



Books
Forward

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Reader,

I grew up in the desert borderlands of Southern California, beside a toxic river that flowed to a deadly sea. Throughout my girlhood, I'd run through the dirt lot, past the date palms, beyond the horse pens, a bit further than the park, straight for the river, teeming with highlighter-yellow fish, glowing with poisons, where I'd dip my toes in anyway, daring the monsters in the molecules.

Seven years ago, when my children and I returned to my hometown, my comadre barbecued carne asada and told me that the Salton Sea had been drying up and releasing its toxic, wind-swept dust, threatening to transform El Valle into a wasteland within the next decade. *We'll all have to leave, she said. It'll be a ghost town.* Our Ancestors knew the sea had been rising and falling for millennia. We followed the water. It had always been set to return. And would vanish again.

This drying, though, was different. In the 120 years since white settlers had created laws banning Native and Mexican people from buying our own land, they had also taken the water rights, creating a billion-dollar farming industry — money most people in El Valle never saw — and beginning a water war with the rest of the state. The big, coastal cities had siphoned the Colorado River water from our farming community, then allowed the runoff to burst through the 19th-century canals, creating a man-made lake — the “Salton Sink.” Now, the water's inevitable evaporation was leaving a death trap of pesticide-laden dust behind. And no one was doing anything.

It was clear that the time had come to dust off an unfinished story, ***Salt Bones***, a tale of siblings growing up on the so-called accidental sea in the desert — a place that had both uplifted and torn apart their family. For years, I had struggled to find my way into that story, and when my comadre shared the grim news of the Salton Sea's fate, I retrieved these *Salt Bones* from a drawer and embarked on a journey of research and discovery.

I immersed myself in everything I could find about my predominantly Mexican farming community and the primarily white, wealthy elite who arrived after the late 1800s railroad boom, dividing the land through racist laws and practices. Despite the billions of dollars this land generates for California annually through agriculture, its people endure some of the highest poverty rates in the country.

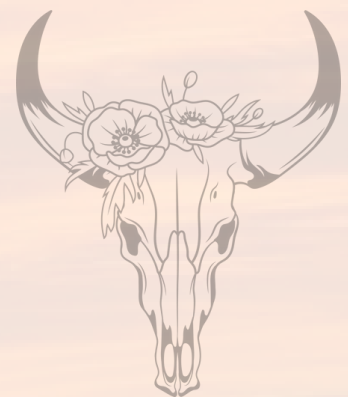
And yet, so few people have any idea where the Valley is or how the Salton Sea and the politics surrounding it threaten to destroy not only their precious winter salad bars but an entire people and way of life.

The possibility that everyone and everything I've loved since girlhood could disappear and Americans would only notice that they had to eat canned vegetables during the winter ignited a fire within me. I felt a profound responsibility to live up to the high praise bestowed upon my work by El Maestro, Luis Alberto Urrea, who had called my first novel "the Great Mexicali novel." I needed to speak up for my homeland again.

Over the past seven years, I've poured my heart and soul into rewriting this novel, a twisty murder mystery that takes readers on a haunted and at times harrowing journey. And yet, always, I've focused on the women. Like this place, ignored, forgotten, buried, disappeared, so too the women and girls, mothers and daughters. Our salt. Our bones.

I hope that within these pages, you will fall in love with El Valle and its inhabitants and realize, as Malamar does, that you can love and work for the well-being of a place even from afar.

All light in the darkness,
Jenn Givhan



AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER GIVHAN



Jennifer Givhan is a Mexican American and Indigenous poet and novelist from the Southwestern desert.

She is the recipient of poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and PEN/Rosenthal Emerging Voices.

She holds a Master's degree from California State University Fullerton and a master's in Fine Arts from Warren Wilson College. Givhan is also the author of five full-length poetry collections and the novel *River Woman, River Demon*.



***Salt Bones* explores deep and sometimes painful mother-daughter relationships. How did your own experiences or observations influence these dynamics in the novel?**

Some of my mother's stories she's sewn so deeply into my marrow that I can't tell if they're her words or my own memories. Still, Mami, Mal, and her daughters are fictional, composite figures, born from the alchemy of familial lore, communal storytelling, and my own imagination. Ever since I was a little girl, I've had my ear pressed to the walls — chest walls — listening to each threaded heartbeat. As Emily Dickinson says, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." Of course, every family member is infinitely more complex than the fictional characters I've drawn, but I'm doing my best to get it all down. I catch glimpses of new facets in each book I write, revealing something I hadn't seen before. Someday, I hope to do my beloveds justice.

Landscape and setting play significant roles in the novel's atmosphere. What made you choose your novel's locations, and how do you see it shaping your themes of environmental catastrophe and hidden histories?

El Valle and The Salton Sea chose me — beckoned me back, I should say. When my comadre told me that the sea was drying, releasing toxic dust into the air that could render the place that raised me a ghost town within the next decade, I couldn't stop seeing the signs everywhere. What happened at the sea could happen to the whole farming community, and no one in the rest of the country would know until some distant winter when their salad bowls lay empty. My childhood was mythic. I see that now.

As all childhoods are — for those who remember. Every story I tell is an act of remembering, recovering, recalling, and mostly, as I said above, re-listening.



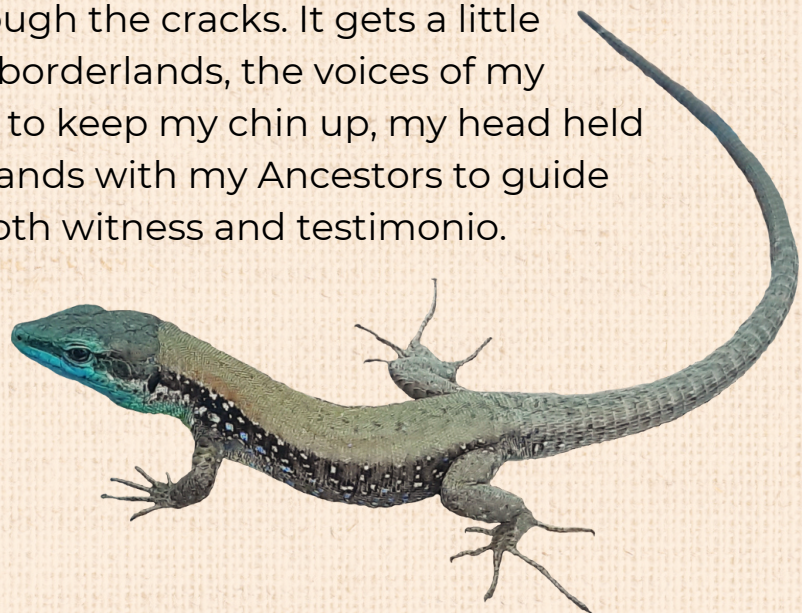
It's cyclical. Listening again to what we might've missed before and allowing new truths to permeate each iteration.

My goal for this novel was to tell a story people would listen to. The Salton Sea has been featured on episodes of Abandoned America, and I felt compelled to show how it's not a ghost town yet. My people are still here.

***Salt Bones* crosses genres — thriller, mystery, horror, and literary fiction. How do you approach genre as a writer? Does your work fit neatly into one category, or do you enjoy pushing boundaries?**

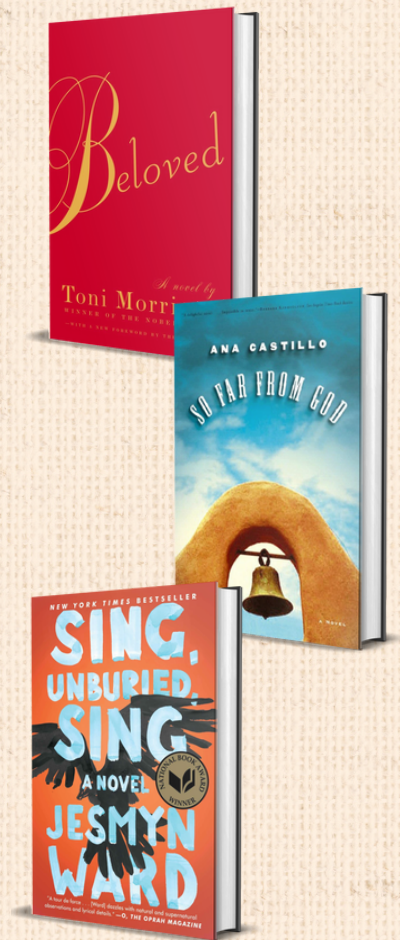
When a story idea finds me, I have no genre expectations. Perhaps because I'm a poet at heart and in love with language and image — and the story comes to me as a character with a distinctive voice and deep-seated ache at the center — I tend toward literary. I hope that every novel I write can be distilled down to a sonnet with a turn, that knife twist. In fact, I didn't know I was writing anything akin to horror until readers told me, much the same as many Latinx folks live with ghosts, quite happily. Or, as Frida Kahlo said, we never painted dreams, only our own reality.

When I'm not trying to fit into any mold, I'm content. But when the insidious habit of categorizing sticks a pin in my writing bubble, I can become distressed at how I don't fit into anyone's tidy delineations and sometimes, therefore, fall through the cracks. It gets a little lonely, I'll admit. Still, I write in the borderlands, the voices of my marginalized kin, so I try very hard to keep my chin up, my head held high, and sift through the desert sands with my Ancestors to guide me. My hope is that this novel is both witness and testimonio.



What inspired *Salt Bones* — books, films, or even folklore?

Much of the novel comes from my own lived experience and childhood on the borderlands, but there are certainly books like my mother's stories that have likewise imprinted upon my matter, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*. Each of these books sing, hum, and gutturally cry the story of the eco-socio-political motherheart of a place, rooted to the mothering spirit of the place, and my work strives always to do likewise — most especially in *Salt Bones*, where the land grieves and the dead speak through La Siguanaba and Mal, where the resilience of my people is both prayer and protest.



How does your identity as a Mexican American and Indigenous writer influence your writing and storytelling in *Salt Bones*?

I feel a great sense of responsibility. My bisabuela and abuela did not graduate from high school. Throughout her entire childhood, my bisabuela picked almonds and other fruits in the orchards all up and down California, and then she sewed in the Los Angeles garment district until at least her 70s. My abuela went on to earn her GED and, ultimately, her bachelor's degree in nursing. Later in her life, my mom earned her doctorate in nursing. As the first daughter of a first daughter of a first daughter, I feel a tremendously empowering — and sometimes painful — sense of duty to speak truths that aren't always easy to tell.

Now that my mom is retired from nursing, I encourage her to return to her first love of writing. She had once dreamed of being an English major — a voracious reader and lover of literature who says books saved her as she grew up and carried her throughout her life. She has a powerful story to tell, and I hope she'll write it. But in the meantime, I'm cobbling together our shared stories as best I can, filtered through my own lens, of course, but I pray that my Bisabuela, Abuela, and all my foremothers and Antepasados come through me every time I sit down to write, my computer as an altar of sorts.

They thought I would be a lawyer, ha! They called me La Abogada as a child because I loved to argue. But now? I argue with ghosts and memory, pushing back against silence and forgetting. I am still making a case — only, it's for the stories with claws that break through the burial sand. And it's not just familial stories. The ghosts of the girls marginalized and silenced come to me and ask me not to look away. I'll admit that sometimes I do wish I wrote rom-coms. Sometimes it hurts — this listening, this seeing, this opening my heart to truths others would rather sweep away. But the voices that find me don't ask for ease. They ask for reckoning. Maybe soon, sweeter stories will come to me. For now, I'll keep my ear to the chest walls of those who came before, asking me to stand in the gaps, and, like my Bisabuela, mend — stitching image to memory, patching voice over silence, and creating such beautiful new things.

Can you share what you're working on next? Will you continue exploring similar themes in future books?

I've just finished the draft of a new novel called *The Bodies We Buried* that loosely recalls the serial killings of 11 girls and women here in Albuquerque where I live with my family on the Boca Negra mesa.

It's border noir meets gothic bones, a genre-bleeding fever dream inspired not only by reclaiming the lives of the girls and women here, whom I still see in the desert fields surrounding my house, but also by my first poetry collection *Landscape with Headless Mama*, who begged me to reweave her into prose — she demanded more space, more breath, to sing her story. Since I have a deep penchant for so-called monstrous mamas, I'm bursting at the seams to share this newest novel with you all — unsettling, breakneck, and feral as a mother intent on protecting her own.



CONNECT WITH JENNIFER

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DEADLY OASIS:

The History of the Salton Sea

Located in Southern California in both Imperial and Riverside counties, the Salton Sea is a shallow, highly saline lake that lies along the San Andreas Fault. Its current form originated in 1905 after a failed irrigation canal project diverted the Colorado River into the Salton Sink for nearly two years until repairs were made. This accidental inflow created the modern lake, which lacks a natural drainage outlet.



Wikimedia Commons, Dicklyon



Wikimedia Commons, Derrickruthless

Historically, the Salton Basin has experienced cycles of filling and drying as the Colorado River alternated its course. Geological records indicate it filled naturally at least three times in the last 1300 years. Archaeological evidence shows that Native American communities once thrived along the shores, relying on the lake's resources for sustenance.





*Wikimedia Commons,
Charles O'Rear*

In the early 20th century, flood irrigation practices in the Imperial Valley sustained the lake. By the 1950s and 1960s, the Salton Sea became a popular resort and birdwatching destination, supported by thriving (introduced) fish populations and its location along the Pacific Flyway. However, environmental warnings in the 1970s went largely unheeded.

Agricultural runoff introduced salts and fertilizers, while evaporation raised salinity, leading to massive bird and fish die-offs by the 1980s. The decay contributed to a pervasive, noxious odor that also negatively impacted tourism.



*Wikimedia Commons,
Jeff T. Alu*

After 1999, as water efficiency improved in local agriculture, less runoff reached the lake, causing it to shrink and expose the lakebed, or "playa." This exposed surface released toxic dust into nearby communities, contributing to severe air quality issues in the region. Imperial County now ranks among the worst in the U.S. for air pollution, with asthma rates in children exceeding 20%.

Ongoing environmental and public health challenges remain pressing concerns for the region's largely Latino and farmworker communities. The area is currently being targeted for an expansive, controversial lithium mine.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE SALTON SEA



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Michael Fiegle*



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Carol M. Highsmith*



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Akos Kokai*

- The lake's salinity is higher than the Pacific Ocean
- The only native fish species is the desert pupfish, which can survive high salinity
- More than 400 species of birds have been documented at the lake
- Geothermal mudpots and mud volcanoes can be found on the eastern shore
- A geothermal brine reservoir within the Salton Sea is estimated to contain 3,400 kilotons of naturally-produced lithium, and has been targeted for lithium mining



TRES LECHES CAKE

inspired by Salt Bones

Because nothing says love, family, and a haunted desert town like a soft, milky, melt-in-your-mouth slice of tres leches.

Perfect for your *Salt Bones* book club meeting, this cake is like Mal's love — **fierce, deep, and absolutely unforgettable.**

Instructions

MAKE THE CAKE

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease and flour a 9x13-inch baking pan.
2. In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt. Set aside.
3. In a large bowl, beat egg yolks and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar until pale and fluffy. Stir in milk and vanilla extract.
4. In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites until soft peaks form, then gradually add the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sugar, beating until stiff peaks form.
5. Gently fold egg whites into the yolk mixture. Slowly add in the dry ingredients until just combined.
6. Pour batter into the pan and bake for 25-30 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Let it cool completely.

SOAK THE CAKE

Drown it in sweetness, just like Mal would

1. In a bowl, whisk together evaporated milk, condensed milk, and whole milk.
2. Poke holes all over the cooled cake with a fork.
3. Slowly pour the milk mixture over the cake, letting it soak in. Refrigerate for at least 2 hours (overnight is best!).

WHIP IT GOOD

La Crema, Baby

1. Beat the heavy whipping cream, sugar, and vanilla together until stiff peaks form.
2. Spread the whipped topping over the chilled cake.

SERVE AND ENJOY

1. Dust with cinnamon or cocoa powder, top with berries, or drizzle with dulce de leche.
2. Pair with a hot cup of café de olla (Mexican cinnamon coffee) and some juicy book discussion.

Ingredients

FOR THE CAKE

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp baking powder
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt
- 5 large eggs, separated
- 1 cup granulated sugar, divided
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup whole milk
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

FOR THE TRES LECHES

- 1 (12 oz) can evaporated milk
- 1 (14 oz) can sweetened condensed milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup whole milk

FOR THE TOPPING

- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups heavy whipping cream
- 3 tbsp granulated sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

FOR GARNISH

Optional, but very Mal coded

- Cinnamon or cocoa powder for dusting
- Fresh berries
- Dulce de leche drizzle



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SPOILERS FOR *SALT BONES* AHEAD!

- 1) Almost every character in *Salt Bones* has secrets. Which character's secret shocked you the most? Do you think secrets are always damaging, or can they sometimes protect people?
- 2) Malamar struggles with her loyalty to her family despite their flaws. Do you think she made the right decision in cutting ties with Papi, Mami, and Esteban? Would you have forgiven them in her position?
- 3) The novel explores cycles of pain passed down through generations. Do you think any character fully succeeds in healing from their family's history?
- 4) Mal's love for her daughters, Griselda and Amaranta, drives much of the plot. Do you think Mal is a good mother? How do her experiences with Mami affect how she parents her daughters?
- 5) Mal hides the truth about Gus from her daughters for years. Was this the right decision, given everything she had been through? How might things have played out differently if she had told them sooner?

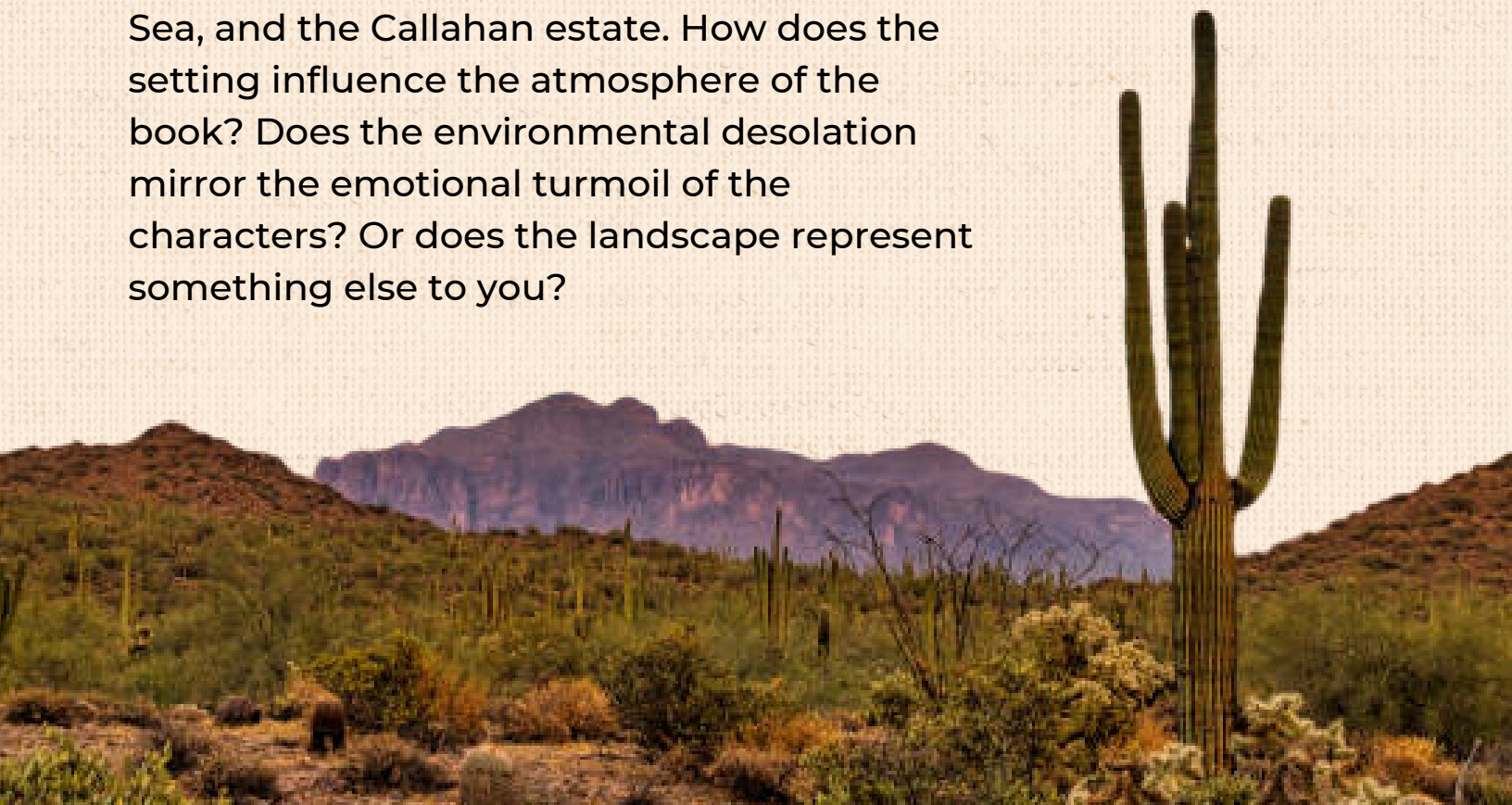
6) The Callahans wield power and influence over El Valle, yet their family is fractured by secrets and betrayals. What does their family's downfall say about power and corruption?

7) The supernatural figure of La Siguanaba plays a major role in the novel. Do you think she represents justice, vengeance, or something else? How did your perception of her change throughout the book?

8) What do you feel the mythical character of El Cucuy represents? How does the relationship between La Siguanaba and El Cucuy mirror various relationships in the book?

9) Harlan Callahan confesses to murder and ultimately takes his own life, but he also tries to protect Amaranta and Mal (and by extension, Griselda) in the end. How do you feel about his character?

10) The novel is deeply rooted in the landscape of El Valle, California, the Salton Sea, and the Callahan estate. How does the setting influence the atmosphere of the book? Does the environmental desolation mirror the emotional turmoil of the characters? Or does the landscape represent something else to you?





11) Mal's work as a whole-animal butcher is an unusual profession for a female protagonist. How do you think this career choice reflects her personality and life philosophy?

12) In Chapter 12, Mal reflects, "Whatever choice a mother makes is the wrong one." The choices that Mal makes — and the choices that her mother, Vero, makes — have significant consequences. How did you feel about both characters as parents and as women? Did your opinion change by the end of the novel?

13) Do you think redemption is possible for any of the Veracruz family members who were involved in the cover-up of Elena's death?

14) From Mal to Griselda, Amaranta, and La Siguanaba, women in this novel hold tremendous power, even in the face of oppression. How do different female characters wield their power, and who do you think was the strongest character in the end?

15) The novel is inspired by the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter. What significant parallels did you see between *Salt Bones* and the original myth? What are the most significant ways you feel the two stories diverge? Why might the author have chosen this myth as a launching point?



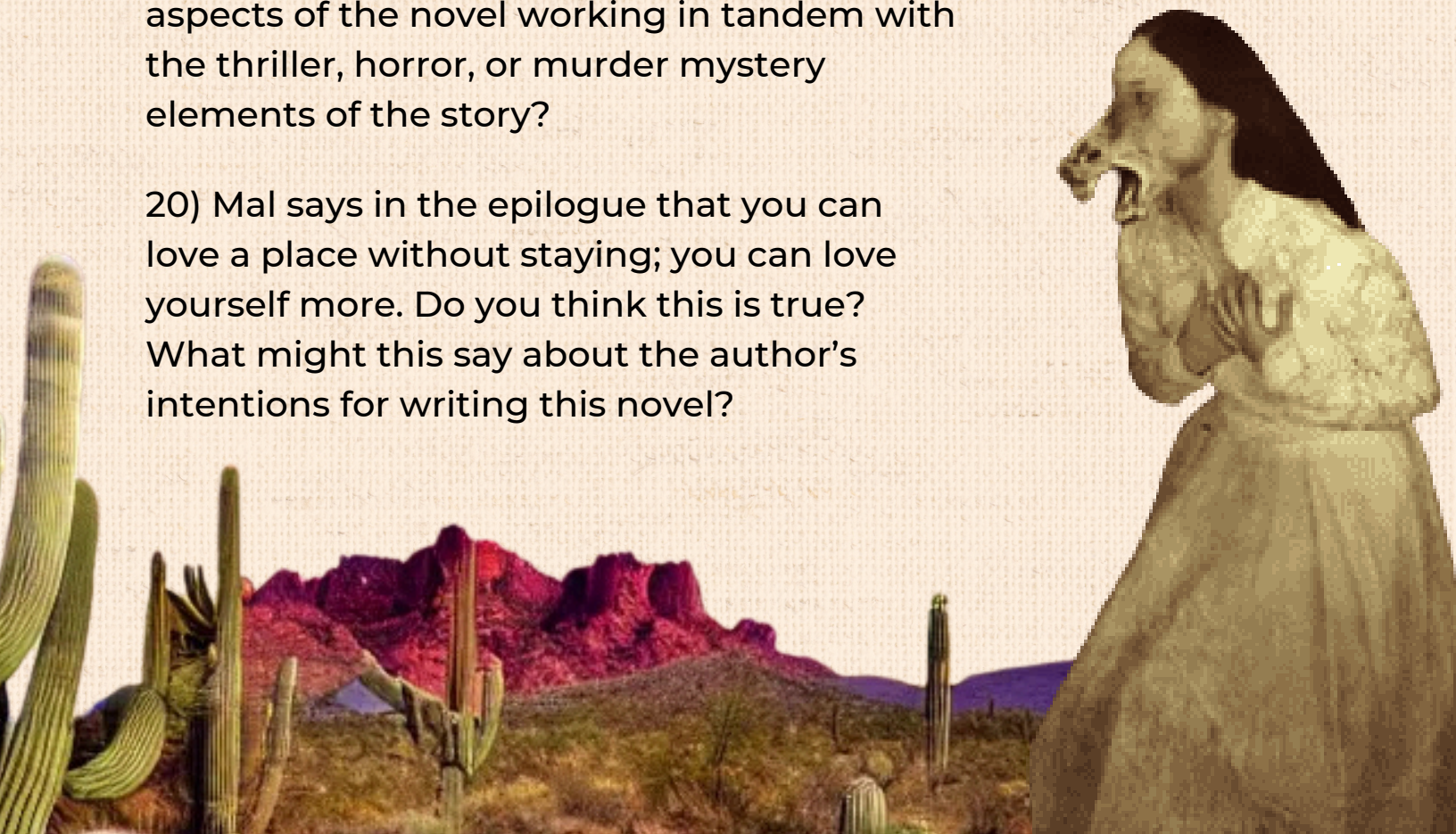
16) In the end, the bodies of other missing girls are found, and the truth about the Callahans is exposed. Is justice served? What did you think of the revelations of who else was responsible for each missing girl in El Valle?

17) The novel ends with Mal recognizing that she will always be haunted by her family's past but also reclaiming land for herself and her daughters. Do you think this was the best possible outcome for her? If not, how would you have preferred her story to end?

18) How does this novel shape or deepen your understanding of the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women?

19) The author has stated in interviews that she wanted to tell people about the Salton Sea environmental crisis, so she wrapped it in a murder mystery to get people to listen. How did you see the social justice and eco-political aspects of the novel working in tandem with the thriller, horror, or murder mystery elements of the story?

20) Mal says in the epilogue that you can love a place without staying; you can love yourself more. Do you think this is true? What might this say about the author's intentions for writing this novel?





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