



"*Shae* is essential for the new queer canon . . . I can't wait to put this in the hands of so many people who need this beautiful narrative."

—GARRARD CONLEY,  
author of *Boy Erased*



# SHAE

*A novel by the author of Sugar Run and Perpetual West*

MESHA MAREN

# BOOK CLUB KIT

# A CITY OF UNBRAIDED LADIES

## *An Essay by Mesha Maren*

The air is fuzzy around us, the slowly diffusing blue of a long summer evening turning into night. My sister will be going to college soon but for one more week, we still share a bed. The roseprint sheets are tangled around our legs and spread among them are the soft pastels of a dozen *Mothering* magazines.

“What if I don’t meet someone I want to have kids with?” she asks and her face is so sincere I can’t look away. She wants so badly to be a mother. She is 18. I am 15. Her desire is so intense it ripples around her and pushes me away. Throughout my childhood, I’ve mostly thought of myself as a slightly less adequate version of my sister. I’ve been in training. When I get older and better, I will become my big sister. But here, in this moment, a crack forms. I don’t have any interest in kids, in mothering, in building a family. It is her intensity that scares me though. I fear that I will never want anything the way she wants motherhood.

Throughout the years to come, my sister will tell me that I just need to give it a little time. Soon, I will want to be a mother. It never happens. And the fear of not knowing what it is that I want instead shadows me as I move across the country picking up waitressing jobs and dancing at strip clubs and dreaming about making movies, taking pictures, writing stories. Through it all, I am envious of my sister’s focus.

I am in my mid-twenties when I first watch *Wanda*, Barbara Loden’s 1970 directorial debut about a young woman from the Pennsylvania coalfields who drifts away from her husband and children towards an uncertain future on her own. The first time I saw the film I felt some jolt of connection, but I could not say why. It was upon rewatching it, a year later and soon after reading Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*, that I started to understand my delight at seeing stories that focused on women feeling their way along the margins of their lives.

“When you have a child, so begins the braiding,” singer-songwriter Aldous Harding writes. “And in that braid you stay.”

But what if you don’t stay? Or what if you don’t even begin the braid?

In her essay ‘*Wanda: A Miracle*,’ critic Amy Taubin recalls the time period when Loden’s film was released. “In those early days of the second wave of feminism, the movement was divided as to whether it should be focusing its energies on the liberation of all women or, more pragmatically, on that of the exceptional ones, or at least the ones who were clearly motivated to become exceptional.” The problem was not that *Wanda* was unfulfilled by motherhood, the problem was that she did not know what it was that she wanted instead. This made her intensely unlikable to many critics.

Anna Bogutskaya writes in her book *Unlikable Female Characters*, “the silent implication of being unlikable is that it’s a free pass to be dismissed, disrespected, and disempowered.” When Bogutskaya talks about ‘unlikeable women’ she is mostly talking about a certain type of unlikability. “In pop culture,” she writes, “I was always drawn to women who were unapologetically angry, horny, ambitious, and even bad, who got away with cons and murders, acting out and misbehaving.” These are the prototypical unlikable bad girls. I like them too. The autumn after my sister left for college, I became infatuated with two girls at my middle school who were expelled for making out with each other in the girls’ bathroom. They were loud goth girls—black lipstick, ripped-up jeans. I was obsessed with them. But they barely noticed me as I drifted along the hallways.

After *Wanda*, I found Joan Didion’s Maria Wyeth (“I am what I am. To look for “reasons” is beside the point.”) and then I found Joy Williams’ Pearl. I circled around to Helen Garner’s Nora and rediscovered Kate Chopin’s Edna (“She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places.”) I found in these women not just drifters but searchers.

The yearning, that inarticulable yearning, was the thread that wove these women together for me. In 2019, another voice joined this chorus. The voice came from inside my own head, but it was not my voice. The voice was young and it was strong. I jotted down a few phrases at first. *I was always in the hallways of life, always outside listening in.* I could see a few images. A young woman lay on a blue couch. Time passed around her. She feared that everything would always keep on passing. Her voice was curious, but it did not fully trust itself. Sometimes I saw her up on a hill, in the high yellow grass, moving, searching. This young woman was Shae. I listened to her, and she told me. She told me about her love for Cam, she told me about her pregnancy, she told me about her fear that she would never know what it was that she needed.

It was not until after I finished a first draft of *Shae* that I stepped back and saw her in the context of the ladies of unarticulated yearning. While I was writing, I was thinking more directly about other searchers: Denis Johnson’s Fuckhead, Anne Carson’s voice in ‘The Glass Essay,’ and the protagonists in Gregory Crewdson’s photographs. But throughout the revision process, I began to see *Shae* as a sister of longing. She, like the women in Loden and Didion and Williams and Garner and Chopin’s work, is a young mother but the mothering is not enough.

In the fall of 2023, as I was completing final edits on *Shae*, I visited a career-spanning Judy Chicago show at The Whitney. On the 3rd floor, Chicago had created an exhibition within the exhibition. She called it “The City of Ladies,” named after medieval writer Christine de Pisan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a catalog of women in history. In Chicago’s ‘City of Ladies,’ O’Keeffe’s “The Black Iris” hung beside early drafts of Dickinson poems and a Zora Neale Hurston film played alongside a painting by Artemisia Gentileschi. Chicago described this exhibit as an “exploration of artistic influences and reverberations across history [...] an ‘introspective’ rather than a retrospective.” Chicago’s own work resonated even more eloquently within this context.

I visited Chicago’s exhibition three times during my final month of editing *Shae*. I kept going back to The City of Ladies because I saw there a beautiful echo—not a reflection but a communion. In her introduction to Williams’ *The Changeling*, Karen Russell writes that the novel is “not a mirror: it’s a window [...] its language opens a portal into the ‘cold, inaccessible depths.’ Its project is annihilating transformation.”

With *Shae*, I wanted to construct my own window—a window into the City of Unbraided Ladies, where my narrator and my younger self could form a sisterhood with Wanda, and Nora, and Pearl, and Maria, and Edna. The window is there now—climb on through.

A version of this essay was published in *Literary Hub* on May 21, 2024.

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Shae* is described as being “as much about these two young women as it is about the home they both love despite its limitations.” What roles do the geography and culture of West Virginia play in the novel?
2. In what ways do the portrayals of Appalachia in the novel subvert stereotypes?
3. The locations in *Shae* are real-world places. How did this affect your experience with the novel?
4. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Shae is narrating with the benefit of hindsight. At what point in the book did you realize that she was reflecting from a future point? Why do you think Maren chose to tell the story in hindsight? What is gained by this vantage point?
5. Did you anticipate where Shae would end up, and if so, why?
6. *Shae* has been described as a “queer coming-of-age novel” and “essential for the new queer canon.” At the same time, these characters are much more than their “queerness.” How would you describe the different ways that Shae and Cam come to understand themselves, not only in terms of gender and sexuality but also things like capability, a quality Shae sometimes uses to describe Cam?
7. What was your experience of reading the sections of the book that dealt explicitly with addiction? How did it affect your sympathy for Shae? How did it affect your understanding of people who are or have been addicted to drugs?
8. There are frequent musical references in the novel. In what ways do music and bands influence Shae and Cam?
9. The novel revolves around two hot-button issues in contemporary American life: the opioid crisis and its impact on small communities, particularly in Appalachia; and the battles surrounding transgender rights, most heated in so-called red states. Have either of these issues touched your life or the lives of people who you know?

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

10. Shae loses custody of her daughter because of an addiction that begins as a consequence of her pregnancy, and her former partner Cam becomes the child's mother. How are parenting and motherhood explored in the novel?
  11. How did you feel about the depiction of Shae's time at Southern X-Posure and the women she meets there?
  12. Shae's mother, Donna, is a loving and supportive character throughout the novel, yet she also attempts to ignore that Cam is transitioning right under her nose. How do you make sense of these aspects of Donna's personality?
  13. The novel opens with Shae telling us that she and Cam do not agree on where and how they met. What role does memory and the ways that memories change over time play in the book?
  14. *Shae* is a love story, but it complicates the notions of both maternal and romantic love. What are the various ways that love is explored in the novel?
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Mesha Maren is the author of the novels *Sugar Run*, *Perpetual West*, and *Shae*. Her short stories and essays can be read in *Tin House*, *The Oxford American*, *The Guardian*, *Crazyhorse*, *Triquarterly*, *The Southern Review*, *Ecotone*, *Sou'wester*, *Hobart*, and elsewhere. She is an Associate Professor of the Practice of English at Duke University.

# SONGS FROM SHAE: A PLAYLIST

“A Sun That Never Sets” — Neurosis

“Mountain Magick” — Wolves in the Throne Room

“A Solitary Reign” — Amenra

“Glare of Autumn” — Drudkh

“In Fiction” — ISIS

“Become the Ocean” — Neurosis

“Schism” — TOOL

“Paranoid” — Black Sabbath

“Dark Horse” — Katy Perry ft. Juicy J

“Toxicity” — System of A Down

“Toxic” — Britney Spears

“Cold Hearted” — Paula Abdul

“That Don’t Impress Me Much” — Shania Twain

“Orchid” — Black Sabbath

“There Is a Light That Never Goes Out” — The Smiths

“King of Carrot Flowers Pts. 2 & 3” — Neutral Milk Hotel

“I’ve Been Thinking” — Handsome Boy Modeling School ft. Cat Power

“Fade to Black” — Metallica

**LISTEN ON**  
**SPOTIFY**

