A: For me, what is in Belle, or at least in my Belle, is in all people. All the turmoil, frustration, anger, and the enormous longing for love and care that rages around in all our bodies, it's in all of us always, we just have different ways of channeling it, be it in writing, exercising, driving, gardening. So it wasn't that hard. I think one reason why it was possible for me to write about Belle is because she was also deeply human. She was extreme, of course, but also human.

Q: How much research did you do? And what did you find that you could use to develop "Belle's voice"? Or, if you did not find that voice in your research, how did you zero in on it?

A: My research was long and extensive, because when you use a true story and a real person as a starting point, you must be careful about everything you write, and you must know all the small details about the world they lived in. Not to then use every detail, but when you have those elements at your fingertips as well as a solid overview, you can wander around their universe in a much more believable way. Because ultimately, this is still an unbelievable project. And an impossible one! I *cannot* possibly know what Belle was thinking and feeling. For example, I spent a lot of time examining envelopes; she wrote many letters, so I needed to know whether there were self-adhesive envelopes, or whether in the 1890s they used varnish and a stamp.

I found Belle's voice when, after several years with her story in my head, I fell in love with my partner. I felt that I was gradually being pushed towards a kind of power that wasn't very healthy. I was so in love that I was willing to sacrifice everything for this man, and that force scared me. And from there, I found the rhythm and the voice that made it possible to write a type of psyche, a type of story about a woman who would ultimately kill a lot of other human beings.

Q: Your book masterfully explores boundaries, or an absence of boundaries, any boundaries. Is that a theme that interests you in particular? What are boundaries to you?

A: Yes, Belle has major issues with boundaries. She is unable to separate herself from others, and this is particularly evident in her relationship with her sister, Nelly. For example, Belle asks Nelly outright to give her her youngest daughter. When she refuses, Belle cuts off all contact and never speaks to her again.

I think this scene shows how she thinks of Nelly's child as her child; they are family, sisters, and for Belle, they share the same body—the same fate. Nelly's children are Belle's children. When Belle is rejected, it is too brutal for her. When Nelly sets up a boundary, Belle is unable to handle it. She decides to leave. Her reaction says something about her understanding of the world and of reality, of her own body and its boundaries, and how it relates and connects to other beings. And it also says a lot about her relationships. For Belle, it is all or nothing. She is filled with desire and looking for love. Her love knows no boundaries, and in this way, love also becomes deadly.

Q: We feel a lot of empathy for Belle, even as we slowly come to realize what she is doing. Do you think she was mentally ill?

A: Obviously, there was something wrong with Belle. You don't kill lots of men just because you have an extreme desire to be loved. But we know all this, we know that she was probably mentally ill. I wanted to write an alternative reality, what it could have been like. I wanted to write about a human being in all this violence. Something happened to Belle that drove her to do what she did. How did it come to this? In that sense it is not so relevant whether she was mentally ill or not. It is rather about what you think literature should be, and I think literature has a unique opportunity to be an exercise in empathy, and this is perhaps an attempt to do just that.

Q: Someone you don't know asks you what your novel is about, how do you reply?

A: Love.

FURTHER READING

Pictures of Longing: Photography and the Norwegian-American Migration

by Sigrid Lien

The Mistress of Murder Hill: The Serial Killings of Belle Gunness

by Sylvia Elizabeth Shepherd

Belle Gunness: Serial Killer from Selbu by Hans Melian

Mrs Muu's Lawsuit by Bodil Stenseth

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

If Only; Third Person Singular by Vigdis Hjorth

The Child by Aina Basso

Near to the Wild Heart; The Hour of the Star by Clarice Lispector

When Death Takes Something From You Give it Back by Naja Marie Aidt

Yahya Hassan: Poems; Yahya Hassan 2 by Yahya Hassan

The Gravity of Love; Darling River; The Antarctica of Love by Sara Stridsberg

Downfall: A Love Story; The Parable Book by Per Olov Enquist

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Belle Gunness: The Lady Bluebeard by Janet L. Langlois

The Truth About Belle Gunness by Lillian de la Torre

MUSICAL INSPIRATION

Born to Die by Lana Del Rey

Janet by Janet Jackson

American Express by Molly Nilsson

Who's Gonna Love You by Emilie Nicolas



Author photo © Julie Marie Naglestad

VICTORIA KIELLAND's first book, the 2013 short prose collection *I Lyngren (In the Heather)*, was shortlisted for the Tarjei Vesaas debutant prize. In 2016, Kielland's first novel, *Dammyr (Marsh Pond)*, was shortlisted for the Youth Critics' Prize, and the literary committee of the Norwegian Booksellers' primary writer's scholarship. *My Men* is her breakthrough novel, published to rave reviews in Norway in 2021 and now set to be published in fourteen languages. *My Men* was awarded the Thorleif Dahl Prize and the Swedish Academy's Dobloug Prize.

DAMION SEARLS has translated more than fifty books of classic modern literature. His own writing includes fiction, poetry, criticism, *The Inkblots—a History of the Rorschach Test* and biography of its creator, Hermann Rorschach—and *The Philosophy of Translation*, forthcoming.



ASTRA HOUSE

ASTRAHOUSE.COM | NEW YORK, NY