

Private Rites

by Julia Armfield



About the Book

From the award-winning author of *OUR WIVES UNDER THE SEA*, a speculative reimagining of *King Lear*, centering on three sisters navigating queer love and loss in a drowning world.

It's been raining for a long time now, so long that the land has reshaped itself and arcane rituals and religions are creeping back into practice. Sisters Isla, Irene and Agnes have not spoken in some time when their father, an architect as cruel as he was revered, dies. His death offers an opportunity for the sisters to come together in a new way. In the grand glass house they grew up in, their father's most famous creation, the sisters sort through the secrets and memories he left behind, until their fragile bond is shattered by a revelation in his will.

More estranged than ever, the sisters' lives spin out of control: Irene's relationship is straining at the seams, Isla's ex-wife keeps calling, and cynical Agnes is falling in love for the first time. But something even more sinister might be unfolding, something related to their mother's long-ago disappearance and the strangers who have always seemed unusually interested in the sisters' lives. Soon, it becomes clear that the sisters have been chosen for a very particular purpose, one with shattering implications for their family and their imperiled world.

Discussion Guide

1. In your opinion, what is the significance of the title *PRIVATE RITES*? What expectations did it set for you of the novel to come? Does it hold new meaning now, after finishing?
2. We move back and forth between the three sisters' perspectives. How are those perspectives similar and different? Were you particularly drawn to one of the sisters? If so, why?
3. At several points, we hear from the perspective of the City. What does that narration add to the story, and what does it

help us learn about the world within the novel?

4. The novel's epigraph comes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which is also a story about the three daughters of a famous man and an inheritance conflict that drives a wedge between them. If you are familiar with *King Lear*, discuss the parallels between that story and this one. Would you consider this to be a kind of retelling or reimagining? Why or why not?

5. On page 26, Irene lists some of the frustrations of speaking to her family members: "A person can be thirty, thirty-five, and yet still largely described by her sisters in terms of things that happened to be true at the age of seventeen." How do we see this taking place between the sisters in the novel? Do you relate?

6. Agnes is often portrayed as the "outsider" of the siblings. Why do you think Irene and Isla don't seem to accept or trust her? Why do you think their father decided to give Agnes his house?

7. As readers, we only learn about the sisters' parents through flashbacks. What sorts of memories about the parents are we presented with? What commentary is the book making about how much our parents shape us as people, both in life and after their death?

8. All three sisters have very different relationships with their partners. Which of the partners, if any, seem involved or well integrated into the dynamic between the siblings? What does the novel suggest about how much a partner can understand your dynamic with a sibling?

9. Though the book opens with their father's death and references Isla and Irene's mother's death several times, the sisters don't really grieve in the traditional sense. In what ways are the sisters shown grieving their parents' deaths, or grieving their lack of a cohesive family structure more generally?

10. How does Julia Armfield show the slow decline of the city narratively throughout the book? What effect does this have on the plot and the relationships between the characters? Would you consider the novel to be "dystopian"? How is it familiar and different from our world?

11. In the final scenes, the sisters reflect on how all three of them are "again, in this house that wants to kill them." How does the novel reframe the trope of the family home as a shelter or safe space? What function does the family home have throughout the book?

12. At the end of the book, we learn the sisters have been being watched not only since their father's death but throughout their entire lives. How does the book build this sensation of surveillance? Were you surprised by that last scene at the house?

13. What do you think the future holds for these characters and this world?

Author Bio

Julia Armfield is the author of the novels PRIVATE RITES and OUR WIVES UNDER THE SEA, which was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and the 2022 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Horror and Best Debut Novel, and the story collection SALT SLOW. Her work has been published in *Granta*, *Lighthouse*, *Analog Magazine*, *Neon* and *Best British Short Stories* 2019 and 2021. She is the winner of the White Review Short Story Prize and a Pushcart Prize, and she was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Awards in 2019. She lives and works in London.

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